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The Power of Minorities in Groups Settings: Do They Inspire Divergent Thinking?

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ABSTRACT:
Studies concerning social influence have generally focused on the power of the majority within groups. In contrast, this research explored the power of opinion minorities in consensus and nonconsensus seeking groups, especially whether minorities in consensus seeking groups inspire divergent thinking in their fellow group members the way minority members in nonconsensus seeking groups do. Thought listing tasks were utilized. Results suggest that minority members decrease polarization of thought and increase thoroughness of discussion.

Historical Context
Throughout the latter portion of the 20th century, social psychologists have studied group dynamics in order to understand the intricacies of collective decision making. Along with the investigation of the process and quality of group decisions, an important focus of inquiry has concerned the context of decision making, the underlying factors that determine the ultimate outcome.

Early research headed by Asch (1956) centered on conformity and the power a numerical majority exerted on the minority in group settings. This initial experimental work indicated an asymmetrical influence, in which the majority factor existed as the source of that influence. In spite of these compelling findings, researchers challenged the notion of such an imbalance of persuasive power within groups and delved into the study of minority influence.

Moscovici, Lage, and Naffrechoux (1969) suggested that characteristics like consistency, autonomy, and rigidity enable minorities to act as influential agents. Further evidence of the power of minority influence was demonstrated by Moscovici (1980), who proposed the conversion theory. Here, majority influence induces a comparison process by which individuals are intensely cognizant of the majority message and, as a result, members collectively neglect other alternatives. This process leads to compliance. Conversely, when group members are exposed to minority dissent, they undergo a validation process by which individuals critically evaluate their opinions in order to substantiate them. In the second situation, persons dedicate increased energy to understanding and interpreting the minority position. Those introduced to a minority position compile greater numbers of both pros and cons regarding a topic of discussion, a cognitive difference which is evidenced by how participants generate arguments and counter-

arguments following group discussion (Moscovici 1980).

While Moscovici posited an increase in the quantity of ideas elicited from those under minority influence, Nemeth (1986) suggested a positive change in the quality of ideas as well. She found that when exposed to majority influence, individuals think convergently or adopt a narrow focus; those under minority influence, however, exhibit divergent thinking processes and display an increase in cognitive fluency and flexibility. In addition, Nemeth (1991) asserted that minority dissent stimulates creative thinking and increases performance. Ultimately, minority disagreement inspires an active seeking of information and a thoughtful consideration of multiple perspectives (Nemeth 1996).

Clark (1990) suggested that polarization of thought occurs in the direction of an initial preference, following discussion where the majority wield influential power. While majority influence translates into an adoption of more extreme attitudes, minority presence decreased polarization of thought, further substantiating the Maass and Clark (1984) finding that though minority influence may not lead to manifest shifts in opinion, it does result in latent, private attitude changes.

Evidence exists that firmly establishes the minority as a potent source of influence. However, Tindale et al. (1990) produced contradictory results. In consensus seeking tasks, the minority was unable to exert significant persuasive power. The study hypothesized that these individuals were seen as a nuisance. Furthermore, it posited that the condition of decision making may have decreased the influential power of the minority. In fact, the Smith et al. (1996) study indicated that in nonconsensus or discussion groups, minority members did function...
The Power of Minorities in Groups Settings

as influential agents. Additionally, these persons were sometimes perceived as a pleasant diversion.

The Present Study
This research examined the influence of minority individuals on both consensus and non-consensus seeking groups. Groups containing minority members and unanimous groups were constructed to measure the influence of minority dissent. It was hypothesized that unanimous groups would exhibit increased polarization of thought following completion of the task, while groups containing minority factions would display a decrease in polarization.

Additionally, groups containing one minority member and two minority members were assembled in order to assess the influential power of the supported versus the unsupported minority. Supported minorities were expected to wield more influence.

To determine whether or not exposure to minority influence leads to divergent thinking, a thought-listing task was utilized. It was hypothesized that majority members exposed to minority disagreement would generate more thoughts, both arguments and counterarguments, than those majority members in unanimous groups. Also investigated was the possibility that divergent thought style would generalize to a subsequent unrelated task. It was hypothesized that the majority members would also show divergent thinking in this situation.

Methodology
Subjects were 160 undergraduates at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. At the onset, participants responded to an attitude pretest consisting of two questions. The first required a categorical response of either in favor or against the death penalty. The second, designed to measure the strength of attitude, required subjects to circle a number along a bipolar scale. Three types of groups were assembled: (a) unanimous groups, consisting of five members in favor of the death penalty; (b) groups composed of four in favor and one opposed to the death penalty; and (c) groups consisting of three subjects in favor and two opposed to the death penalty.

Half of the groups were instructed to reach consensus regarding the death penalty, with no time restrictions. The remaining groups were required to hold a conversation concerning the topic. Each nonconsensus group was matched to a consensus group with respect to the duration of the conversation. The experimenter instructed the nonconsensus groups to finish their conversations once the allotted time had passed. All conversations were audio-taped.

Following the discussion, those in consensus seeking groups recorded the group decision, which included a categorical and a numerical response along a 21 point bipolar scale. Each participant indicated his/her opinion regarding the death penalty on the same attitude measure used in the pretest. Subjects then individually completed a thought-listing task, which required the generation of arguments and counterarguments relevant to the issue. Afterwards, participants responded categorically to the issue of changing the university grading system to pass/fail rather than assigning letter grades. The subjects then listed thoughts pertaining to the second issue. At the conclusion of the experiment, the participants’ responses to several questions designed to assess the quality of the group discussion, as well as their impression of fellow group members, were collected.

Results
A one-way ANOVA performed on group decisions showed a significant effect for group composition (F(2,16) =13.74, p =.00). With respect to group decisions, unanimous group decisions were extreme (M =29.17) when compared to the collective decisions made by groups containing one minority member (M =19.17) and appear more extreme than decisions made by groups with two minority members present (M =24.17). Additionally, unanimous groups spent less time discussing the issue (M =4.01) than those groups with one minority (M =9.61) and those with two minority members (M =14.71), F(2,16) =6.76, p =.01. Analysis of the quality of groups discussion indicated a significant difference between unanimous and non-unanimous groups.

Upon further examination of the data, groups with one minority member (M =5.82) and those with two minorities (M =6.77) found to have agreed more with the statement that the issue had been carefully examined than did unanimous groups (M =4.50), F(1,3) =11.26, p =.00). Similarly, the opinions of group members exposed to minority influence differed significantly from those of unanimous group members regarding the thoroughness of discussion. Analysis indicated that groups consisting of two minority members reported having been more thorough than groups with one minority and even more so than unanimous groups (F(1,3) =6.64, p =.00).

There was also a significant difference in how minorities felt about the ease of defending their positions. Those in consensus seeking groups found it easier to defend their side of the argument than did those in nonconsensus seeking groups (F(1,3) =5.02, p =.03).

Data assessing the perception of the unsupported minority (when only one minority was present) was also analyzed using a one-way ANOVA. Minority members in consensus seeking groups were viewed as more rigid in their opinions pertaining to the death penalty than minority members in nonconsensus seeking groups, F(1,70) =12.07, p =.00). Furthermore, the minority in consensus-

78
seeking groups was considered more logical \((F(1,70)= 5.49, p= .02)\) as well as more consistent in their argument than unsupported minorities in nonconsensus seeking groups.

**Discussion of the Findings**

The results of the present study indicate that minority members within groups act as a powerful source of influence. When compared with unanimous groups, groups containing minorities exhibited decreased polarization of thought in decision-making. The presence of the minority lessens the likelihood of a group decision being extreme in nature. As also demonstrated, minority group members initiate a more thorough discussion, thereby encouraging a more critical examination of the issue.

The power of minority influence may be associated with behavioral consistency (Moscovici, 1985). As revealed in this study, in consensus seeking tasks the minority was perceived as very rigid, consistent, and logical in their argument presentation. However, minorities in non-consensus groups were not viewed as strongly in these categories. The potential for optimum minority influence may increase under the consensus condition. In decision making, the minority may assert their position more adamantly. Likewise, majority members take the minority argument more seriously in the context of the decision making task.

Further probing will allow for a more accurate assessment of the dynamics that take place. Still, the early results further the notion that minority influence enables thoughtful analysis of problems. Therefore, minorities' participation within groups may have numerous implications for better decision making and problem solving.

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References


