

Dynamics of Minority Influence

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Overview of Issue

Social influence is arguably the central construct in social psychology. There are many manifestations of the pervasive tendency for individuals to impact one another's thoughts, feelings, and actions, but all have in common the sensitivity of an individual to the real, imagined, or implied presence of others. Indeed, simply knowing or imagining how other people think and feel about a topic is often sufficient to induce that mental state in a person, as demonstrated in classic research on conformity⁸ and contemporary research on social coordination.⁵ One might conclude, then, that over time a social group or society would converge on similar, if not identical opinions, beliefs, and values. Especially in light of the potential for rapid and widespread transmission of information via mass media, telephones, and the internet, the tendency toward homogeneity in people's internal states and overt practices would seem to be inevitable. Yet, there is abundant evidence that minority views are routinely maintained, even in the face of explicit influence attempts by the majority to squelch dissent¹. In fact, minority viewpoints have been shown, under certain circumstances, to be more influential than majority sentiment in shaping public opinion². Understanding the dynamics of minority influence is clearly relevant to the psychology of terrorism, since the perpetrators of terrorist activities constitute a small proportion of the population and clearly represent attitudes and beliefs that run contrary to the prevailing norms, ideology, and activities in a society.

The Dynamical Perspective on Minority Influence

Insight into the emergence, maintenance, and impact of minority sentiment has been enhanced by recent applications of principles and methods of dynamical systems to social psychological phenomena^{6,7}. The resultant dynamical models, implemented and tested in computer simulations, have revealed an ironic result: the press for uniformity in social groups increases the strength of individuals who hold minority opinions. Cellular automata⁹ have provided a particularly useful platform for demonstrating this effect. Cellular automata are discrete dynamical systems composed of elements (i.e., individuals) that may display two or more states (e.g., opinions) and that also differ in their relative strength (e.g., expertise, charisma). The individuals are arranged in a specific spatial configuration, often a 2-dimensional lattice, corresponding to a given pattern of social interaction. In a 2-dimensional lattice, for example, each individual may have four neighbors (one on each side) or eight neighbors (the original four plus an additional four in the diagonals). The model assumes that each individual assesses how much support each position (e.g., pro vs. con) has by discussing the issue with other group members. The opinions of those who are closest in social space and have the greatest strength are weighted most heavily. An individual's own opinion is also taken into consideration and has the greatest weight by virtue of zero distance. As a result of this process, each individual adopts the most prevalent opinion in each round of social interaction. So if the resultant strength for any opinion is greater than the strength of the individual's current opinion, his or her opinion changes to match the prevailing opinion. This procedure is repeated until an equilibrium is reached—either a static social structure with no further changes in opinion or a dynamic structure characterized by a stable pattern of changes.

The computer simulations often reveal that an initial random distribution of opinions gives way after several rounds to a well-defined social structure³. As might be expected, the majority opinion increases in frequency (e.g., from 60% to 90%) over time as individuals interact with each other. The minority opinion survives, however, by the formation of clusters of like-minded people, which are usually formed around strong individuals. Although these opinions represent a minority in global terms, they form a local majority within a cluster and thus are insulated from outside influence. And because weaker individuals are more likely to switch to the majority opinion, those individuals who manage to maintain their minority opinion are likely to be stronger on average than the majority members. This means that when conditions in a society are destabilized or otherwise change, minority members are in a position to exert disproportionately strong influence in shaping public opinion. Such an effect was in fact observed in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism in the early 1990s⁴.

Recommendations

The dynamical approach has shown that minority influence varies in its strength and resistance to outside challenges (e.g., majority opinion) for different patterns of social interaction. To date, however, these patterns and their relation to minority influence have been investigated primarily in computer simulations. There is a clear need, then, to verify the dynamics of minority influence in real-world contexts. Research efforts should concentrate on investigating different patterns of social interaction in laboratory settings and identifying key features of social networks in various societies and sub-cultures, including those associated with terrorist activity. Such an approach, in combination with theory construction and further computer simulations, is likely to shed light on the conditions that enable terrorist ideology to be maintained and exert disproportionate influence in contemporary society.

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