Social Influence Research and Social Change

• What is Social Change? – It occurs when a society as a whole adopts a new belief or way of behaving which then becomes widely accepted as the “norm.”

• Research into Social Influence doesn’t just tell us how individuals change their beliefs and behaviours, but also how whole societies can be influenced to change.

• If we look around us, we can find evidence of social influence in many types of Social Change……for good…and evil!!!
An Example of Social Influence as a force for positive Social Change

• Women’s Rights
An Example of Social Influence as a force for negative Social Change

- Nazi extermination of the Jews
Social Change

• Often begins with the rebellious actions of a minority, (as with the Suffragettes) who gradually increase their influence until they become the majority.

• Another Example? Environmental Campaigners

• 20 years ago they were regarded as a small group of nutters.

• Now they have increased their influence and have majority support.
Once the views of a minority group are accepted by the majority, then....

- **conformity** comes into play, and those who resist social change become subject to **normative** and **informational influence**.

- If social change becomes enshrined in law, then orders are issued and **obedience** also comes into play. (Revision of these terms)

- On the next 5 slides!!)
Majority Influence (Conformity)

- **What is meant by the term SOCIAL INFLUENCE?** It’s the study of how thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the presence of others, whether that presence is actual or imagined.

- We are all influenced by social influences, some of which we’re aware of and some of which we’re not. Sometimes we give way to this social influence to “fit in” with those around us and sometimes we do it because we’re not sure of the right way to think or act so we use others as a source of information.

- Children learn by imitating others and adults follow the most common form of behaviour in their society. Therefore CONFORMITY becomes common, even in large groups. So our life is characterised by Social Norms, which are the generally accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that are shared by other members of the social group.

- When a social group has well-established norms that specify appropriate behaviour, there is pressure for members of the group to maintain this norm (i.e. to conform).

- Deviants who go against social norms may experience a lot of pressure to
Explanations of why people yield to Majority Influence 1.

- **Normative Influence** — following the crowd — is the result of wanting to be liked and part of a group by following social norms.

- If we simply go along with the majority without really accepting their point of view, we are conforming in *behaviour alone*. Psychologists have called this type of conformity *compliance*. A majority may be able to control other group members by making it difficult for them to deviate against the majority viewpoint, by exerting pressure on them to conform. Going against the majority isn’t easy, as demonstrated in Asch’s study, where participants clearly felt uncomfortable in deviating from the majority position.
Explanations of why people yield to Majority Influence

• **Informational Influence** - accepting the majority’s viewpoint – is the result of wanting to be right – looking to others for the right answer and accepting it, genuinely believing it to be right.

• In some cases individuals go alone with the majority because they genuinely believe them to be right. As a result, we don’t just comply in behaviour alone, we also change our own point of view in line with the **majority viewpoint**.

• Because we are conforming both **publicly & privately**, this form of conformity is known as **acceptance**.

• In conditions of uncertainty we may turn to the majority for **information** about how to behave. Therefore, the majority has **informational influence** over group members when they are uncertain how to behave.
Social Influence

• OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

• “The Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience”  
  Milgram 1974
What is meant by Obedience to authority?

• Obedience is a type of social influence where someone acts in response to a direct order from someone with perceived authority. There is the implication here that the person receiving the order is pressured to respond in a way that s/he would not otherwise have done without the order.

• Obedience to authority is a more direct form of social influence than majority or minority influence, where people choose whether or not they will yield to the various pressures of the groups. Here, the individual may have less choice in whether s/he gives way. In obedience to authority the person is faced with whether to comply with a direct order from a person of higher status – for example, a soldier obeying an order from a superior officer, or whether to defy the order. And because of the hierarchical superiority of the authority figure, the individual must also consider the consequences of his/her actions.

• Much of the drive for research into obedience to authority was an attempt to explain the atrocities committed during the Holocaust, and look at the situational conditions under which people would suspend their own moral
Implications for Social Change (using Conformity Research)

1. **Terrorist Minorities** can bring about social change through the process of *Minority Influence*. How?

   a) **Consistent and Persistent** - Minority Influence research shows that the influence of a minority is most effective when it is both C & P. Suicide bombers in Iraq for example, are certainly C & P.

   b) **The Zeitgeist** is an important concept in minority influence. As the spirit of the times changes attitudes, there may be increasing popular support for the minority position and terrorist acts will be more acceptable to the majority if they are seen as bringing about justice.
Revision of Minority Influence

• Initially, Minorities may be dismissed as weirdoes, extremists or troublemakers. How then, do they have any influence over the Majority?

• Moscovici, 1976, claims that the answer lies in the behavioural style. That is, the way the minority gets its point across.

• The crucial factor in the success of the suffragette movement was that they were consistent in their views.

• Minorities that are active & organised & consistent in defending their views can create social conflict, doubt and uncertainty among members of the majority, and ultimately this can lead to social change.

• This social change happens because a minority has converted others to its point of view. Conversion is a shift from one set of beliefs to another.

• Without the influence of minorities, we would have no innovation and no social change.

• Many of what we now regard as “major” social movements, like Christianity, trade unionism & feminism were originally due to the influence of an outspoken minority
Implications for Social Change (using Obedience Research)

• 2. **Widespread tendency to Obey.** The tendency to obey was strong in Milgram’s participants and human history is littered with examples of destructive obedience in the name of social change. For example, during the Holocaust, Nazi leaders claimed that they were simply following orders to bring about the “Final Solution”.


![Image of soldiers and victims]
3. Presence of a Dissenter

• In Milgram’s study, it was found that people with more advanced reasoning skills, moral principles, and the more educated, were less likely to obey and were able to empower others to disobey.

• The important role of disobedient models has been shown in many movements for social change including the Civil Rights movement in the US and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. These people helped others break free from unjust social pressure.
4. **Gradual Commitment effect found in Milgram’s study.** ("Teacher" delivered 15 – 450 volts in incremental steps – what social psychologists call “Foot-in the door” technique.)

- Zimbardo, 2007 suggests that despite the dangers shown in Milgram’s study, of a drift into destructive obedience, research also supports the possibility of the reverse – “drift in to goodness”. For example, researchers have found that filling out a short questionnaire increases the willingness of people to sign up for organ donation and by merely signing a petition can lead to increased donations to charities.
Implications of Research in to Independent

• **1. Dissent** – a catalyst for Social Change.

• In Asch’s studies on conformity, one of the most important variables for increasing independent behaviour was the presence of a dissenter who expressed a position different from that of the majority.

• The presence of a dissenter appears to free participants from the need to conform to the majority and leaves them free to express what they truly believe.

• **Dissent has been a catalyst for social change for centuries.** In 1930, Mahatma Ghandi and 78 volunteers began a march to protest against the salt tax introduced by the British. Three weeks later, over 5 million people followed his example of breaking this unjust law and this eventually led to the overthrow of British colonial rule in India.
2. The role of Moral Principles

- Kolberg found that in Milgram’s study, those who based their decisions on moral principles tended to be more defiant, while those at a more restricted level of moral development obeyed the experimenter completely.

- Individuals who resist obedience are freer to be a force for social change.

- An example of how an individual with deep moral convictions led to a force for social change is Jesus Christ.
Homework

1. Describe **four** implications for social change from research into social influence. (4 marks)
2. For each implication outline a piece of supporting research evidence. (8 marks)