

Information Sheet: The role of social influence processes in social change

Let's consider the steps in how minority influence creates social change by looking at a real-life example – the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s, and 60s:

- 1. Drawing attention:** in the 1950s in America, black separation applied to all parts of America. There were black neighbourhoods and, in the southern states of America, places such as schools and restaurants were exclusive to whites. The civil rights marches of this period drew attention to the situation by providing social proof of the problem.
- 2. Consistency** – there were many marches and many people taking part. Even though they were a minority of the American population, the civil rights activists displayed consistency of message and intent.
- 3. Deeper processing of the issue** – this attention meant that many people who had simply accepted the status quo began to think about the unjustness of it.
- 4. The augmentation principle** (this means to show commitment)– there were a number of incidents where individuals risked their lives. For example, the 'freedom riders' were mixed racial groups who got on buses in the south to challenge the fact that black people still had to sit separately on buses. Many freedom riders were beaten and there were incidents of mob violence.
- 5. The snowball effect** – Civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King continued to press for changes that gradually got the attention of the US government. In 1964 the US Civil Rights Act was passed, which prohibited discrimination. This represented a change from minority to majority support for civil rights.
- 6. Social Cryptomnesia** – (people have a memory that change has occurred but don't remember how it happened) There is no doubt that social change did come about and the south is quite a different place now but some people have no memory of the events above that led to that change.