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Conformity, Obedience, Disobedience: The Power of the Situation

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1. Introduction

From the beginning social psychology has concerned itself, from different perspectives, with processes of social influence, producing an imposing amount of research. Given this vastity and heterogeneity, it is opportune to restrict the sphere of these studies, to understand better their specific nature. Social influence can be assessed in all situations where there are two "social entities" (two people, two groups, a person and a group), where one is the source of influence and the other the target; both interact through an "object" which can be an opinion or a behaviour. The purpose of these studies is to reveal whether the reactions of people faced with a certain social object can change in terms of the relationship engaged in and how, in the present chapter, to what the phenomena of conformism and obedience are connected.

Conformism can be defined as the change in thinking, feeling or acting following pressure, real or imaginary, exercised by the group (Moghaddam, 1998). Obedience is instead that modification that is manifested carrying out the instructions issued by figures given authority. The two phenomena are connected (often conformism is a mental direction more easily inclined towards obedience) and both imply the themes of independence and submission. For sure living in a society we develop a sense of dependence on others as regards the way of understanding and acting in social reality. We can sometimes reach an authentic shared consensus, other times no. There are situations in which we cannot freely express our ideas, and this activates our resources in order to affirm ourselves and our values. Instead others can resign themselves and become submissive, even coming to the point of aligning themselves with their oppressor. Analyzing similar situations enables us to distinguish the presence or the forming of binding forces in the social environment, just like the forces that individual people put into action to resist coercion.

Conformism and obedience are not necessarily negative phenomena. The list of their positive aspects is decidedly long. In fact, without conformism and obedience social life would be governed by chaos. We could not circulate in the streets nor even hold a civil conversation. However in the present chapter we shall concern ourselves mainly with their negative consequences. Starting from the analysis of what is the basis of conformism and obedience: the formation of social norms.

2. Conformism

A social norm is generally an accepted way of thinking, feeling or acting, emphasized and expected by members of a particular community or social group since it is considered the right thing (Turner, 1991). A norm is the standard of reference for judging what is correct and appropriate to do in specific situations, providing people with criteria of validity and reducing their sense of uncertainty. Therefore norms exercise their own influence on people in terms of how to perceive social reality (the function of understanding) and how to behave inside social reality (axiological function).

First research on interaction in small groups has demonstrated that when called to express judgment, people tend to develop a certain agreement. For Sherif (1936) this agreement is the equivalent of the formation of social norms. In one of his classic studies he used an optical illusion called "autokinetic effect": in a completely dark room, fixing on a luminous point the sensation is created, though immobile, that it begins to move irregularly. The participants in Sherif's experiment, placed in this ambiguous situation and assigned with the task of estimating the width of movement of the luminous stimulant, manifested a progressive tendency to establish a common rule, producing a convergence in their judgment. A mutual adaptation that may be interpreted as the internalization of a social norm, a framework of common reference that establishes judgment and reduces uncertainty.

Something analogous is present in the work of Leon Festinger (1950), where conformity is seen as pressure towards the uniformity that the group exercises on its members. A uniformity that, excluding deviants, favours the cohesion of the group. But probably the most brilliant demonstration of pressure towards conformism is retraced in the pioneer studies of Solomon Asch (1951).

2.1 Independence and submission to judgment

The experimental context provided by Asch (1956) was simple: a length comparison task was proposed for the participants. They were placed in front of two white cardboards: on the left one there was a single line (the sample line) and on the right one were three other lines. They had to indicate which of the three lines was the same length as the sample line. Once all participants had formulated their judgment the two cardboards were replaced by another two, again with a sample line and three lines to compare. The sequence foresaw 12 evaluations. The difference between the line and the other two different lines was so marked that it was unmistakably visible.

The experiment proceeded regularly for the first two trials. Being quite simple judgments, the response was the same for all participants. But during the third trial and in subsequent ones some changes occurred: the members of the group, except for one (usually situated in the last but one place in the row), were in reality accomplices in the experiment and had the task of providing the seven judgments clearly contrary to the perceptive evidence. The group involved in the experiment was thus composed of two types of participant: a majority of people aware of the characteristics and of the results of the experiment and a minority (just one participant) unaware of anything. As was immediately intuitable, the real "experimental subject" (the "critical subject", according to terminology used by Asch) had to

confront a highly problematic condition. On the one hand the task appeared very simple, as it was easily perceptible which of the three lines was the same length as the sample; on the other hand the situation was disorientated since the accomplices claimed to have completely different perceptions from those suggested by the senses.

Since he had to express his own opinion after theirs, the critical subject suffered the pressure of the majority and therefore was faced with a dilemma: would he have to express without wavering what he really saw, thus showing his own disagreement with respect to the rest of the group, or provide the same response given by the others, conforming in this way to general opinion?

Results proved that, while in a control group errors had been very few, in the experimental groups the wrong evaluations expressed by the majority had influenced about a third of the judgments expressed by the critical subjects (33.2% of total responses). If it was also true that independence had prevailed among the critical subjects (the percentage of exact responses was 66.8%), what is striking is the high percentage of participants who submitted to the clearly wrong opinion of the majority in a substantially insignificant task. If 6 of the critical subjects maintained a firm position, altogether 25 people out of 31 involved claimed they perceived what for sure they could not have seen.

It is also interesting to consider the behaviour shown by the critical subjects. None of them neglected the responses of the others and all demonstrated that they had been struck by the fact that a unanimity of judgment had not been reached in this simple perceptive test. The immediate reaction of most of the critical subjects was perplexity, unease, confusion. Some of them, after two or three trials in which disagreement was registered, attempted to stop the experiment to ask the experimenter to repeat the instructions, while others tried to speak with their neighbours to find out why they had given such unexpected responses. If at the beginning of the series of discordances the critical subjects thought that dissent was by chance, with the continuation of the trials they were forced to confront another unequivocal fact: their perception was different from that of the others. Also many of them attributed the cause of the disagreement not so much to the others, but rather to themselves. All of this shocked Asch who expected that very soon the game would be up and the experiment would come to nothing. What happened instead was the opposite: in the face of such a clearly mistaken opinion, the critical subjects did not call into question the judgments of the majority but tried to defend their own position or be even safer, even going so far as to approach the two cardboards with the lines to see better and, finally, to doubt their own perceptive capacity.

One comment reported at the end of the experiment, by one of the critical subjects is exemplary: "I didn't think I was mistaken, but reason told me I was wrong because it was impossible that so many people could be wrong and that only I was right". Even the few that never conform to the responses of the majority confessed that they had experienced a profound sense of unease and a painful uncertainty. Among these few those who resisted did it to hold on to the trust in themselves, through exercising internal coherence in their judgments. Among those who instead aligned themselves to the opinions of the majority, besides those no longer trusting their own visual capacity, many claimed they had felt the need not to be excluded from the group ("I didn't want to appear stupid"), giving less importance to any concern relative to what they had effectively perceived.

In these experiments the numerical rapport between the two sides takes centre stage. In fact when the sides are one to one (one accomplice and one critical subject) conformism is almost zero; after all we are in a situation of the type "your word against mine". The breaking point comes when the rapport becomes one (critical subject) to three (accomplices); a higher proportion does not increase significantly the entity of conformity. When however a person who thinks like the critical subject is inserted in the group despite a substantial confirmed majority in an opposing position, conformity falls visibly. Another dissenting individual breaks up the unanimity and shows that it is possible to have different opinions, creating at the same time a psychological tension in whoever has to manifest an opinion. It is interesting to note that in such a predicament very few of the critical subjects interviewed fully appreciated the role played by the deviant judge; although admitting that his presence was one of support, they did not seem to realize that he had been the determining factor in allowing them independence of judgment. When however the accomplice of the experimenter was instructed to be the only one to give the wrong response, the participants in the experiment ridiculed him.

2.2 The explanation of conformism

To understand the phenomenon of conformism a distinction was advanced between "informational influence" and "normative influence" (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

The first, consisting in taking positions expressed by others to resolve doubts deriving from ambiguous situations, is utilized to integrate sketchy skills and so gain greater security in facing up to life's chores. In such a case the group offers its members informational influence.

The second form of influence, pertaining to affiliation (the assumption of the norms of the group as an expression of the link between individuals), manifests itself in situations where a person intends to communicate to others a positive image of himself, or wants to avoid embarrassment and sanctions, like exclusion from the group.

Both these processes of sharing norms and knowledge assume importance for the people, and the prevalence in exercising one or the other varies according to the situation. In fact they produce their psychological effects at different levels. In this way two essential forms of conformism originate: acquiescence, when the person externally agrees with the group to avoid argument, although disagreeing, and internalization, when the person conforms because he is trustful of the responses given by the others and so is convinced of their goodwill (Kelman, 1958).

In the experiment conducted by Sherif on the autokinetic effect, the group exercised informative influence which induced a process of internalization. The individual judgments converge towards uniform regulation decided at group level without excessive difficulty, since there is no chance of objectifying the perception of luminous movement, being an optical illusion. As with many other real ambiguous or dangerous situations people authentically accept the influence exercised by the group they belong to.

In Asch's experiment, although both are present, the normative influence turns out to be more important than the informational one. This derives from the fact that public responses

suffer more from the judgment of the group with respect to those given in private, generating in deviants a feeling of shame (Scheff, 1988). In addition this study has shown above all the type of conformism known as acquiescence, since the participants regain independence of judgment, once separated from group pressure. In this case you can speak of false conformism.

Naturally, acquiescence and internalization are not phenomena that exclude each other, rather they are understood to be polarities of a continuum. To do something because circumstances force us to do so can in fact induce a change of behaviour compared with what you are doing, as shown by the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

The "Asch effect", to follow the norms of the group even when they are so clearly against the data of reality, has raised several questions. Besides explanations linked to group processes (informational and normative influence), some authors (for example, Berry 1967; Frager, 1970) have also analyzed the rapport between conformism and socialization. In fact different societies tend to encourage behaviour of independence rather than submission, and viceversa. Otherwise to attach great importance to conformism compared with norms fixed by unknown people. At the same time, every society is characterized by the presence of various sub-cultures, which can orientate its members differently with respect to the dominant culture. For example, homosexuals often conform to the norms of the group they belong to but turn out to be non-conformist compared with the remaining society of heterosexuals.

Reference to homosexuals enables us to remember how, next to the influence of the majority, precisely in the studies of Asch, there is also an influence of the minority (Moscovici, 1976). Assigning a central role to social conflict, the minority, as for example illustrated by the history of the homosexual movement, have shown that it is possible to induce a change in the majority.

3. Obedience

If for the studies of Asch we can speak of a conformism in words the research conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974) on obedience describes instead how conformity comes to involve conduct. Obedience is a particular form of conformity: it manifests itself when the "majority" is not a quantitative dimension but qualitative. At the bottom of this there is a difference of status: the one who exercises a power superior to others operates a direct explicit pressure on them, who adapt to his will.

3.1 Immoral orders and dilemmas of conscience

"We will pay you $4.00 for one hour of your time. People needed for a study of memory". With this announcement published in a local newspaper participants were recruited to the first of a series of experiments which signalled the story of social psychology (Milgram, 1974).

Those who had responded to the announcement were invited to a laboratory to carry out actions which became more and more in contrast with their moral conscience. What interested the experimenters was to understand to what point the participants would obey

to orders and when or how they would rebel. To make the prearranged situation credible a particular strategy was used: staging an experiment which had as its fictitious objective the study of processes of memory and learning; two participants were assigned the roles of teacher and learner. The experimenter informed both that it was an investigation aimed at investigating the effects of punishment on learning. The learner was taken into a room, made to sit, with hands tied in such a way as to make it evident that freedom of movement would be removed, while an electrode was applied on one pulse. The task of the learner consisted in learning a series of word associations, but for each error of memory apparently an electric shock was received increasing in intensity each time.

In reality the real "experimental subject" was not the learner but rather the teacher who, after helping to accommodate the former, was placed in another room before a false electricity generator contrived with a series of modulators of intensity ranging from 15 to 450 volts, rising on a scale by 15 volts with 30 lever switches. The instrument indicated, with special labels, the sequence from "light shock" to "dangerous shock". The teacher had the task of subjecting the learner to the word memory test: when the latter responded correctly the rule was that the test passed to the subsequent series of words, while when a mistake was made an electric shock was administered starting from the lowest level and proceeding as required upwards. As an accomplice of the experimenter, the false guinea pig did not receive any torture but the teacher was convinced that real damage was being inflicted.

The objective of the experimenter was that of observing to what point the teacher would agree to inflict violence on a person who manifested the will to defend himself, interrupting the test and unable to do it as he was tied up. The contrast between moral conscience and received orders was primed so that when the learner, pretending, manifested his discomfort: around 75 volts the first groans could be heard clearly, at 120 volts there was strong invective, at 150 volts the request that the experiment be suspended, finally, when the shocks were now reaching 285 volts excruciating gasps. How did the teachers behave? The results were surprising. Although manifesting tension and protesting energetically, 65% of the participants continued to punish the learner to the last beat. The groans and imploring of the victim were insufficient to make them desist from carrying out the orders of the experimenter.

What has just been described illustrates the standard condition of the experiment and the general results obtained but, to understand the problems faced better, it is opportune to analyze the different experimental modifications introduced to identify which conditions influence the behaviour of obedience. Milgram conducted several variations on his baseline study and found that obedience was maximized when participants merely assisted someone else giving the electric shocks (92.5%) and when they first observed a peer complying with the experimenter until the end (68.75%) (Milgram, 1974).

From these variations of situational stimuli, an important element regards the closeness of teacher and learner: the data show that there is an inversely proportional rapport between the tendency to inflict electric shocks and the proximity of the victim. As can be seen from table 1, Milgram arranged four different experimental conditions; if we observe how many participants arrived at the extreme point, corresponding to the most dangerous shocks, we

note that the percentage of obedient participants follow the course of the levels of proximity. In fact the closer the teacher gets to the learner, until they touch, the less the phenomenon of obedience to the orders of the experimenter is registered. It can be affirmed that closeness of the victim, on the perceptive plane, increases the link between action and consequence, raising personal responsibility for the suffering inflicted. The principal morals that guide the action thus seem to be subject to the laws of proximity and distance. To act with ferocity towards a nearby or faraway victim certainly does not change the moral quality of the action; in spite of this intervention in the spatial rapport profoundly affects the disposition towards obedience. Therefore every element that reduces the proximity between action and victim inhibits the voice of conscience and makes the execution of the violent task easier.

EXTREME POINT OF OBEDIENCE (Shocks XXX) (435-450 volts)	REMOTE	VOICE FEEDBACK	PROXIMITY	TOUCH PROXIMITY
	The victim is not visible or audible	The victim is not visible and only his groans can be heard	The victim is in the same room as the person administering the electric shocks	The victim receives the shocks only if his arm is pushed by the teacher on a metal plate
% Participants	65.0%	62.5%	40.0%	30.0%

Table 1. Rapport between the proximity "teacher-learner" and level of obedience in Milgram's studies.

Even when the experimenter behaves incorrectly, reaching preliminary agreement less with respect to the moment of interruption of the experiment, most of the teachers respected their decisions of authority. Already evident is that the substance of the order is not so important as its origin; in fact, in the situation where roles are manipulated it turned out that any man placed in the role of the experimenter was unable to obtain obedience and when the part of the learner was recited by the experimenter, the moment the latter asked that the experiment be suspended, all participants stopped, disregarding the orders given by any man, while 65% of teachers continued when the commands were given by another experimenter: the orders of a source without authority had no power.

3.2 The explanation of destructive obedience

The explanation adopted by Milgram (1974) to understand the results of his research is founded on the concept of *agentic state*. A person inserted in an authoritarian system passes from an autonomous state to an agent state since he no longer feels free to act and considers himself as an agent who must satisfy the requirements of others, accepting the definition of the situation provided by authority. Thus a subject finds himself in an agentic state when he is willing to regulate his conduct according to directives coming from a person of higher

status. In this condition the individual is no longer considered responsible for his own actions but is defined as an instrument to carry out the orders of others (Zamperini, 2003).

The root of behaviour of obedience is however singled out by Milgram outside the experimental context, calling socialization into question: the role of the family structure, school, institutions as agents that promote teaching of rules of obedience. And science does not escape similar considerations: the figure of the scientist, cloaked in prestige and superiority thanks to social legitimization, induces respect and acceptance.

The experimental model of Milgram is known also by the term "Eichmann experiment", since the condition in which participants are found evokes something analogous in the activity of this nazi bureaucrat, who from one side of a desk, absorbed in the work to be carried out, organized the expedition of trains loaded with Jews, destined for the extermination camps. Without drawing any equivalence between the participants in these experiments and those marked with collective atrocities these studies have, in any case, provided important indications in order to understand human behaviour in extreme situations like the Holocaust (for a critical review, Miller, 2004). The power of the situation in transforming ordinary people into torturers ready to commit acts of violence has also been analyzed by Kelman and Hamilton (1989). The authors give the name "binding forces" to all those elements of a situation that psychologically bind an individual to the definition of the reality provided by authority. The power of these forces is emphasized by the presence of numerous factors: the pressure of a group of equals, being watched, finding oneself involved in an ambiguous or new situation, the existence of a chain of command (like the military hierarchy), the grave consequences in case of disobedience. The massacres of civilians perpetrated by soldiers, as in the slaughter of My Lai during the Vietnam war, represent a tragic manifestation of similar forces.

The rapport of power between the dominant and the subordinate is shown effectively by a famous simulation: the imprisonment study of Philip Zimbardo (for a detailed summary, Zimbardo, 2007). In the simulated prison set up in the rooms of Stanford University, whoever wore the guard's uniform became aggressive while those who wore that of the prisoner took on an apathetic manner. This condition would have induced a psychological feeling of de-individualization, since the uniforms caused anonymity and loss of awareness of oneself. This seems to show that social roles may have a powerful effect on our behaviour. The guards are invested with authority and expect obedience. The expectation of role of the prisoners is obedience. In the study it does not just turn out that the latter obey the former but that all of them obey their social role (Zamperini, 2004).

3.3 Administrative obedience

In Milgram's study we are in the presence of conduct which (apparently) causes physical suffering, but we know that there are forms of violence and oppression that produce less visible damage and perhaps, just for this reason, are more insidious and worrying. The problem was confronted in a series of experiments on administrative obedience conducted in the eighties at Utrecht University, in Holland (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1995).

The participants were asked to administer an enrolment test to an unemployed person and, to enable the scientist to collect data for personal research, completely unrelated to the

selection process, they had to create a degree of psychological tension so as to cause a very poor performance. In this way the unemployed person lost any chance of obtaining the job he had applied for.

Comparing results obtained using the violence administered with those of Milgram, it turned out that in the first condition a greater level of obedience was achieved with respect to the second. It is the type of violence that enables us to understand this difference: physical violence (Milgram's experiments) is more direct and therefore more difficult to apply compared with the more indirect psychological-administrative violence. It was also shown that the participants were able to oppose authority: when they had to sign beforehand a declaration that made them legally responsible to the unemployed person, there was a significant reduction in the degree of obedience.

The explanation for the results are collocated in the theoretical perspective of Milgram, calling into question the status of agent and thus the psychological change inherent in the responsibility perceived in the participants. The experimenter is a representative of social institutions, authorized to act in a certain way and in a certain direction, while the unemployed person is perceived as a neutral and insignificant individual. For this reason the participants feel no emotional involvement with the victim and let themselves be guided by an institution considered legitimate.

4. Ethical issues and the (limited) validity of scenario studies

As we have seen from the above analysis, it seems difficult for people not to obey in the presence of an authority figure perceived as legitimate. Although social psychologists know much about this pervasive phenomenon — particularly with regard to the role of situational influences —, they would have known even more if ethics committees within universities or research institutions, established to protect the rights of human subjects, had not discouraged them from extending Milgram's research because of the stress experienced by participants. In the end, stricter ethical standards placed studies using procedures similar to Milgram's out of bounds — the last methodological replication was made in Austria, in the eighties, by Grete Schurz (Schurz, 1985).

Diana Baumrind was one of Milgram's most severe critics. In a famous article published in the *American Psychologist*, Baumrind (1964) argued that the extreme stress and emotional conflict described by Milgram could have easily modified the participants' self-image and/or their ability to trust authority figures in the future. Perhaps only an intense corrective interpersonal experience could have helped the subject to recover after such a distressing event. Without it, Baumrind expected a sensitive individual to remain hurt and anxious for some time, and a cynical subject to become even more alienated and distrustful. Similar critics and concerns for the welfare of subjects who served in the Milgram's experiment were expressed in the following years by several other scholars (Kaufmann, 1967; Mixon, 1972).

In his defense, Milgram (1964) claimed that the stress experienced by participants dissipated quickly and was not injurious — when, a year after the research program was completed, a medical examiner interviewed 40 experimental subjects, no evidence was found of any

traumatic reactions. Also, follow-up data indicated that many participants not only felt gratified to have taken part in that study but said they viewed their participation as an opportunity to learn something important about themselves and wanted to be in further experimental research.

Milgram's arguments were not enough to put an end to the controversy. From that point on, social researchers interested in exploring the mechanisms of obedience have relied upon their creativity to set up experimental paradigms able to minimize participants' emotional strain. Electric shocks were then replaced with verbal insults (Bocchiaro & Zimbardo, 2010; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986), the real victim with a puppy (Sheridan & King, 1972) or with a (female) virtual human (Slater et al., 2006), and the intimidating laboratory settings with more familiar, real world ones (Bickman, 1974; Hofling et al., 1966).

Recently, a partial replication of Milgram's experiment was conducted in the United States by Jerry Burger (2009). Burger received approval from his university ethics committee by modifying several of the experimental protocols in order to reduce the emotional discomfort experienced by participants. First, through several screenings (tests and interviews), he rejected people who might have negative reactions to participating in the study. Second, participants were given a milder sample shock (15 volts) rather than in the Milgram study (45 volts). Third, and most important, Burger stopped the procedure at 150 volts, when the learner-confederate protested for the first time and clearly said he wanted out because of the excessive pain. The 150-volt solution was based on previous analyses showing that 79% of Milgram's subjects (Exp. 5; see Milgram, 1974) who had followed the experimenter's orders at this level went on until the last shock. As noted by Burger, knowing people's reactions to the 150-volt point allows one to estimate what they would do if allowed to continue, without exposing them to the extreme tension exhibited by Milgram's participants.

What did Burger find 45 years after Milgram? Despite the important historical and cultural changes that have occurred over four decades, the power of authority figures to claim people's allegiance and obedience remains very strong: 70% of participants obeyed until the end. Milgram, at the same point in his most comparable condition, had found 82.5%, but such a difference does not come close to statistical significance — in comparing these percentages, it is crucial to consider also that Burger had implemented a few procedural changes that should have made it easier to disobey.

Results obtained by Burger are not surprising: correlational analyses conducted by Blass (1999) on 24 studies spanning a period of 22 years (from 1963 to 1985) clearly indicate that the rates of obedience show no systematic change over time. These findings, taken together, provide indirect evidence against the "enlightenment effects" thesis proposed by social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1973). According to Gergen, "sophistication as to psychological principles liberates one from their behavioral implications" (1973, p. 313). If Gergen is right, participants in the more recent studies would have been more familiar with Milgram's work and thereby become enlightened about the demands of authority; as a consequence, the later studies should have found lower rates of obedience than the earlier ones. A more direct test of the "enlightenment effects" thesis was provided by a study in which participants were asked to serve as experimenters and oversee a "teacher" who had to teach a verbal-learning task to a "learner" by using increasing shocks as punishment on

each mistake (Shelton, 1982). As the shock levels escalated, the teacher, who unbeknownst to the experimenter-participant was a confederate, "expressed uneasiness, then became quite anxious, angry, on the verge of tears; cursed, complained of stomach pains, asked for a glass of water, and pleaded with the experimenter to stop the session …" (p. 31). Although participants had first been given a synopsis of the obedience experiment — in Gergen's words, they had been "enlightened" —, 92% of them continued to command the teacher to keep increasing the voltage to the maximum level. As noted by Blass (1999):

> …contrary to what is implied by Gergen's "enlightenment effects" notion, knowledge does not or cannot always lead to action. Being enlightened about the unexpected power of authority may help a person to stay away from an authority-dominated situation, but once he or she is already in such a situation, knowledge of the drastic degree of obedience that authorities are capable of eliciting does not necessarily help to free the individual from the grip of the forces operating in that concrete situation; that is, to defy the authority in charge. (p. 971)

The aforementioned stringent ethical standards, besides hindering research on obedience, have indirectly delayed the systematic investigation of the socially positive aspects of the interaction individual-unjust authority, notably disobedience and whistle-blowing — we will talk about them in the next paragraph—, investigation that would seem to be essential for understanding some preconditions of social/political revolutions. Our knowledge about "rebellious" individuals is gradually increasing, but there are still no clear cut answers to basic questions: do disobedient people/whistleblowers have special values or personality traits? Or why do they choose to defy unjust authority/to report the misconduct to higher authorities?

In order to resolve the ethical controversy and find answers to these important questions, some social scientists feel that scenario studies are a viable methodology (King, 1997; Sims & Keenan, 1998). Basically, in scenario studies participants are presented with a detailed description of a given situation, asked to reflect carefully on it and, finally, to predict their behaviour. It is a research method that can be appropriate and useful when respondents are asked to predict their own behaviour under situations that have been experienced frequently. Predictions in these cases will likely be correct because based on people's personal histories. On the contrary, complex and unfamiliar circumstances have a flavor that is hard to grasp by simply imagining them; as a logical result, respondents are especially inaccurate in guessing what they would do. Also, as correctly noted by Miceli and colleagues (2008), would people accurately report their behaviour, or would they report what they believe most others will view favorably? Or would they give the researcher the responses they believe would support his/her hypotheses rather than their "real" feelings?

Before the study was conducted, Milgram (1963) had provided 14 psychology graduate students with a detailed description of his experimental paradigm on obedience, then asked them to predict the behaviour of one hundred hypothetical Americans of various ages and occupations who were placed in that situation. Students predicted that about 1% of the subjects would continue to obey to the end. The same question was posed informally to a group of experts, professors of psychology and psychiatry, and again the prediction was

that virtually all participants would refuse to go on at a certain point of the procedure. As you remember, in Milgram's baseline condition 65% of participants turned out to be fully obedient to the authority. Similarly, Bocchiaro and colleagues (2011) found a striking difference between estimated and observed data. Their experimental paradigm allowed participants to deal with an unreasonable, unethical request by the experimenter-authority with options of obeying, disobeying, or blowing the whistle. In the scenario study, only 3.6% of total respondents (138 undergraduate students) indicated they would obey; by contrast, most believed they would be either disobedient, 31.9%, or whistleblowers, 64.5%. Data from the laboratory presented a very different picture: 76.5% of participants (a separate sample of 149 undergraduate students) obeyed the experimenter, 14.1% disobeyed, and 9.4% challenged the alleged unethical nature of the experiment by reporting the misconduct of the experimenter to higher authorities.

Far from launching a generic attack on scenario studies, we want to point out again that it is feasible for social scientists to use this research method when they want to explore human behaviour in situations that are familiar to respondents. Otherwise, it is more appropriate to use or develop research paradigms that (a) allow for the analysis of spontaneous reactions to events that are real in the participants' eyes and that (b) protect their psychological and emotional well-being. The 150-volt solution proposed by Burger is a valid contribution in this direction. In the next paragraph we will see a few more.

5. Resisting to social pressures: Disobedient people and whistleblowers

It is worth noting that, independent of the procedure used, all studies on obedience invariably report a percentage of participants that defy the authority (Hofling et al., 1966; Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986; Sheridan & King, 1972; Slater et al., 2006). This defiant decision, at least in Milgram-style experiments, appears most likely at the critical point when the victim's first requests to terminate the study (Gilbert, 1981; Packer, 2008). Other subsequent analyses, this time performed on Milgram's "Bridgeport" condition (his second laboratory site in an office suite in Bridgeport, Connecticut), reveal that the earlier in the procedure subjects begin to oppose the experimenter (by questioning or objecting to his demands), the more likely they are to end up defiant (Modigliani & Rochat, 1995). "Thus it appears that the timing of a participant's first firm opposition is important in shaping final outcomes. Firm, early opposition seems to be a sufficient condition for successful defiance, and, not surprisingly, total lack of such firm opposition is a sufficient condition for ending up obedient" (Rochat et al., 2000, p. 171).

Monin and colleagues (2008) demonstrated that *moral rebels* — "individuals who take a principled stand against the status quo, who refuse to comply, stay silent, or simply go along when this would require that they compromise their values" (pp. 76-77) — often do not receive the respect they deserve. In a series of studies, such rebel behaviour turned out to elicit resentment and rejection in those participants who had not taken this brave course of action, implicitly perceived as an indictment of their own misconduct. As a further, indirect proof of the validity of these results, the authors report comments made at debriefing by Milgram's obedient participants on those who had disobeyed (1965, Study 2): they were "ridiculous" (p. 132), they "lost all control of themselves" (p. 132), and "they came here for an experiment, and I think they should have stuck with it" (p. 132).

More recently, Bocchiaro and Zimbardo (2010), through a research paradigm modeled after that of the Utrecht studies (Meeus & Raaijmakers, 1986), tried to cast some light on the psychological factors involved in fostering disobedience. In this study, the participant, called "coach", was asked to assist a "performer"(confederate) in solving a sequence of syllogisms. The task for the performer was to find the logical conclusions, for the coach to give critical feedback in case of mistake. Critical feedback consisted of a graded series of negative comments and rude remarks. For example, a mild criticism was "You are going bad…", a moderate feedback was "You are really ridiculous!", and an extremely negative feedback was "You are really the most stupid person I have ever seen!". The performer solved only 4 of the 19 syllogisms, mostly at the beginning. His emotive reactions were also predetermined and their intensity increased as critical feedback turned more hostile.

The results of this exploratory study revealed that 70% of participants (Italian undergraduate students) disobeyed the unjust authority at the victim's first request to be released (the confederate pretended to suffer a lot and shouted that he wanted to leave) — such a high level of disobedience was mainly due to the combination of condition "proximity of teacher to learner" with "remote authority". The study also showed similarities between obedient and disobedient participants: the two groups were equivalent in terms of personality traits, stress reactions to the experimental setting, and verbal dissent (form and frequency) towards authority. Among the disobedient participants, post-experimental interviews revealed their decision to be impulsive, and believed to be the most obvious for anyone to make in that situation. Moreover, disobedience turned out to be typically motivated by emergent empathy for the victim-confederate ("I felt pity for him") and, to a lesser extent, by moral/ethical considerations ("I stopped because it didn't seem fair to me to go on in those conditions. I wouldn't have had a clear conscience").

In another study (Bocchiaro et al., 2011), conducted in the basement of the VU University of Amsterdam, participants were asked by the experimenter-authority to write and sign a brief statement to convince their fellow students and friends to participate in an experiment on sensory deprivation to be done at the VU University. The experiment appeared immediately unethical: in a similar one, allegedly carried out in Rome (allegedly, as no experiment had actually been done), subjects had panicked, experienced visual and auditory hallucinations, and described the experience as a frightening one. Two participants had even asked the researchers to stop because of their strong symptoms.

Besides the possibility to disobey the experimenter's request to write the statement in support of the sensory deprivation experiment, participants had the opportunity to report his misconduct by putting a form in the "research committee" box. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, 76.5% of participants obeyed, 14.1% disobeyed, and 9.4% blew the whistle.

When considered retrospectively, the decision to disobey seemed fairly obvious to participants: 81% of disobedient subjects stated it had been "easy" for them to act that way, mainly because of their perception of the obviously unethical aspects of the sensory deprivation experiment. Such a perception of "easiness" was also linked with a firm resolution not to involve other people. The dominant feeling, at the end, was one of "pride" (52.4%), and of "relief" (28.6%).

Obeying was considered an easy path as well. Authority of the experimenter (34.2%), importance of scientific research (17.5%), and money (16.7%) were the factors that, in that order, contributed most in making such a decision. In sharp contrast, it was mainly the wish to protect their own friends (52.4%) and the ethically unacceptable sensory deprivation experiment (14.3%) that triggered participants' disobedience.

When asked about the thoughts that went through their mind before choosing what to do, many disobedient participants (42.9%) thought about how "not fair" the sensory deprivation experiment was ("It is unethical… it goes against my principles"). As regards their feelings, a clear sense of uneasiness was experienced by 47.6% of disobedient participants ("I felt under pressure, morally oppressed", "I got a strange feeling in my gut").

The pattern of responses given by obedient participants proved to be more articulated: some of them (18.4%) were confused about what to do ("Would it be weird to stop?", "Shall I get up and leave?"), others (14.9%) concentrated on their friends ("I thought to warn my fellow students before they would receive that message", "What are they going to do with the friends I wrote down?"), and some others (6.1%) were preoccupied with the task ("My thoughts went to the message… how to write a good and short piece"). Almost one third of obedient participants (30.7%) experienced conflicting feelings before deciding to comply ("On the one side I did want to help the experimenter, but on the other I did not want to involve my friends"), whereas 23.7% explicitly claimed to have felt "uneasy" ("I did get a nasty feeling", "I was uneasy because I had the idea that it was not ethically correct"). This same feeling of uneasiness accompanied the act of writing the statement for the experimenter by 30.7%. However, this figure grew to 48.2% when the categories "uneasy", "guilty", and "forced, used" were combined.

Subjects were also specifically asked whether they had realized that, in writing the statement, they were lying. Only 47.4% of respondents said "yes." Even so, they continued for one of the following reasons: "People who would receive the message still have the freedom to choose what to do" (25.9%), "authority of the experimenter" (14.8%), "already committed to the task" (14.8%), value of "science" (9.3%), and the "possibility to adapt the message" (9.3%). All the remaining answers were included in the category "other". Those who had said "I did not realize I was lying" actually resorted to a mechanism of denial. They stated that they just left out crucial information, adapted the message, withheld information – but actually they did not.

In general, disobedient participants stated they were not worried about possible negative effects arising from their behavior ("no money" was the worst consequence for 28.6% of those who disobeyed). Surprisingly, the same lack of consequential concern was true of many obedient participants: most of them were not concerned because "people who would receive the message still have the freedom to choose what to do" (38.8%), because "these people can be warned in advance" (28.8%), or because "the last word is up to the Research Committee" (10.%).

Finally, disobedient participants were asked why, although they refused to comply, they refrained from going further to denounce the authority misconduct by reporting it to the

higher authorities. Many of them (42.9%) answered that, by opposing the experimenter, they had already done their duty ("I thought it did not apply to me"). Others (19%) made reference to the experimenter ("I would have felt guilty", "The mail box looked like it could be opened by the experimenter"), whereas 14.3% refrained from blowing the whistle because in any case the Research Committee would monitor the experiment ("The Research Committee was informed, so...").

What about the whistleblowers? Before going into details of their post-experimental responses, it is probably useful to present here the whistle-blowing phenomenon. Whistleblower is a general term applied to anyone who discloses illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of his/her employer to persons or organizations that may be able to effect remedial action (Near & Miceli, 1985). Although protected by a number of laws (at least in some countries), the act of reporting internal wrongdoing is clearly demanding for people: a prospective whistleblower, in fact, is typically concerned about ostracism, harassment, blame, demotion, discharge. Moreover, there is no warranty that the unlawful practices will be corrected, especially when the correction is costly, damages the reputation of the company or institution, or when there is a culture of complicity from top down in the company or system of control.

Miethe (1999) noted that the act of blowing the whistle is often followed by bankruptcy, depression, and alcoholism, whereas Alford (2001) found that somewhere between half and two-thirds of the whistleblowers lose their jobs — they rarely get them back and most will never work in that field because of informal blacklists spread across sister organizations. But usually they are not fired outright. "The organization's goal is to disconnect the act of whistleblowing from the act of retaliation, which is why so much legislation to protect the whistleblower is practically irrelevant. The usual practice is to demoralize and humiliate the whistleblower, putting him or her under so much psychological stress that it becomes difficult to do a good job. If the whistleblower is under enough stress, he or she is likely to make a bad decision, justifying disciplinary actions." (Alford, 2001, pp. 31-32).

Retaliation seems then a key element in the whistleblowing phenomenon. It can be work-related or social — the first being tangible and formal whereas the second more informal and undocumented in employment records — and it is inversely associated with the whistleblower's power and credibility (Near & Miceli, 1987). However, "where the organization depends heavily on the wrongdoer or the wrongdoing itself, even a whistle-blower with high status may not have sufficient relative power to escape retaliation" (Miceli et al., 2008, p. 104).

Having said all that, it is not surprising that only a small minority of people is willing to perform such an extraordinary act. The value of this percentage will depend on situational factors (seriousness and type of wrongdoing, characteristics of the organization, wrongdoer power) more than on personality traits (see Miceli et al., 2008). Regarding this latter point, research reveals that whistleblowers are not different in terms of personality traits or personal values from those who chose not to report the observed wrongdoing (Near & Miceli, 1996). This lack of difference may sound somewhat strange at first, as one might expect a whistleblower being more altruistic, courageous, empathetic than the rest of the people. It is not like this. Of course, there must be personal variables that distinguish

between "categories" of individuals, but the psychological tests so far used by psychologists are probably not so subtle to pick up such difference.

Let us go back to data. In the post-experimental interviews collected by Bocchiaro and colleagues (2011), 78.6% of whistleblowers stated it had been an easy decision, followed by a feeling of "pride" (42.9%), and of "relief" (35.7%). Whistleblowers declared that they were not worried about possible effects arising from their behavior, and that their decision was almost entirely a matter of principle of fairness and justice. When asked about the thoughts that went through their mind before choosing what to do, whistleblowers were mainly focused (57.1%) on the moral "rightness" of the decision they were about to make ("I thought I would do something good by sending the form"). As regards their feelings, a clear sense of uneasiness was experienced by 57.1% of them ("I was scared, my hands started to shake", "I felt used").

It is important to note that no statistically significant differences were found among whistleblowers, obedient, and disobedient participants in any of the personality factors measured. Also, no significant differences were found in any of these groups in relation to religious affiliation, religious involvement, or gender.

6. Conclusion

We opened this chapter by noting that conformism and obedience are essential elements in maintaining social order. However, as clearly demonstrated by Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram in the controlled setting of a laboratory, the desire to conform and obey can lead ordinary people into even mistrust their own experiences or inflict serious harm on others. The implicit message is that, in certain contexts, apparently simple situational factors are more powerful than personality traits in shaping human behaviour.

The good news is that these same situational factors can be manipulated to stimulate people to act in a positive way. In other words, virtually anyone, independently of his/her personality structure, can overcome social pressures toward conformity and obedience. Although we expect many social psychologists to agree with us, our statement may appear provocative or even absurd to those who think that behaviours stem from a specific constellation of personality: for them, we assume, rebels must be more courageous than others or must have been nurtured properly, in a supportive environment, by parents or teachers. This reasoning is surely plausible, but at present there is insufficient evidence to support it. To us, it seems much more reasonable to argue that nonconformers, disobedients, and whistleblowers are ordinary people whose action is extraordinary, and that some of them, if not many, are unlikely to engage in another disobedient act given that the first one was situationally-specific.

It is essential to understand the forces that catalyse people from passive bystanders to active responders able to challenge immorality and injustice. To do that, we call for studies that, while protecting the welfare and dignity of individuals, explore the foundation of defiance both in the person and in the situation. On the one hand, social researchers should make use of more refined psychological measures to capture even the most subtle difference between categories of people; on the other, they should

systematically manipulate a set of variables to develop in the participants a sense of personal responsibility, morality, and pressure necessary for disobeying and blowing the whistle. Also, it would be important to manipulate the power held by the authority figure and observe whether, and to which extent, different typologies of power shape the participants' behavior.

If conformism and obedience are basic elements in our culture, nonconformity, disobedience, and whistle-blowing are vital for its progress.

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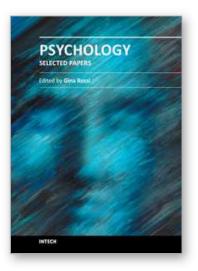Turner, J. C. (1991). *Social Influence*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

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