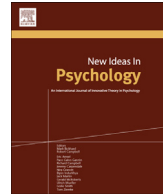


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Do the right thing! A study on social representation of obedience and disobedience



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The present research is aimed at investigating through a mixed-method approach the dimensions underlying the psychosocial constructs of obedience, disobedience and the relations between them. To this end, we consider the attitudes toward (dis)obedience being socially constructed, and we chose the theory of social representations (Abric, 2003; Moscovici, 1961) as the theoretical framework of this study.

The data, collected on a sample of 190 individuals, allowed us to define these social objects, reducing both their complexity and polysemy.

Obedience and disobedience were both seen by research participants as context-dependent behaviours, neither positive nor negative, *per se*. Also, both related to the concept of authority (individuals, institutions, and *society*). However, while obedience was mostly considered an uncritical response to laws, social norms or physical authorities, disobedience was defined as an active, conscious line of conduct. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

People are constantly interacting with authorities as long as they live within multiple hierarchical structures. People will obey authorities (for example respecting the rules of the road when driving) or they will disobey (for example joining a movement like Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, or the Arab Spring). Social psychology has for many years shown a strong interest in the dynamics between individuals and their authorities, with particular emphasis on the behaviour of obeying the commands of an unjust authority (Ancona & Pareyson, 1968; Burger, 2009; Burley & Mc Guinness, 1977; Kilham & Mann, 1974; Mantell, 1971; Milgram, 1963). Several years later,

scholars have begun to adjust their interest towards disobedience¹ (Bocchiaro & Zimbardo, 2010; Bocchiaro, Zimbardo, & Van Lange, 2012; Dambrun & Vatiné, 2010; Modigliani & Rochat, 1995; Passini & Morselli, 2010a).

Obedience and disobedience have been considered always as behaviours, but in the meantime no clear definitions have been provided. Scholars have studied obedience and disobedience mainly using the experimental paradigm as a main approach and even descriptive and correlational studies (Morselli & Passini, 2012a; Passini & Morselli, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) have not given boundaries and definitions of these social objects. A bottom-up mixed-method approach thought to investigate attitudes, values, and psychosocial components related to obedience and

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¹ “The social construction of the authority relationship has an influence on the importance that people daily attribute to social justice and to the dynamic between social stability and social change” (Passini & Morselli, 2009, p. 99).

disobedience was never used. Moreover, studies we have cited so far often focused on obedience and authority relationship from an individual level, underestimating the impact of the societal one (Morselli & Passini, 2011). So, according to this premise and considering attitudes related to obedience and disobedience being socially construed, the present research aims to define and compare obedience and disobedience as two social representations in a sample of young adults using a mixed-method research approach. The study of the psychosocial components of obedience and disobedience will contribute to the definition of this poly-semantic and complex phenomenon.

1.1. An historical lack of definitions for obedience and disobedience

Stanley Milgram's experiment (1963) on destructive obedience at Yale University is the most cited study on the relation between the individual and the authority. Milgram's aim was to understand how an average person would react to a legitimate authority's order to shock an innocent stranger. Despite numerous ethical controversies (Baumrind, 1964; Kaufmann, 1967; Mixon, 1972), Milgram's experiment was replicated worldwide on numerous samples, tracking levels of obedience even higher than the basic study (Blass, 2012). Nonetheless, none of these studies highlighted a clear definition of what obedience and disobedience are, since they were assumed as behaviours. Milgram's definition originates from an everyday use of the word obedience and disobedience: "If Y follows the command of X we shall say that he has obeyed X; if he fails to carry out the command of X, we shall say that he has disobeyed X" (Milgram, 1965, p. 58). Moreover, Milgram's differential analysis (1974) between conformism and obedience makes us clearer the main features of these two social phenomena and disobedience as non-obedience but could not saturate the semantic universe of such complex concepts.

Recently, obedience has been defined as follows: "Obedience means that the subject keeps the action and attitude the same as that of the object to seek rewards or avoid punishments after summarizing, judging, and deducing the object" (Song, Ma, Wu, & Li, 2012, p. 1369). These scholars view obedience as depending only on the subject's expectation to satisfy the goal and by the valence of the object.

Some scholars proposed, firstly, a twofold definition of obedience (constructive and destructive), and at the same time, a twofold definition of disobedience (pro-social and antisocial) (Passini & Morselli, 2009, 2010b). In short, constructive obedience is a set of behaviours that promotes social harmony and destructive obedience is a set of behaviours of uncritical acceptance of immoral or illegitimate requests by an authority. Accordingly, pro-social disobedience promotes a positive change in society, and antisocial disobedience aims to a "selfish" improvement of the situation, as an exclusive benefit of an individual or of a specific group.

These premises lead us to highlight the importance of better defining obedience and disobedience and that "it is important to consider how people represent themselves

and others and how these representations influence their relationships with authority [...]. In short, the issue of obedience also concerns the role of disobedience" (Passini & Morselli, 2009, p. 99). According to these premises, it is necessary to study these social objects using a methodology that allows a contextualized and comparable description of obedience and disobedience. In the next paragraph, we will highlight why social representation structuralist approach (Abric, 1976) can advance the knowledge on authority relationship. To this aim, obedience and disobedience will be directly defined by people using an approach that allows the researcher to highlight the co-construction of the meanings.

1.2. A different societal approach to study obedience and disobedience: the social representations theory

People belonging to the same social group – ethnic, political, religious, cultural – share a set of beliefs, ideas, values, symbols, and expectations that form the general modalities of thinking and feeling within that particular group; these are called Social Representations (SRs). Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of collective representations in 1898 adducing evidence that every representation is static and arises from a collective consciousness. Afterwards, in the sixties, the French psychologist Serge Moscovici (1961), responding to Durkheim's work, developed and articulated the social representation theory (SRT). SRT represents a unique approach to studying psychosocial phenomenon in modern societies.

Contrary to Durkheim (1898), Moscovici (1961) suggested the idea of a social, dynamic and contextualized representation, which simultaneously embraces both the structure and the process of the social re-construction of the social object to which it refers. SRs arise through social interaction and are maintained through various sources (popular experience, religious beliefs, scientific and secular knowledge). SRs have several functions (Purkhardt, 1993): (a) to establish an order in the social context, allowing people to control and regulate their behaviours; (b) to make communication easier by offering people categories and common codes in order to select and classify the social objects (i.e., justice, sexuality, human rights, violence, money); (c) to delimit and consolidate groups; (d) to model the process of socialization started in the parent–child relationship; and finally (e) to make familiar what is unfamiliar, that is to integrate unknown concepts into one's social reality. As explained by Wagner et al. (1999, p. 96), "in contrast to social cognitive approaches it is presupposed that an object is social not by virtue of some inherent characteristics, but by virtue of the way people relate to it. In talk people attribute features and meanings to an object which make this object a part of their group's social world. In the same vein, people's actions are often concerted and coordinated by bearing on shared conceptions of the world. The view which group members maintain about a social object is specific for the group and, hence, also the object itself takes on group specific social characteristics". Since Moscovici formulated the SRT, several theoretical and methodological improvements have been made by social scientists (Abric, 1976; Doise, 1985; Marková, 2003). Among these

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