

Is obedience still a virtue? An Italian research during COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The authors examine some criminological theories that explain adherence to the rules, and in particular those that have been used to account for whether or not the rules imposed or proposed to contain the contagion from COVID-19 are considered. Then, they show the results of their own research, carried out by interviewing a sample of 1,004 Italians using an online questionnaire. The aim of this research: understand who complied with the anti COVID-19 measures and, if so, for what reasons. If the given answer was no, the authors asked the respondents the reasons why they didn't. After showing the results, the authors discussed them comparing them with other similar researches made abroad, underlying also the emerged limits. In conclusion, the authors propose their own thoughts on the subject.

Keywords: pandemic, theory, obedience, COVID-19, interview.

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Is obedience still a virtue? An Italian research during COVID-19 pandemic

*“From that moment fear began,
and with it reflection”*
(Albert Camus, *The Plague*)

1. Theories of obedience

The COVID-19 pandemic had among its effects also that of giving life to a powerful legislative work.

From the beginning of the pandemic many legislative measures have been enacted regarding the containment of the pandemic phenomenon.¹

Some of these rules have had the effect of «disciplining» behaviors that until February 2020 were essentially free.

Think, for example, of the possibility of moving between municipalities or regions, having to respect a maximum limit of guests in case of invitations in your own home or having to wear a mask in certain places or environments.

An extremely complex situation that contributed to develop a wide debate of legal, bioethical and even criminological interest (Pinto, 2020; Fabiano, 2020; Guizzi, 2020; Gatta, 2020, Bonvicini, 2021; Merzagora et al., 2021).

Criminology has wondered whether an event of broad social influence such as this has affected and to what extent the trend of crimes (Travaini et al., 2020), which crimes it has given impulse to, what was the social reaction also in attributing responsibility for the spread of the disease, such as the repercussions in prison and in REMS (Martucci, 2020; Merzagora et al., 2020; Ravagnani et al., 2020; Grattagliano et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2020).

In addition, the pandemic led to the adoption of a series of measures to limit freedom for which we could ask ourselves to what extent it is legitimate to restrict rights in the name of an emergency, for which we could ask ourselves whether citizens are adapting to them or less, and the reason for doing it or not. Murphy et al. write: “The COVID-19 global pandemic provides a unique opportunity to examine factors associated with compliance with mandatory public health orders” (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 488).

The topic of obedience to the rules, on the other hand, is the – equal and opposite – topic of criminology which has, as its object, the explanation of why it is trans-

gressed, by overturning the terms it also has that of why it is not done (Martin & Cohn, 2004; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Nagin & Pogarsky, 2001; Nagin & Pogarsky, 2003; Papachristos et al., 2013).

In an effort to an integrated theory of obedience to the law (de Puiseau et al., 2019; Kuiper et al., 2020), three strands of explanation of regulatory adherence are distinguished, starting with:

1. deterrence theory, which is inspired by Becker's (1968) theory of rational choice, according to which legal imperatives are adhered to if this entails more benefits than the transgression of them. According to this theory, the greater the severity of the sanction, the greater the costs that the deviant bears; moreover, in our case, which is that of adhering to the rules aimed at limiting the coronavirus infection, the «cost» of disobedience goes far beyond a penalty imposed by the judiciary, since it can involve being infected by a fatal disease. It's important to consider that this theory, which arises from the contemplation of a perfectly rational actor, concerns the knowledge that the citizen has of the rules and penalties for their transgression, knowledge that criminological research has shown to be often anything but accurate (Apel, 2013). This aspect becomes even more significant considering the large amount of new regulations that characterized the pandemic period.
2. A second approach is that of the legitimacy model according to which obedience to legal imperatives does not depend so much on the fear of the sanction as on the perception that the citizen has of the «legitimacy», impartiality, correctness of the institutions, including the judicial and control systems (Tyler, 1990). This is true for both compliant citizens and criminals, who however, Papachristos points out, do not always spend their time violating the laws, in most cases they respect them (Papachristos et al., 2013). Similarly, and in partial disagreement with the deterrence model, it would not be as much the severity as the certainty of the sanction that contributes to legislation compliance (Apel, 2013; Nagin, 2013).
3. A third approach is linked to the general theory of crime of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) which instead of asking why one person decides to commit a crime, propose to ask what are the factors that prevent recourse to crime, and they identify them in the social relations in which socialization takes place. To this they add an even more purely psychological element, low self-control. Some meta-analyses suggest that the theory that emphasizes the importance of low self-con-

1. <https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/archivioNormativaNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?iPageNo=1&lingua=italiano>

trol holds up more to empirical examination than the deterrence theory, even if it shows differences in different cultures and in any case cannot be applied to all types of crimes (Gailliot et al., 2012; Vazsonyi, et al., 2017).

In summary, according to de Puisseau et al. (2019), none of the three approaches is able to account for all types of crimes, so much so that they propose an integration of the theories of obedience to the law.

2. Our research: materials and methods

The research, carried out in collaboration with the Universities of Trento and Milan, was commissioned by the Vita Salute San Raffaele University to AstraRicerche in January 2021. A questionnaire was formulated to investigate the behavior of the sample at two different times: the beginning of the pandemic (February - May 2020) and the period from September to October 2020, months in which the pandemic seemed to have significantly reduced based on the data of the subjects tested positive for COVID-19 and ICU admissions. Structurally, the questionnaire was divided into two parts, aimed at investigating the reasons that led people to comply or not with the rules on containing the COVID-19 pandemic, with reference to the so-called first wave (spring 2020) and second wave (autumn 2020).

The questionnaire used was administered by AstraRicerche s.r.l. through the CAWI method (Computer Aided Web Interviewing) on a sample of 1.004 subjects representative of the Italian population by gender, age (18-75 years) and geographical areas. This sampling activity was carried out directly by AstraRicerche s.r.l. which has guaranteed the protection of the legislation in terms of privacy in carrying out its activities. The data provided to the researchers was anonymous and a number identified each respondent subject. In addition, AstraRicerche in the administration has guaranteed: a) consistency check on responses; b) check on the overall time of compilation and of each single application. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques through the use of the open source statistical software R (R Core Team, 2020).

3. Results

The first question, formulated and asked in relation to the periods before and after the summer of 2020, was:

«Did you comply with the anti COVID-19 measures?»

Both before and after the summer, very few people replied that they had not respected the measures, respectively 1.29% and 1.39%. This implies that in both cases over 98% of respondents declared that they had complied with the containment measures of the epidemic.

Our research then asked the following questions:

«If so, for what reasons did you comply with the anti COVID-19 measures?»

Below is the table with the results obtained in relation to the behaviors held at the beginning of the pandemic (first wave).

The rules must be respected	27,42%
Experts (doctors, authorities, etc.) said it	10,74%
I saw people around me respect them	1,97%
I was afraid of sanctions	4,99%
I was afraid of feeling judged by others if I didn't respect them	1,63%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and affecting my health	18,46%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to my family	20,05%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to other people	14,52%
None of these	0,23%

The table below shows the gender differences on this point:

	Female	Male	I prefer not to specify	Total
The rules must be respected	48,00%	51,17%	0,83%	100,00%
Experts (doctors, authorities, etc.) said it	48,59%	51,41%	0,00%	100,00%
I saw people around me respect them	38,46%	59,62%	1,92%	100,00%
I was afraid of sanctions	40,91%	58,33%	0,76%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and affecting my health	55,33%	44,26%	0,41%	100,00%
I was afraid of feeling judged by others if I didn't respect them	37,21%	62,79%	0,00%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to my family	53,96%	45,85%	0,19%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to other people	54,17%	45,31%	0,52%	100,00%
None of these	33,33%	50,00%	16,67%	100,00%

Below is the table with the results obtained in relation to the behaviors held after the summer (**second wave**).

The rules must be respected	25,46%
Experts (doctors, authorities, etc.) said it	10,14%
I was afraid of sanctions	5,29%
I saw people around me respect them	2,06%
I was afraid of feeling judged by others if I didn't respect them	1,67%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and affecting my health	18,81%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to my family	20,72%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to other people	15,62%
None of these	0,23%

The table below shows the gender differences on this point:

	Female	Male	I prefer not to specify	Total
The rules must be respected	48,09%	51,30%	0,61%	100,00%
Experts (doctors, authorities, etc.) said it	44,83%	54,79%	0,38%	100,00%

I saw people around me respect them	32,08%	66,04%	1,89%	100,00%
I was afraid of sanctions	47,79%	52,21%	0,00%	100,00%
I was afraid of feeling judged by others if I didn't respect them	32,56%	67,44%	0,00%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and affecting my health	54,34%	45,25%	0,41%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to my family	53,66%	45,78%	0,56%	100,00%
I was afraid of contracting the virus and passing it on to other people	56,22%	43,53%	0,25%	100,00%
None of these	50,00%	33,33%	16,67%	100,00%

The following figure compares the behaviors in the two distinct phases of the pandemic (figure 1).

Then, we asked:
«If not, for what reasons did you not observe the anti COVID-19 measures?»
Both, for the first and the second wave. It was specified that multiple answers could be given.

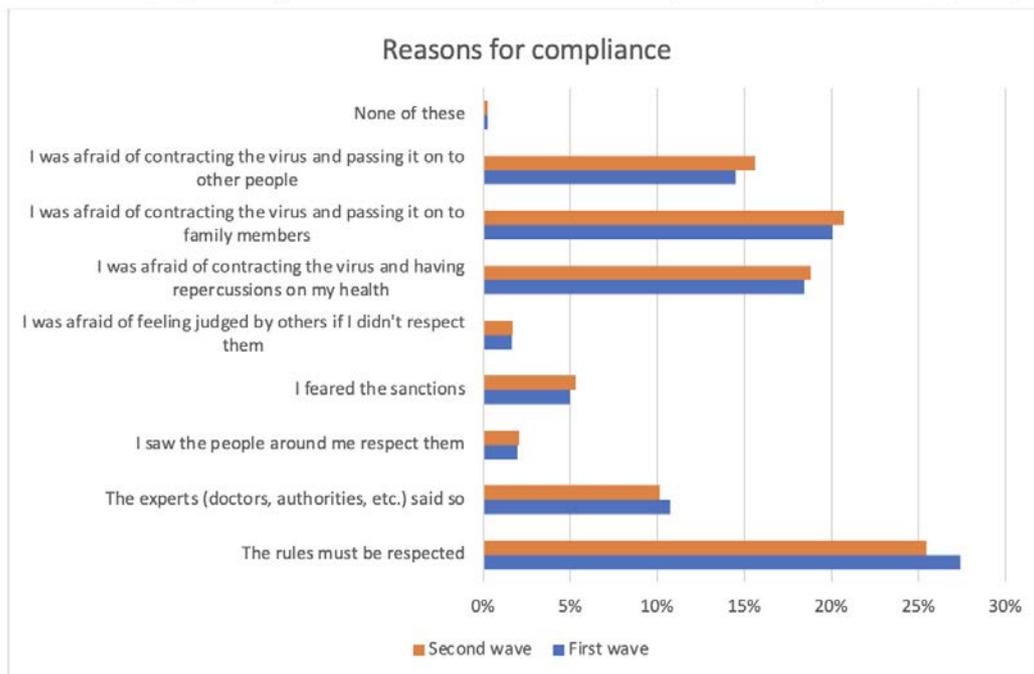


Figure 1

Before the summer we got these results (**first wave**):

The virus does not exist	0,00%
The measures were too severe	17,39%
The risk of being sanctioned was very low	13,04%
The measures violated my rights	26,09%
I didn't harm anyone	17,39%
The measurements were not clear to me	4,35%
To safeguard my business	8,70%
To be able to be with my loved ones and my friends	8,70%
None of these	4,35%

I didn't harm anyone	17,24%
The measurements were not clear to me	3,45%
The measures violated my rights	3,45%
To be able to be with my loved ones	10,34%
They are not useful, given their ineffectiveness during the first wave	13,79%
Decrees with new measures continue to follow one another, it is not possible to follow these continuous changes	13,79%
None of these	3,45%
To safeguard my business	10,34%

After the summer (**second wave**), the answers were as follows:

The virus does not exist	0,00%
The measures were too severe	24,14%
The risk of being sanctioned was very low	0,00%

Focusing on the disrespectful answers, the reasons that were proposed, for the first and second wave, were distributed as follows (figure 2):

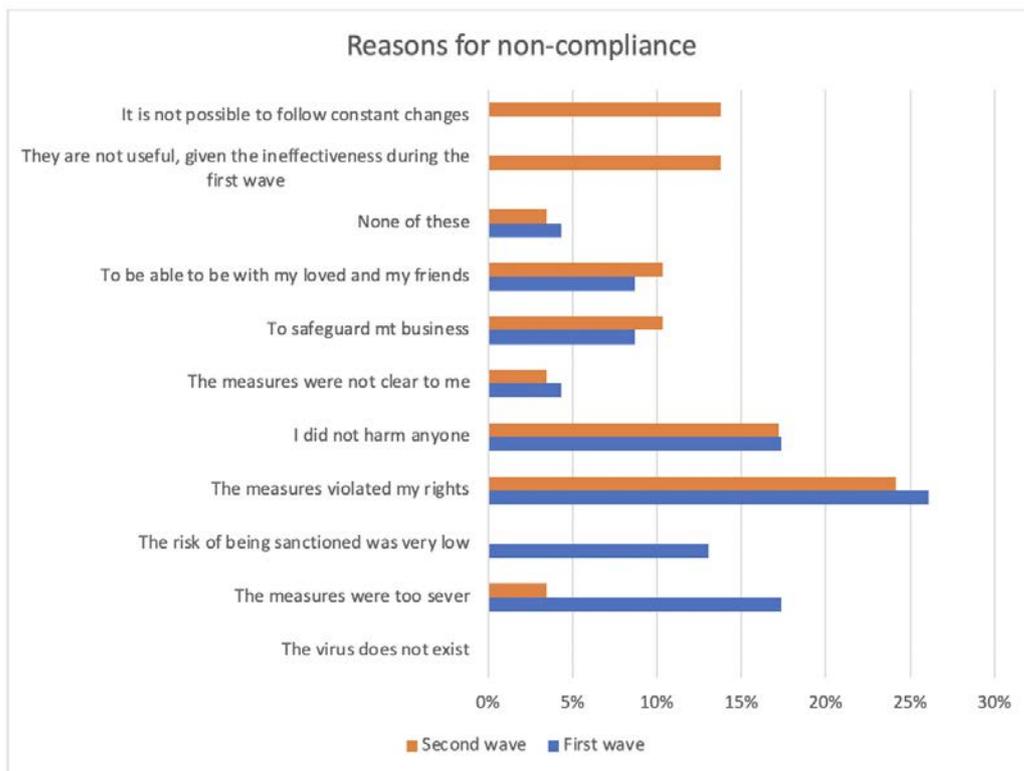


Figure 2

4. Discussion

The analysis of the results of our research can be an interesting starting point for making comparisons with other researches as well as some autonomous reflections.

Let's start with the comparative aspects: there is a certain uniformity of the results achieved by all the scholars who have conducted research similar to ours. In particular, the high respect of the rules, shown by the community, to combat the pandemic, emerges as an interesting data (de Bruijn, 2020; Kuiper, 2020; Fetzer, 2020; Salier, 2020).

In our sample, this adhesion is declared in almost all of the interviewees. Furthermore, in our study, despite having made a temporal distinction between the first and second pandemic waves, we did not find a reduction in regulatory compliance. This may be due to the fact that the phenomenal pandemic, although reducing in the period June-August 2020, has regained a strong vitality since the month of September and therefore people found themselves experiencing an identical emergency situation.

The moral and social motivations underlying compliance with the imposed rules are present in all studies as well as the reduced fear of sanctions. As for the works that considered the alignment to the restrictions against the spread of COVID-19, there is a US one that would demonstrate the limited effectiveness of government communications that emphasize civic duty (Everett, 2020), but perhaps we must remember a certain initial derailment by the major authority of that country (Trump 2020, in: Harper et al., 2020).

A research conducted on a sample of 1,595 Australians identified both instrumental attitudes as significant variables in adherence to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic - the fear of sanctions, worries about one's own health and that of others, the perception of one's own vulnerability and that of the severity of the disease - , and regulatory attitudes - trust in the competence and in the equity and integrity of the institutions, sending significant and not contrary communications from the authorities, duty of obedience to authority. Overall, however, even in a situation like that of COVID-19 in which the instrumental attitude of fear of the negative health effects of the violation of restrictions is to be expected, regulatory factors such as the duty to obey authority and personal morality were way more significant. The authors conclude that this provides general indications on why the rules are obeyed, in particular the unpopular ones, underlining the scarce use of focusing only on sanctions to strengthen adherence to the limitations, but not excluding the fact that «for some people simply it requires that there be sanctions» (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 491). To a similar conclusion comes a Dutch research conducted in April 2020 on a sample of 568 citizens. The approach of the Dutch authorities, as explained by the authors, was based on persuasion and on leveraging self-discipline and moral and social motivations rather than repressive measures (Kuiper et al., 2020).

In our sample of interviewees, the prevailing underlying motivation for respecting the imposed precepts is that of wanting to protect oneself and others from the risk of contagion. We consider equally interesting the data (up to 27% of the answers) of mere compliance with the rules as such.

It could be indicative of a high collective capacity to internalize the normative precepts. Therefore, both moral and normative motivations are applicable to our sample.

It's equally interesting that even in our group of interviewees the fear of the sanction was not very relevant.

Finally, we are aware that our research has limits linked to a limited number of interviewees compared to the population, to the need to carry out further qualitative investigations that would allow a greater understanding of the answers provided and to not having detailed the concept of «authority» (not having separate medical and institutional authorities).

5. Conclusion

We believe that it is necessary to start from this last point in order to carry out some conclusive reflections.

People have respected the rules (or rather they have declared that they have respected them, the criminologists are, for training and tendency, very wary) not out of fear but rather out of sharing. A sharing perhaps determined, on the one hand, by the desire to fight the common «enemy» and, on the other, by protecting oneself and those close to us from a contagion that can prove to be dangerous and sometimes deadly. It follows that scientific information plays an essential role. Only experts can tell us how much and how the virus can really be insidious for people and what are the ways to avoid a fast transmission.

It should also be considered that knowledge the communication of scientific knowledge is not neutral in itself, but could be subject to misunderstandings and manipulations, this implies an ethical duty on the part of scientific societies and individual experts.

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