

Covid-19 and restrictions: why can't people respect rules?

Explanations from Social Psychology and Decision-making theories.

Two months have passed since Coronavirus has first been diagnosed in Europe, and from that moment it has drastically altered our life. We experienced strong restrictions to our everyday freedom and we needed to modify our routines.

During this period we had the chance to observe how different countries have reacted to the emergency, what kind of measures they have implemented, how people behaved and finally we could evaluate how the spread of the virus was impacted.

Prevention, as always, has turned out to be the best practice. Nations which acted fast and made a relevant amount of diagnostic tests were able to better contain the outbreak.

However, there is another factor which results to be important to limit the spread of Coronavirus and it is the type of limitations implemented. By comparing the results of the regulations put in place, it is clear that severe restrictions led to a more successful restraint of Covid-19. Examples are countries like China, Israel, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, where the government opted for strict rules and checked the citizens also with the support of digital solutions, such as mobile apps.

Anyway, strictly linked to the types of rules implemented there is another element: the ability to respect the rules.

Indeed, many countries, including Italy, decreed strict limitations which did not bring to the same results. Surely, different variables had a role in the trends of new cases, however, the behavior of people has certainly an impact. For example, in Italy 26.000 fines were given during Easter's weekend (il Fatto Quotidiano.it) and in France, after two weeks from the beginning of the restrictions, 359.000 fines have been registered (RSI NEWS).

Thus, analyzing the reasons behind the lack of respect of the rules can be interesting. Surely, culture and education have an impact on how a person behaves.

But, what else influences how people from the same country and with similar culture behave?

Here, the field of study of Decision-making and Social Psychology can help us to understand.

I believe there are ***two possible theories*** which can explain why people decide to respect or to not respect the rules.

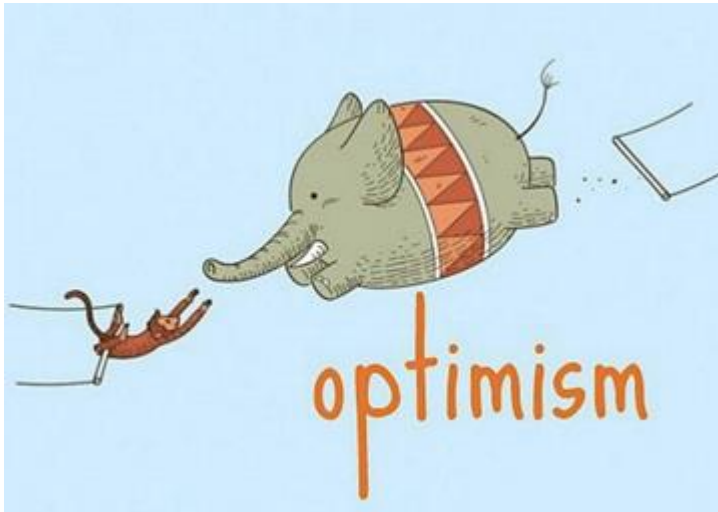
The first is a mechanism called "Optimism Bias". Cognitive biases can be defined as "shortcuts" that our minds use in order to make sense of the world around us. Since information processing requires excessive time and adaptive decisions often need to be made fast, our brain utilizes rules of thumbs to breakdown the reality and guide our

behavior ([G. Haselton](#) et al., 2015). Cognitive biases have the aim to protect us and help us in moving forward- if we were constantly obliged to analyze all the data and to imagine every possible scenario in order to take a simple decision, we would probably freeze. However, sometimes, or most of the times, they can lead us to misjudge the situation and fail.

The optimism bias is one of the most consistent, relevant, and pervasive biases documented in psychology and behavioral economics. Humans, indeed, show this curious ability to strongly believe to be less likely than others of experiencing negative conditions. When it comes to predicting what will happen to us in the future, we overestimate the likelihood of positive events, and underestimate the likelihood of negative events. For example, we underrate the probability of being victim of a crime, being in a car accident, or suffering from a serious disease. Surprisingly, this bias is observed without substantial difference across gender, race, nationality and age ([Tali Sharot](#), 2011). Thus, this can in part explain some individuals' behavior during this health emergency. People who decide to go out and meet other people despite the rules, can feel less at risk to contract the virus or to present a severe prognosis.

If this is the case, how can we decrease the optimism bias?

Different studies about the topic explain that optimism seems to arise because individuals persistently overestimate the degree of control that they have over situations ([David M. DeJoy](#), 2002). Therefore, targeted messages which underline the unpredictability of this virus, when correct precautions are not implemented, can be a valid tool to decrease the biased perception of the risk.



Optimism bias.

The second explanation can be offered by a more complex theory, called “*Terror Management Theory*”, and its implications.

Briefly explained, the TMT sustains that whenever we are forced to think and reflect about death, we automatically feel a strong sensation of “*existential anxiety*”. This sensation is extremely uncomfortable, and it cannot be borne for a long time. Therefore, always according to the theory, humans put in place a defensive mechanism to protect from this distress. This anxiety can be decreased through a “*buffer*”, which is self-esteem. Consequently, in order to feel better, we try to increase our self-esteem.

Self-esteem can be increased through two different strategies: 1. We can work on our personal achievements and build our self-esteem internally; 2. We can increase our self-esteem by assigning ourselves to specific social groups and adhering to their social norms.

To explain it with an example, let’s say that a student enrolls in a prestigious university. He/she can either increase his/her self-esteem by studying and putting effort to get a degree; or he/she can simply feel

satisfied by classifying himself/herself as student of the prestigious university and by recognizing the successes of that institution as personal achievements. In the second scenario, he/she will try to follow the social norms of that specific university, in order to increase his/her sense of belonging.

Now, it is evident that the first method, even if more stable and durable, requires more time and energy. Thus, if we experience a strong sense of discomfort that we want to decrease immediately, the second option can be a faster solution.

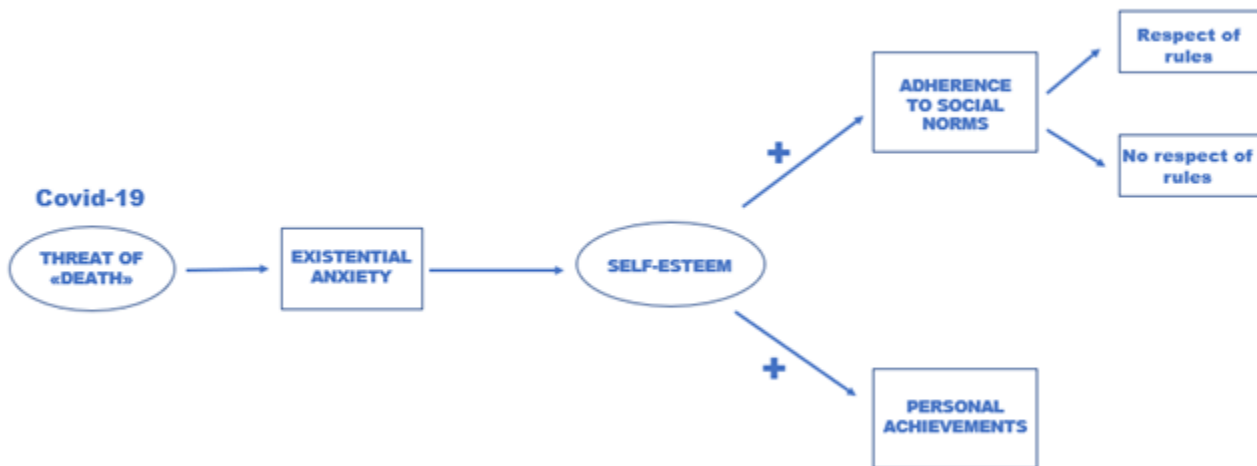
An interesting study was made to confirm this theory. Several judges were asked to reflect about deaths before fictional trials. The consequences observed were curious. All the judges, exposed to the stimulus, gave more severe fines for criminals who broke the laws in comparison to the control group (judges who were not exposed to the stimulus). The judges unconsciously acted in this way in order to attain to the social norms and to increase further the sense of belonging to their category. Ultimately, this led to increase their self-esteem and thus to decrease the existential anxiety felt.

The same mechanism of the theory can also be observed in the current situation. Let's see how.

Inevitably, the threat of coronavirus makes us reflect about death, causing us to feel anxiety. Obviously, we feel the need to push away this negative feeling. Following the TMT, self-esteem can help us to succeed in this aim. We need a fast and easy way to increase it, thus we will probably go for the second option. Therefore, the social group in which we recognize ourselves plays an important role. For example, if we see our peers and friends respecting the rule, we will probably

identify this behavior as the correct one and act accordingly. On the other hand, if we see or believe that our social group keeps breaking the restrictions, we might as well end up following the same example.

Terror Management Theory applied to Covid-19



TMT & Covid-19

To support this hypothesis, I will quote other observations. During this period of quarantine, adolescents and young people showed to be the most respectful of the restrictions. Why? According to some psychologists (Matteo Lancini, 2020), it is because adolescents know well technology and they are aware that relationships can be strong even if virtual. However, I would also add another factor. Young people are very active on social media and through them, they have the possibility to be constantly exposed to what their friends are doing; and guess what? They can see that all our peers are at home. Thus, staying at home becomes a social norm to respect.

However, do not misunderstand me, I do not believe that we are unable to reason with our mind and to decide what is right or wrong.

These theories are possible explanations of the unconscious mental processes behind some decisions. Nevertheless, they can be a valid starting point to design interventions to prevent certain behaviors. So, if they are true, what can we do?

First of all, it would be interesting to analyze the demographic and sociodemographic variables, such as age, gender, job title etc., of the people who received fines during this period. If recurrent patterns are identified, like different clusters with similar characteristics, then designing tailored and targeted messages can be helpful.

Like in marketing, only once we understand our target audience, we can design effective communication campaigns.

The respect of the rule is fundamental now, but it will be even more critical in the next phases of the emergency; when we will need to adapt to a new normality. Of course, communication alone will not have much power on the behaviors of citizens. It will be necessary to have proper changes and supports from the government to facilitate the adherence to the rules. Moreover, if mental processes proposed in these theories can have a role in following the rules, psychological and social support would be essential.

Cristina Carbone

References

1. Il Fatto Quotidiano.it (April 2020). “Coronavirus, nel week di Pasqua oltre 26mila sanzioni su 795mila controlli: solo domenica 14mila italiani multati”.
2. RSI NEWS (April 2020). “Covid-19, fioccano le multe in Francia”.
3. [M. G. Haselton](#), [D. Nettle](#) & [D. R. Murray](#) (2015). “The Evolution of Cognitive Bias”.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119125563.evpsych241>
4. Tali Sharot (2011). “The optimism bias”. Current Biology, Volume 21, Issue 23. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.10.030>
5. [David M.DeJoy](#) (2002). “The optimism bias and traffic accident risk perception”. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-4575\(89\)90024-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-4575(89)90024-9)
6. Anna Spina & Matteo Lancini (Aprile 2020). “Coronavirus, gli adolescenti hanno dimostrato di essere migliori degli adulti”.