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Analyzing *Equilibrium* Through
Concepts of Conformity and Obedience

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The movie, *Equilibrium*, takes place after humans are almost eliminated due to the horrific effects of World War III. The government believed that peoples' emotions were the cause of the world's problems and that hate and anger led to the destructive war. In response, the government required everyone, except the man in charge, to take injections of a drug at specific times every day to deaden their emotions. Anyone who did not take their drugs, allowing them to experience emotions, was killed by a group of clerics whose job it was to rid the world of emotions and any emotion causing objects, such as art, poetry, books, paintings, etc.

This paper will discuss two scenes from *Equilibrium* and examine them through several social psychological concepts. The first scene that will be analyzed was a common picture that was shown many times throughout the movie where people were walking in a large group down the street. All of them had straight, blank faces with no expression, and all were wearing dark colored clothing. The buildings and houses in the city were also dull and dreary in appearance. The leader was shown on large screens along the streets repeating the same message that emotions lead to disaster, and people must take their drugs to keep the world at peace. A buzzer sounded and all the people stopped and injected their emotion deadening drugs into their neck.

The second scene was where John Preston's, who is the head cleric, partner stopped taking his emotion suppressing drugs and stole a book from a house that the clerics raided. John finds him reading the book and knew his partner was able to feel emotion. John, whose job it was to rid the world of emotion, killed his partner cleric. The night after killing his partner, John had a dream about when his wife was taken and killed in front of him for the very same reason as his partner, and he did nothing to stop it. After his dream John stopped taking his drugs and began to question the authority of the government to kill those who feel.

Taking the injections of the drug was considered an everyday practice and was expected of all citizens. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) explored the concept of social norms, which is a group's idea of how people are supposed to behave. Following these same lines, Aronson, Wilson, and Akert (2007) suggest that groups define specific actions or ways of thinking that are considered to be appropriate or inappropriate. Based on this concept in the movie, it was expected by the majority of society for citizens to not be able to feel emotions and was considered inappropriate to be able to experience any sort of feeling. Those who took their injections of the drug regularly were the norm and accepted by the group, and those who went against this were considered deviant and were severely punished or killed. Taking the injections would be just one example of the concept of a social norm. Another social norm throughout the entire movie was wearing black, grey, or dark blue clothing. The majority of society accepted the idea that there was supposed to be no color and followed that group thinking. The city and houses were also cold and grey as well. It was banned by the government to own anything expressive or that displayed any sort of emotion, so wearing dull colors and having no decoration was the appropriate thing to do.

“The Resistance” was the name given to those who refused to take their drugs and owned forbidden possessions. The people who belonged to this group were considered to be deviants of the social standards set by society. They went against what society expected of people by wearing bright colors and owning artwork, decorations, perfume, books, and experiencing emotions. To the majority of the citizens it was normal not to show any emotion, to walk in a crowd of those acting exactly the same as them, to wear unexpressive colors, to take their injections of a drug that suppressed all of their emotions at designated times, and not to question

those in charge. John Preston accepted killing those who went against the government because it was what society expected of him in his job as a cleric.

Some of the people accepted the ideas of society to not be disliked by others or the ones in charge. According to Deutsch and Gerard (1955), these people would have conformed due to normative social influence. Their concept of normative social influence holds the idea that people will change behavior to gain approval from others. Deutsch and Gerard suggest that it may not be that the people truly accepted the ideas or thinking, but rather they conformed because they were afraid or wanted to be accepted by the group majority. In the movie, people may have taken injections because that is what the government said to do, and they did not want to go against them to stay in good terms with the other conforming members of society. This concept also applies to how the people dressed and what they owned. As shown in Deutsch and Gerard, a part of normative social influence is that when a person wants to be approved of by others, the person conforming may not actually believe in what the group is doing is right, but wanting to be a part of the group is more important than truly believing in what they are doing. The person may not want to or dare to go against the group. A strong reason for people in the movie to not want to go against the group would have been the fear of being killed. The clerics killed anyone who did not take their drugs, so even if a person did not believe it was right to take something that suppressed all emotion, the fear of being killed if they refused could lead them to conform.

Another possibility for conforming could be due to informational social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Aronson et al. (2007) mention several instances where informational social influence may be more apparent. They state that an individual may adopt others' behaviors or use them as an information source when we are involved in a situation that we have

never experienced before, in a critical situation in which we need a quick decision, or when we believe that someone else is more knowledgeable in an area than us (Aronson et al., 2007, p. 237). Milgram (1963) also suggests very similar reasons for conformity. The people in *Equilibrium* may have accepted what the government enforced because it was supposed to be a respectable authority and that having people suppress their emotions will lead to a better world. They may have been uncertain of what to do after WWII and turned to the government for guidance, thinking that maybe those in charge knew how to handle the situation. These are all ways in which informational social influence may have had an effect on the citizens in the movie, by believing the government is a respectable authority, people truly believe in what the government is doing, or that the government may actually know how to handle the situation or at least know how to handle it better than them. Those who belonged to “The Resistance” could have joined their group because they may have truly believed that those who knew the most about the new situation after the war were the people who believed that not suppressing their emotions was the right thing to do.

Conforming to suppress their emotions could be a product of both the situation and an individual’s disposition. The situation may have been the major cause of how people acted by instilling a fear in individuals that if people did not conform they would be killed. Also, the majority of people around them had conformed and followed the government’s orders without question, so the situation of being in a group of people who all held a common belief may have led some to take their regular injections. Those who did this were not necessarily bad or corrupt people, but rather the situation probably played a large role influencing those who took their emotion suppressing drugs. Some may have believed that taking the injections had more benefits than negative effects. People who believed this would act this way regardless of the

situation and probably would not fear the effects of the government, but rather take the drugs because that is what they believe in. In a different situation, many of the people who took their drugs and destroyed their emotionally expressive possessions probably would not have acted the way they did when they walked down the street in a large group with no expression and everyone took their injections in unison. It may have been some individual's personality to not question those perceived to be in charge, but for the most part the situation played a much larger role. Another possible option is that it was a combination of both an individual's personality and the situation. When someone who conforms easily is placed in a situation where there are high expectations to accept the ideas of everyone else, they are almost bound to accept those views without any question. In a situation where there are lower expectations for accepting others' ideas, it may be less likely for that same individual to conform.

It was expected of John Preston to kill his partner when he found him reading a forbidden item, and that is what he did. John followed the rules of Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) idea of social norms. Just as in Milgram's (1963) study where participants enforced perceived realistic shocks even though they knew it was hurting another individual, John killed his partner because of the forces of the government, who is a strong authority figure. After killing his partner, John began to question the authority of the government. It was after encountering his friend who had gone against the ideals of the government and the majority of citizens which made John realize what he did doing was wrong. According to Asch (1955) having an ally who goes against the majority makes it easier for another to do the same. When John's partner defied the government by refusing to take his injections and stole a forbidden item from a raid, he showed John that he did not agree with what they were doing as clerics and was not willing to submit to government standards. Even though he killed his partner, knowing that someone else had resisted the

governments orders was enough for John to realize that he could also stand up to the government. Asch's (1955) concept of defying a group's ideas with an ally directly applies. John was not able to defy the group majority on his own for many possible reasons. He may have conformed because he was afraid of being killed or that he did not want the government and society to think poorly of him, but having an ally allowed some of the group's pressure of conforming to be taken off of him. Asch (1955) found that participants were more likely to state their personal beliefs if it went against the majority when there was someone else there who went against the group before them. John's partner and wife were the first to state their beliefs against the group and it was not long until John began expressing his true beliefs as well.

John was not necessarily an evil or corrupt person, although it may have seemed that way when he killed his own partner cleric and watched his wife get killed. He obviously felt bad about it later when he realized what he had done, but at the time the situation played a larger role in both instances. It was expected of him as a member of society, but especially as a head cleric, to rid the world of anything that was emotionally expressive. That is exactly what he did. The forces of the situation, where there were emotions that were displayed, were the factors that caused him to behave the way he did. It probably was a combination of both John's personality and the situation that caused him to behave that way. He most likely believed the government was correct and being a highly respected cleric did not question their authority. It may have been an aspect of his personality to not question those he believed to possess a respectable opinion. The situation where he is faced with his partner or his wife, who had violated the law, combined with his personality of not opposing the government resulted with two individuals close to him being killed.

In conclusion, *Equilibrium* can be analyzed through many social psychological concepts, especially pertaining to obedience and conformity. Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) concept of social norms applies to why the people took their injections and dressed and acted the same way. Their concept of normative social influence is apparent by individuals conforming to not be disapproved of by others, whereas their concept of informational social influence applied to other reasons why some conformed, such as the government being a respectable authority or a new situation after the effects of WWII. John's change in behavior against the government is an example of Asch's (1955) idea that having an ally who agrees with you makes it easier to resist conformity. Even though John knew that killing his partner was wrong, just like Milgram (1963) found, having someone in charge or a new situation may cause a person to behave differently than they normally would. The behavior in this movie was a product of both individual personality of wanting to agree with others and the strong forces of the government demanding conformity. Conformity is a complex process, but knowing how to resist and when to conform is an important characteristic that one must learn.

References

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