



Original Article

Sociology of communication processes in current scenarios and the “manipulation of news”

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Abstract

This study examines the sociological processes underlying social influence, beginning with early military psychological operations (PSYOP) involving news manipulation and tracing their development toward contemporary techniques of persuasion. It focuses on the mechanisms through which influence is exerted and on the core principles involved in directing human behavior. The analysis also addresses mass suggestion, crowd psychology, and the erosion of individual identity, drawing on the foundational contributions of Gustav Le Bon and Sigmund Freud. These perspectives provide a framework for introducing eight typologies of the “change process” and for analyzing the corresponding reduction of individual volitional capacity.

Keywords: *social influences; sociology of communication; manipulation news; social influences; military psychological operations (PSYOP); crowd psychology; human behavior*

1.Introduction. From Early Military Psychological Operations of News Manipulation ("Psyop") to Current "Brainwashing"

Never before in recent years have PSYOPs, short for "psychological operations," become fundamental strategies of significant importance from a military and diplomatic perspective.

PSYOPs, military psychological operations, have effectively always been the winning tactics of valiant military theorists and commanders, from Sun Tzu, the Chinese General (dating back to the 5th century B.C.), to the present day. Every strategist, to achieve their assigned objective and obtain maximum effectiveness with a minimum expenditure of losses

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and forces, necessarily values psychological operations, making them a cornerstone of success and considered, to all intents and purposes, a weapon of war.

History, moreover, helps us better understand how Psychological Operations (PSYOP) immediately played a decisive role. In particular, in World War II, they found their maximum expression in the most powerful communication medium of the era, the radio: an immediate tool for propaganda against the enemy. An example of this was the radio programs broadcast by the famous Japanese station "Tokyo Rose," which spread music and messages of blatant, fierce, and pungent criticism towards the Americans and their allies. But the most innovative example of how psychological operations were used is owed to the English radio programs of the "British Broadcasting Corporation" (BBC) in 1940. The latter used this medium specially to disseminate messages lacking veracity, with the aim of intimidating the Germans, should they invade the English Channel, claiming to be able to set fire to a large part of the channel thanks to sophisticated weaponry systems.

In 1950, Korea, in addition to employing the same radio communication method, already consolidated by previous experiences, added the use of loudspeakers and the distribution of posters and leaflets as further, more persuasive means of information. The purpose of the posters and leaflets was evident: to persuade by attracting the reader's attention with impactful phrases and images, composed of words, figures, and white spaces. This required the use of particularly simple and precise writing to be easily understandable. Among the now well-known elements capable of "piloting" human behavior, as highlighted by several Authors (Gaskell & Sealy, 1980; Poicheler, 1987; Cialdini, 2010, and others), the following six principles emerge:

1. **Commitment and Consistency**
2. **Reciprocity**
3. **Social Proof (or Imitation)**
4. **Authority**
5. **Liking**
6. **Scarcity (or the fear of running out of something)**

Speaking of the first of the six principles: **commitment and consistency** represents one of the strategies of "subtle persuasion" employed in Chinese concentration camps during the Korean War against several American prisoners, who, without the intervention of physical coercion or threats, found themselves transformed into genuine "convinced collaborators" of the Chinese themselves. The technique, defined by Edward Hunter Jr. (1950) as *brain-washing*, subsequently found its validation in the research of Freedman & Fraser (1966) and consisted of first obtaining trivial and completely inoffensive written anti-American and/or pro-communist statements such as: "The United States is not perfect"; "Unemployment is not a problem in a communist country." Subsequently, in a gradually imperceptible manner, the statements became increasingly substantial; for example: a) "some concrete examples of why the United States is not perfect"; and then again: b) discussing their list of "America's problems" with other prisoners, and so on until the physiological self-conviction that everything they had written was nothing more than the real product of their own "mental labor" was determined. The next step (without hesitation, therefore) then consisted of granting authorization to use their name and written text in a radio broadcast airing throughout North and South Korea, thereby obtaining a sort of "gradual collective social influence" that naturally spread like wildfire.

According to the canons of social psychology, Cialdini (2010) writes in this regard: "If I can get you to make a commitment (take a position, say something publicly), I will have

prepared the ground for your automatic and unthinking behavior, consistent with that initial commitment." (cf. also Schein, 1956 and Di Fiorino et al., 1989).

As communication technology evolved, with the 1st Gulf War, psychological operations changed their mode of communication, while maintaining the already tested tools: radio broadcasts, television programs, leaflet drops, and the dissemination of news through loudspeakers. In this case, too, the means employed proved effective for a faster propagation of messages, such as Arab brotherhood and independence from the Islamic world. Within 24 hours, approximately 29 million leaflets were scattered over a specific Unit, informing the members that they would be attacked if they did not declare surrender.

In short, "PSYOPs have been part of military strategy throughout history. Although neither the definition nor the purpose of the same have significantly changed since the end of the Cold War, the nature of conflicts, the technologies available today, the socio-political context, and the type of operations in which the Armed Forces are engaged have totally changed" (Fontana, 2003).

According to a NATO definition, PSYOPs represent "planned psychological activities, conducted in peace and war, directed at an audience, whether friendly, hostile, or neutral, in order to influence attitudes and behaviors that might otherwise compromise the achievement of political and military objectives. They include strategic psychological activities, consolidation psychological operations, and battlefield psychological activities" (Fontana, 2003). With the advent of new technologies and the birth of new means of communication, such as the internet with social networks, news becomes increasingly smart, faster, and closer to real-time (Calderaro et al., 2025a). This suggests that the faster the dissemination of a piece of news, the greater the margin of error regarding its "authenticity" (Şerban, 2022). In this regard, the consideration that *giving, or withholding, information is a source of enormous power* (Fontana, 2003) proves precise and timely. If, on the one hand, military operations, consciously employed, can contribute (as General Sun Tzu asserted) to "breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting!!!", today we are witnessing an evolution of military operations of a terrorist nature, developed not only through words but above all through powerful video-images, such as the decapitation of innocent people and images portraying episodes of war carried out and then broadcast by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) that violently shake the viewer's sensibility (Mastronardi, 2013).

If, up to this point, we have confined the term PSYOP to relatively military matters, it is necessary to broaden the concept of the same in another equally important aspect. Before further delving into this topic, it is essential to open a small parenthesis regarding the acronym PSYOP, attributing to it an additional definition: *manipulation of people's minds, whether antagonist or enemy, through acute methods of disinformation that propagate non-facts, non-events, and non-cited quotes by skillfully piloting sensations that everyone can perceive, thereby conditioning adverse reactions.*

Alerting news, in fact, can distract attention from dangerous attacks, often of devastating proportions.

Psychological terrorism, which is now also distributed with a few written or spoken words such as "BOMB ALERT," creates negative effects in our daily lives, causing disruptions in the fields of transport, work, and IT (intimidating emails and viruses), never considered before in previous eras.

From the website of "ilGiornale.it" by Biloslavo (2006), it is learned that different forms of psyops have recently also been used by our military in a rather original way.

The distribution of a sheet-sized newspaper by female soldiers attracted the attention not only of young people but also of adults, including illiterates. In this way, the NATO

mission in Afghanistan was made public, using both English and the two local languages (Dari and Pashto).

This "operational communication" (PSYOPS for Americans) would therefore represent the most important strategy for winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans. The ethnologist Gianfranco Manchia therefore used a drawing to represent the union of Italy with Afghanistan, symbolizing the geographical map of the two countries with daisy petals.

Furthermore, numerous posters were affixed in bazaars and shops, with photos of structures built by the Italians, of useful public interest (bridges, schools, clinics), alongside images of previous dilapidated and deserted places.

Another tactical stratagem of PSYOPS developed is that of *close contact*. That is, immersing oneself in the daily local reality: "eating rice and mutton with their hands, sitting on the ground, barefoot, and cross-legged" (Biloslavo, 2006).

Giving away *gadgets* (plastic shopping bags with the Italian tricolor flag depicted, pens, pencils, tricolor backpacks, notebooks with images of European monuments) and giving away tricolor kites (symbolizing freedom) have been the latest novelties that even our armed forces have used within the framework of *PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS (PSYOP)*.

In conclusion, PSYOPs, of significant and undisputed importance, now represent an effective, modern, and ever-evolving weapon with effects and implications that are not always positively successful, but which can also guarantee, if knowingly used, better common relations between peoples.

The importance of *mass media* in current society is supported by their ability to transmit information with maximum speed, clarity, and variety, to reach a vast audience at the same time, and to convey educational and training messages in addition to merely informative ones.

Given the influence that the media exert on the individual in particular and, more broadly, on society, to address this theme it is necessary to delve into some specific mechanisms found in situations of aggregation and interpersonal exchange, such as "pathological group conformity".

If it is true that communication requires a continuous reciprocal exchange between multiple interlocutors, it is equally true that an individual involved in this relationship can be influenced by it (Calderaro et al., 2025b), even reaching a complete identification with the group itself. In this sense, the individual and the group are in a relationship of *reciprocity and dependence* which, in certain cases, can generate *pathological conformity* in which there is a *decrease in the personal responsibility of each individual*, which is thus distributed within the group, and a *diminution of the ability to take personal initiatives and autonomously evaluate different situations*, whose judgments are based exclusively on the observation of the behavior of others (Calderaro et al., 2025c).

An immediate consequence of this process is "brainwashing" (Hunter, 1950; Taylor 2004), which occurs in a context of *lack of external reference points* that generate a *weakening of the Ego* and a *lack of defenses* such as to allow messages, especially those linked to fear or threat, to penetrate coercively and powerfully into the individual's mind, becoming absolute and imperative: it is from these mechanisms that the *gradual collective social influence* is generated, in which each member of the group loses critical and objective contact with reality, thus proposing attitudes and behaviors that are entirely automatic and unreflective, lacking precisely that rationality that is at the service of a truthful and objective knowledge of the surrounding world.

The result is a *reality deformed by the media*, which is no longer interpreted by the eyes of the individual who loses their critical power at the expense of a *passive assimilation and reception of information*.

Referring specifically to the role of the press in this suggestive process, Walter Lippman, the main exponent of the theory of the function of the press in the construction of meaning (DeFleur & Ball Rokeach, 1995), states that the media often transmit untruthful information, thus influencing the behaviors of individuals who are supported by partial and distorted judgments of reality. In this way, people act not on the basis of what actually happened but by thinking about the real situation as conveyed by the information provided to them by the press, which carries out a fine selection of news, the language with which it is transmitted, the images connected to it, and the priority and salience of the information, in order to direct public attention to a predefined set of themes.

This latter aspect relating to the priority of information is well explained by the *agenda-setting function theory of the press* (DeFleur & Ball Rokeach, 1995; Cheli, 1994; McQuail, 1993) according to which the media produce a kind of "priority agenda" by transmitting news based on its importance, following a previous selection and valorization. The latter, the cornerstone of the theory, consists of *emphasizing a particular piece of news* thanks also to specific measures which, in the case of the press, may concern publication on the front page, the lexicon used (for example, impactful phrases), and the judgments more or less explicitly expressed by the journalist, resulting in the immediate effect of involving and concentrating public opinion on that precise identified theme.

In addition to bringing about changes related to perceptions, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, the media can also act at a linguistic level by intervening on the lexicon and the attribution of meanings, for example by introducing new words (neologisms), expanding existing meanings, or attributing others. The *dual intervention of the media on communication* is therefore evident: one purely aimed at the vocabulary and the choice of words to use, the other at ways of speaking, pronunciation, and syntax (DeFleur & Ball Rokeach, 1995).

It is also known that the media assume the role of an instrument of culture but also of *social conditioning and control* which can be exercised through the transmission of information, sometimes *distorted* thanks to the mechanisms of *amplification or focal deformation*, which constitute "reality" for the receiving public, often absorbed without any critical filter or benefit of the doubt; what emerges is a real process of *construction of credibility* that makes it difficult for the public to verify the truthfulness of the news and, therefore, the possibility of creating an objective and personal point of view of the facts. This process takes place thanks to the use of what Kapferer (1982) calls "communication variables," such as the quality of the source and the message, the characteristics of the channel and the recipient, all elements that the journalist carefully analyzes to produce and *orient public opinion* towards a specific piece of news.

Overall, McQuail (1986) concludes that the media have their effect at *multiple, strongly interconnected levels*, such as the individual level, weakening personal beliefs and opinions and therefore exposing the individual more to mechanisms of persuasion, then extending to the level of social institutions and reaching society in general, causing deliberate or non-cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes whose effects can be immediate or prolonged long-term.

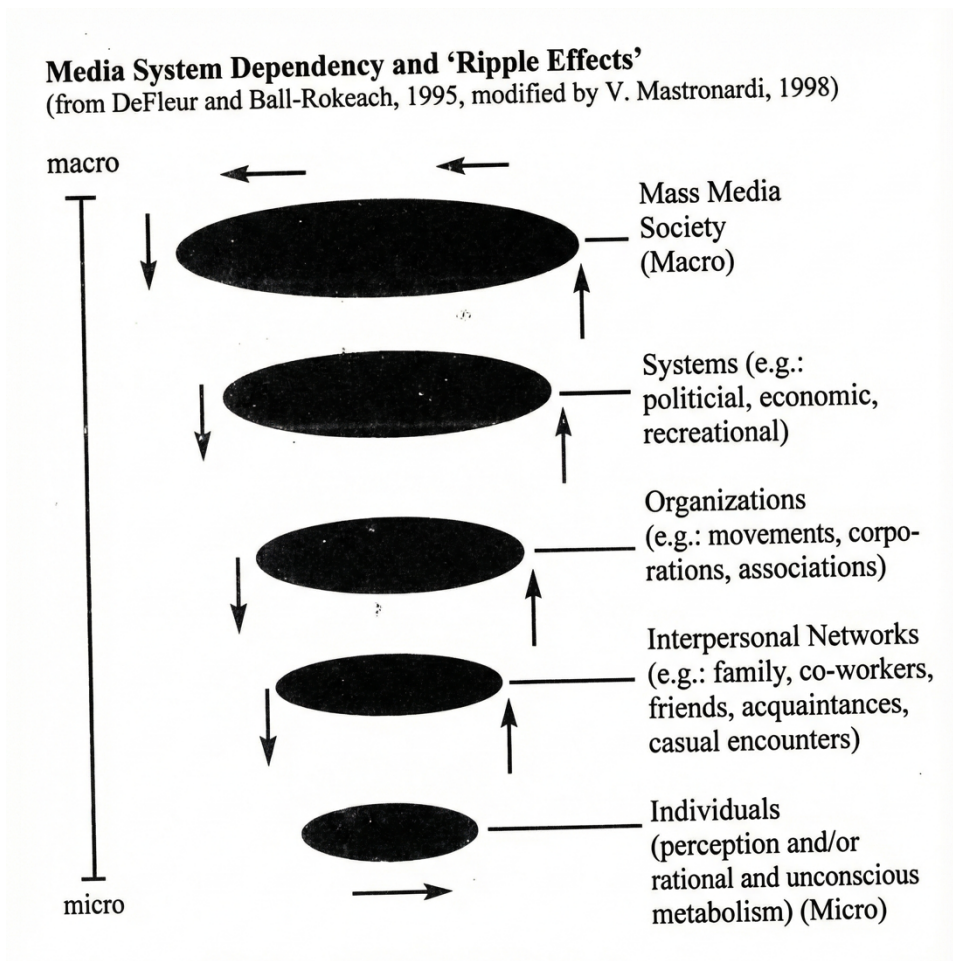


Figure 1. From DeFleur, M. & Ball Rokeach, S.J., (1995). *Teorie delle comunicazioni di massa*, Il Mulino, Bologna. Modified by V. Mastronardi in 1998.

Thus, the *media dependence theory* (Figure 1) considers the media as an integral part of society, as a group inserted within it that relates to the other components at different levels (systems, organizations, interpersonal networks, and individuals).

The dependence that is created is based on the media's ability to draw and create information, process it, and distribute it to the public, and their applicability at the macro and micro levels is explained by the fact that, through media information, useful elements can be provided for the pursuit of specific objectives, including *understanding (of self/society)*, *orientation towards action and interaction*, and *leisure*, and stimulating individual and collective activities, strengthening public interest. Furthermore, since the media play a fundamental role in society, it is also appropriate to consider their *educational potential*, i.e., the ability to broaden the horizons of recipients and raise awareness on important topics capable of favoring the evolution of the individual (Ilie & Serban, 2018). Let us not forget the lesson of an exponent of the psychoanalytic current of Jacques Lacan,

the psychiatrist Massimo Recalcati: "An hour of lesson can change life," which we could thus borrow in journalistic terms: "A good article by a keen journalist can change life."

Far from being merely a neutral means of exposing information, we cannot conceal from ourselves how, conversely, the media have the *real power, if piloted ad hoc, to distort reality*, for example by highlighting superficial news at the expense of important ones, to persuade the individual and thus provoke a change in attitudes implemented in society, to propose models, and to orient public opinion.

In conclusion, it would be necessary to be more aware of the *persuasive power that the media have*, of their usefulness when considered in educational terms, of the essential part they play in society, and of the sometimes devastating effects they produce on individuals, being their "victims—who—tend to see in their acquiescence the effect of natural forces, rather than the designs of those who take advantage of them" (Cialdini, 2010, p.21).

2. Mass Suggestion, Crowd Psychology, and the Loss of Personal Identity: The Contributions of Gustav Le Bon and Sigmund Freud

Considering what has been previously stated about the media's ability to invade daily space, to mark people's days, becoming an integral part of society, it is appropriate to consider that in order to carry out their action, communication tools require the existence of one or more interlocutors who form *public opinion*.

What Scipio Sighele wrote in 1903 in *L'intelligenza della Folla* (The Intelligence of the Crowd) about Public Opinion is interesting:

"It is in the world what God is in heaven; an invisible, impersonal, and feared judge; it is, like religion, an arcane power in whose name the most sublime heroism and the most abject iniquities have been accomplished; it is, like law, invoked and interpreted wrongly or rightly at every moment of life; it is, like force, sometimes supporting right, more often error; it is, finally, like a flag, disposed to turn always to the side whence the wind blows" (Sighele, 1903 p. 69).

From this valuable definition, one can already well understand the *fickle and influenceable nature of the interlocutors*. But what characteristics must a crowd have to be defined as such?

Le Bon (2013) describes it, connoting it from a psychological point of view as an agglomeration of individuals who, upon gathering in predetermined circumstances, assume well-defined characters and characteristics as well as a common identity.

The fact that they are part of a *collective soul* makes them nevertheless "vulnerable to the influences of the group and fashions" and, at the same time, ready to give in to the temptation to indulge in their instinctual reactions which, conversely, if not conditioned by the "pack" or simply by the "reactive group," would be individually self-managed with the right balance. Conversely, the "Superego," the so-called "moral conscience," "the internal judge," is lost, transforming from an individualized to a "massified Superego." This means that belonging to a crowd, which by its nature is anonymous, is capable of granting individuals (fortunately not all) the power to let themselves go, bringing out the most primitive instinctuality, losing the self-determination of the sense of responsibility which is alas redistributed and downsized within the group. In this context, the thresholds of rationality and the individual's defenses are lowered, and the individual becomes highly *suggestible* and thus easily exposed to *mental contagion*: Le Bon (2013: 19), taking an extreme view with the acquisitions of the time, writes: "the individual, finding himself in a fermenting crowd, falls as a result of the influences emanating from it [...] into a particular state, similar to that

ascertained in the hypnotized person under the influence of their hypnotist. The psychic faculties being soothed in the former, they become a slave to all the unconscious activities that the latter moves at will. The conscious personality is annulled, the will and discernment aborted."

How is a crowd constituted from a psychological point of view? - A large agglomeration of individuals is not enough to form a crowd, as it is only a crowd if it is united by particular psychological characteristics. - The crowd, through easy psychic contagion, can be easily heroic as well as criminal.

Thus, by means of a reciprocal influence and dependence of the members, a crowd oriented towards *mediocrity* is created, in which the individual's intelligence is thinned and set aside, and in which the most primitive instincts dominate, to the point that the individual becomes "a grain of sand in the midst of other grains of sand that the wind lifts up at its whim" (Le Bon, 2013, p. 20).

Following the theory of crowd psychology formulated by Le Bon, Freud, in the work *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* from 1921, attempts an analysis starting from the consideration that the study of individual psychology cannot disregard the examination of social psychology, as the individual, from the beginning of their life, influences and is influenced by the context in which they are inserted (family), in which they grow and establish themselves.

Specifically, the Author (1975) explains the individual propensity for aggregation by assuming the existence of a *social drive* at the service of the individual's psychic life, in which the other is regularly present as a *model, as an object, and as a supporter of the relationship itself*.

The maintenance of relationships and thus the survival of the identity of the mass itself is then made possible by the *limitation of the narcissism of each member* for the benefit of the *exaltation of the other*, supported by the presence of a force that Freud sees in the particular bond with others capable of orienting behavior towards *homogeneity*. In this sense, the mass remains united and survives because *every member has invested in the same object placed in the position of their own Ego ideal*, neglecting any individual interest or need to conform to the group, sharing and accepting norms, objectives, ideas, and behaviors that make the mass a unique and integrated identity.

Thus, *suggestibility and regression to a state of primitive psychic activity* are traced back by Freud to the *primeval horde*, i.e., an original form of human society subject to the unlimited domination of a powerful leader: in this case, "the will of the individual was too weak, he did not dare to decide on action. No impulses were acted upon unless they were collective; there was only a common will, there were no individual wills. The representation did not dare to convert into will unless it drew strength from the perception of how widespread it was" (Freud, 1975: 72).

In general, Freud's conception of the mass is *negative*, similar to Le Bon's, emphasizing how its influence generates in the individual the *disappearance of the impossible*, so all individual inhibitions collapse and impulses find free vent, and the appearance of a *regression from an integral and unique entity to a collective individual*, suggested and moralized by common thought, stripped of any personal integrity and faculty to make way for a *total adherence to the mass* that molds and shapes it at its will.

"The mass meeting is necessarythe individual.....if he leaves his small shop or large company for the first time, where he feels very small, to enter the mass meeting, where he now feels surrounded by thousands and thousands of individuals who have his same

conviction.....he too succumbs to the magical influence of what we call mass suggestion," Adolf Hitler alas decreed in *Mein Kampf*.

3. Conclusions.

The "Change Process" and the Decrease of "Volitional Power"

According to the list provided by Spaltro - De Vito Piscicelli (1990), 'change' in Organizations, in relation to the individual interaction processes, can be of 8 types:

1. **"Planned and Participated Change,"** which involves: a) reciprocal determination of the goal by both interacting parties and b) equal distribution of power.
2. **"Indoctrinating Change,"** which involves: a) intentional reciprocal determination of the goal and b) unbalanced distribution of power in a monocratic sense (e.g., schools, prisons, psychiatric hospitals, or other total Institutions).
3. **"Change from Spontaneous Interaction,"** with a) reciprocal and unpremeditated interaction of the goal, b) almost balanced distribution of power (policratic type) (e.g., Changes between good friends with a will for mutual assistance and in all unpremeditated transactions in general). Change in this case produces beneficial effects, but without defined or pre-planned roles.
4. **"Change from Socialization or Social Pressure"** in direct relation to interdependent hierarchical dependence (e.g., relationships between parents and children or between teachers and students). If premeditation is added to this, then "participated change" and "indoctrination" are achieved.
5. **"Technocratic Change,"** on the other hand, solely presumes the simple awareness in overcoming the ignorance of the subjects. Conversely, in programmed change, which includes planning and participation, "the goal is established by involvement and changing of those interested in the process of change; The technocrat does not accept being 'one' of the protagonists; he feels he is 'the protagonist'."
6. **"Coercive Change,"** with a) non-reciprocal determination of the goal, b) unbalanced power relationship in a monocratic sense with unilateral premeditation. It is the change of "people who generate and realize change on the backs of others." It is important, although difficult, to make a distinction between *indoctrinating change and coercive change*: compare a patient in a psychiatric hospital with a prisoner of war in a prison camp. The latter has, compared to the former, the fact that he is not legally subdued: the result is that the former is encouraged to express feelings and dissent if this can lead to his discharge. His removal from the hospital is well received. The situation in the prison camp is completely the opposite. "Indoctrination requires consent, even if manipulated, while coercive change overrides consent, and relies only on power relationships" (Spaltro-De Vito Piscicelli, 1990).
7. **"Natural or Casual Change":** change induced without premeditation and without reciprocal determination of the goal; it includes everything that our knowledge is capable of reaching.
8. **"Emulative Change,"** typical of formal institutions, occurs where there is a clear hierarchical-charismatic relationship between superior and subordinate. Innovation and change through the identification of subordinates with mythical and charismatic figures of superiors. "This innovative form is more frequent than is believed, such is the number of institutions of this type" (Spaltro-De Vito Piscicelli, 1990).

Authors contributions

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