

Catalyzing Rebellion:
An Introduction to the Mobilization in Miniature Project*

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project is to capture a set of rebellious actions against authority. We have designed a situation which produces mobilization among naive subjects. The design emphasizes two features: realism and replicability. To insure realism, the programmed situation avoids the social psychology laboratory and many of the other trappings of classical experiments. The first goal is to produce real mobilization, not just a simulated form or laboratory analog. The second goal is to repeat the same basic scenario on many different groups. Further, we wish to maintain the option of varying either the mobilizing population we recruit from and/or key structural elements of the situation itself.

The solution we have used is to create a real world setting where our subjects are willing to enter into a voluntary relation with an unknown external authority. In Frame Analysis, Goffman terms this arrangement a "fabrication;" it is the basis for all con games and deception experiments. Crucial to our fabrication is that the subjects find our sessions indistinguishable from their real world. We lead our subjects to believe that they are being illegitimately manipulated by what originally appeared to be a benign authority figure, and then we observe how they attempt to resolve this situation.

While the research is based on the central phenomenon of rebellion against authority, the research group is composed of several individuals, each with his own set of questions about this phenomenon. The following section describes some of the perspectives we employ in our investigations. This is followed by a brief description of the setting of a session. Part I of the paper concludes with a description of our data collection procedures and a brief discussion of how we plan to relate our analysis procedures to the task of answering

our theoretical questions. Part II of the paper is a discussion of the link between this project and one of our principle theoretical orientations, the collective action perspective.

PART I

PERSPECTIVES

The second half of the paper will concentrate on questions and insights derived from macro-level theories of social conflict and rebellion; here we shall sketch some of the micro-sociological and social psychological outlooks used in the research. We have been influenced not only by the literature on large-scale mobilization but also by (1) Milgram's work on compliance, (2) questions of group dynamics and, (3) social interactionist perspectives. In all of these areas we are more interested in evaluating the adequacy of concepts and explanations than in verification of existing specific hypothesis. We are attempting to build from and extend existing theories, rather than provide a test of them.

The primary difference between our work and Milgram's stems from our interest in looking at the mechanisms by which non-compliance is generated. A goal in pre testing the design of our situation was to ensure that a relatively high proportion of groups would refuse to obey the authority. While we maintain variability in this dimension, especially as regards amount and intensity of rebellion, the major focus is on the content, rather than the presence, of non-compliant behavior.

With the group dynamics tradition, we share an interest in questions of group leadership and structure. In particular, we are interested in the collectiveness of our rebellions; the degree to which reactions to our situation are something more than a series of independent reactions to the common stimulus.

We do not assume that the set of people we introduce to the setting begins as a "group" in any sociologically meaningful sense, rather we consider the degree of group formation as an important analytical variable.

From the social interactionist perspective we borrow a concern with the process by which a definition of the situation is negotiated. Implicit in the fabrication which is the basis of our design is the idea that the subjects will eventually realize that what they are involved in has considerably greater implications than the authority is willing to admit. This realization is, of course, a property of individuals, but the means by which it is brought to the group's attention and debated leads to questions of impression management and the processes by which shared understandings are recognized or generated.

In summary, our analysis is intended to account for non-compliant responses by small groups when facing an authority of doubtful integrity. Within non-compliance, we focus on two potentially inter-related questions about the group's response: its rebelliousness and its collectiveness. Our final goals involve both (1) relating the outcomes to individual and group properties and (2) describing the various mechanisms by which these outcomes are determined.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The subjects enter the situation believing they are going to participate in a group discussion of community standards under the auspices of a market research firm. During the course of the session it gradually becomes apparent that they are being used to aid illegitimate ends. The authority refuses to listen to their objections and attempts to get the group to complete the session. The situation centers on the market research firm, the Manufacturers Human Relations Consultants (MHRC) and its relations to three other parties: (1) their client, a large oil company; (2) their "employees," the subjects;

(3) the final recipient of the "evidence," the courts.

The oil company has terminated one of their service station managers on a morals charge; he is now suing them. The oil company has hired the MHRC to gather evidence to support their actions. In particular, they would like to show that the community standards of ordinary citizens are such that the station manager was unfit to serve as the oil company's local representative to his community.

The MHRC's goal is to gather video-tapes of group discussions which demonstrate that ordinary people side with the oil company, i.e. the station manager's behavior was an intolerable violation of community standards. To this end they recruit people through newspaper ads and assemble them before cameras in motel conference rooms. The MHRC is determined to get evidence from the subjects which supports the oil company's case, regardless of what the subjects in fact believe. In particular, under the guise of promoting a better discussion and bringing out all the issues, and MHRC manipulates some of the subjects into arguing the company's point of view.

The subjects generally find the oil company's case ridiculous and initially support the station manger. However, as the session continues the subjects realize that they have been manipulated into producing a number of statements which support the oil company. Towards the end of the session, a release form affidavit makes it apparent that the MHRC may edit the tape of the group's discussion to seem as if all of them in fact agreed with the oil company.

The court is the ultimate object of everyone's attention. The oil company wants evidence to support its actions. The MHRC has been hired to do everything in its power to manufacture this evidence. The subjects are trying to grapple with the fact that they have been duped into providing this evidence.

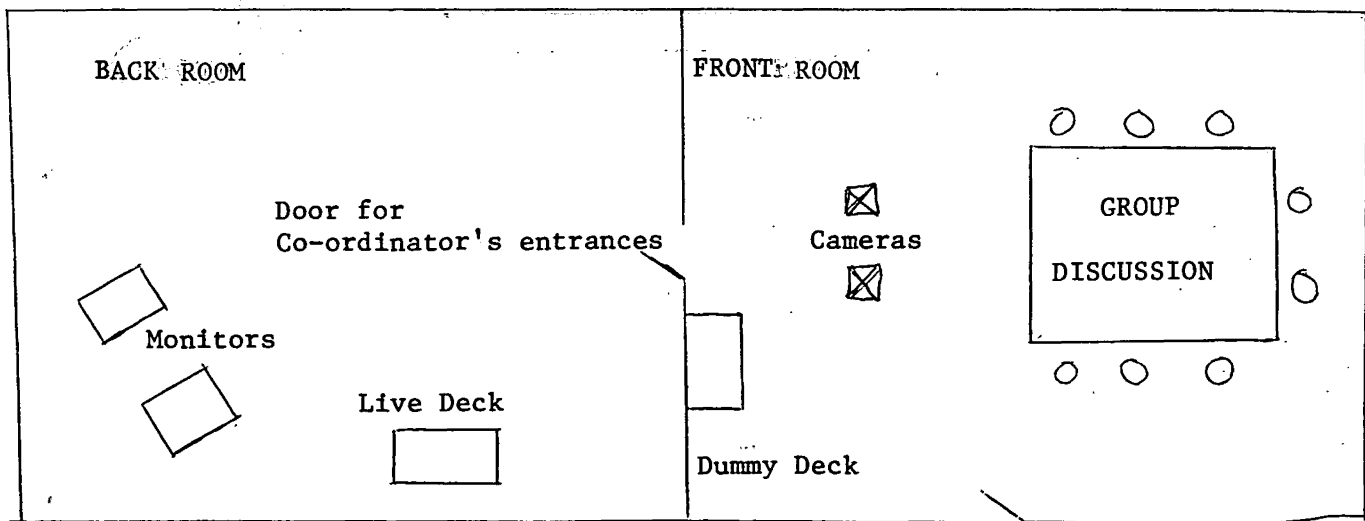
SCENARIO OUTLINE

This section provides a more detailed description of the procedures we use to implement the setting as sketched above. Readers more interested in the theoretical content of the project may choose to skip over this section.¹

0. Recruitment: Subjects are recruited via a newspaper ad placed by the fictitious research firm (MHRC). They call a telephone number and are scheduled for a discussion group at a local hotel or motel. Informed consent with regard to deception is obtained at this point. No other information about what the subjects will be doing is provided. Six to nine participants are scheduled per session.

1. Physical set-up: Subjects are placed in a front room which conspicuously includes video-taping equipment. There is also a backroom which contains the MHRC's set-up and in which the researchers observe the group's behavior.

Subjects are never aware of anything occurring in this backroom. A diagram of the physical set-up is shown below.



2. Arrival: The subjects are met by one of our group posing as the MHRC's project co-ordinator, the authority figure. He presents them with a vague introductory letter and makes them aware of the video-tape equipment. Each subject fills out a name tag and they are free to get acquainted as they arrive. Our taping begins here and continues throughout.

3. Pre-Questionnaire: These are distributed with minimal explanation and that the main purpose of the session (the group discussion) follows.

4. The Instructions: The co-ordinator begins the session by having everyone sign a "Participation Agreement" which acknowledges that they were willingly taped and that the tape produced is the sole property of the MHRC. Upon signing, they are paid ten dollars. The co-ordinator then turns on the dummy video tape deck for the first time and makes an introduction on the tape, stating the date and location of the session. This is followed by each subject introducing him or herself on camera.

At this point the goals of the supposed research are introduced: a group discussion of a legal case in which one of the MHRC's clients is currently involved. It is made clear that the subjects' discussion will be presented as courtroom evidence of how they, as members of the community, feel about the client company's actions. The co-ordinator distributes and reads a one page description of the case.

5. First Question: Internally, the session is structured by a series of discussion questions presented to the subjects. The co-ordinator distributes a question concerning the case for them to discuss. The question emphasizes the potential community reaction to the morality aspects of the case. He then turns on the dummy video deck and leaves for the back room. The dummy deck is not connected to the cameras. It is manipulated throughout to maintain the

appearance that none of the co-ordinator's instructions or comments appear on the MHRC's video-tape record. Our own taping is continuous.

Initial discussion of this question is typically hesitant, but this gap is bridged by the one-sided nature of the case. Most groups quickly decide that they cannot possibly agree with the client company's actions. After this discovery of common opposition to the oil company, discussion winds down.

6. Second Question: After 10 minutes of discussion the co-ordinator re-enters with another question. He tells the subjects that they are not bringing out all sides of the case. To provoke a better discussion he assigns roughly one third of the subjects to argue as if they personally agree with company. (Assignment to the pro-company position is random). He then hands out the second question and exits.

This is the basic ploy of the MIM design. Through this manipulation the subjects are assigned to lie and video-tapes of these lies can be edited and produced in court to aid the MHRC'S client. However, at this point our groups are not usually able to piece this together. Instead, they initiate a second hesitant discussion, as subjects try their roles as people who agree with the oil company. We do have a programmed series of justifications available to counter any objections that subjects raise. Subjects who fail to perform well are re-instructed or reprimanded, again according to pre-programmed rules.

7. First Break: At the end of the second question (after about 10 minutes of discussion) the co-ordinator returns and tells the group to take a short break. This provides "free time" during which the subjects can discuss whatever they choose. It also provides us a reading their reaction to the situation.

8. Third Question: After five minutes the co-ordinator re-enters. He claims that the quality of the discussion improved greatly in the second question and to keep the ball rolling, he adds more people to the company's side. Now two thirds

of the group is "lying." Again a programmed set of responses is available to meet any objections. Discussion of this question is also allowed to continue for 10 minutes.

9. Second Break: The co-ordinator now announces that there are no more questions. However, to wrap things up, each person should make one summary statement of their opinions of the case, emphasizing why they agree with the MHRC's client, the oil company. The co-ordinator tells them there will be a final break to allow them to compose these final statements. Again the group has free time and we get another chance to see how they are reacting to the situation.

10. Summary Statements: After 5 minutes the co-ordinator returns and announces that they can proceed with their summary statements, making them in any order they choose. By this point many subjects are not willing to comply; again, the co-ordinator has a series of strategies available to persuade them to follow the MHRC's requests. If at the end of this phase some subjects still refuse to make any further statements regardless of the justifications offered, the co-ordinator is forced to move to phase #11 without their compliance. Whenever this occurs, the co-ordinator states that they now have enough "good material" to present to the courts and that the session is almost over.

11. Release Form Affidavit: When he returns, the co-ordinator tells them that the last thing to be done is to sign a release form. He distributes these and leaves to get his notary seal to validate their signatures. This form is printed as a standard legal affidavit, which acknowledges the MHRC's intention to edit the tapes, "in order to facilitate their presentation to the court." This form allows the subjects to clearly perceive their manipulation in the collection of the "evidence."

12. "The Fight": After watching 3 or 4 minutes of discussion the co-ordinator returns and is "shocked" to discover the subjects' unwillingness to sign the release form. The group may present considerable resistance in its demands for information and/or concessions from him. His only reaction is to request that they sign the release forms; his demeanor here as throughout the session is authoritative without ever being authoritarian. This disagreement proceeds briefly, with the co-ordinator allowing anyone who has signed to leave (these people are intercepted in the outside room for de-hoaxing.) When an impasse is reached, the co-ordinator tells the group to remain while he works something out.

13. "The Bloody Shirt": When the co-ordinator returns, he announces that he has discussed the problem with his supervisor on the phone and that the court will accept the previously signed "Participation Agreements" in lieu of the release forms (see phase #4 above.) He proceeds to notarize these documents. He says that he wishes he could thank them for their co-operation and tells them the session is over. Any further action is up to them.

14. Dehoaxing: At this point the subjects, whatever their destination is, prepare to leave the room. They are intercepted in the hall and given a letter which for the first time introduces the real research group. After answering questions related to their deception, a post-questionnaire is administered to obtain information on any aspects of their actions which we were unable to interpret while observing the session. The session lasts a total of two hours.

The above outline is ideal-typical. In particular, it omits the possibility that the entire group does not rebel at all; that they follow the co-ordinator's instructions right down the line. We are of course interested in capturing some natural variation in the reactions to the situation, and

thus failure to rebel is also interesting. It anchors one end of a range of potential reactions to our situation. It should be clear that our primary interest is in the group processes which lead to a range of alternative courses of action, given a fixed situation.

DATA COLLECTION

The most important source of data from any session the video-tape, which provides a literal record of what occurred. Along with this we compile field notes from the co-ordinator and backroom personnel following the session. The other major sources of data are the pre- and post-questionnaires; the following discussion is limited to questionnaire data.

The pre-questionnaire includes measures of the individuals

- general sense of efficacy
- attitudes towards authority in general
- attitudes towards various issues which are discussed in the "case"
- demographic and socioeconomic status

The first part of the post-questionnaire consists of open ended questions on how the subjects perceived and responded to the situation. This detailed individual information, while subject to reactivity due to the revelation of our fabrication, is an important supplement to the behavioral responses available on the video. The post-questionnaire also includes measures of prior political participation.

There are two major sets of closed items on the post-questionnaire, each laid out in grid format. The first is a set of questions on how each subject felt about each of their fellow participants, i.e. how opposed to the situation was each one, did they like or dislike each other, who was perceived as socio-emotional and task leaders. We anticipate a network analysis to compare structure and internal organization across groups, based

on this sociometric grid.

The second series of items obtains each subject's evaluation of a several alternative courses of actions. The actions include such alternatives as simply complying with the MHRC's demands, collectively leaving to investigate the MHRC, confiscating the video-tape. For each alternative course of action we ask several things: whether a subject considered this action, how risky they think it would have been, how much effort it would have taken, and how many of the group would have had to do it before the subject would have been willing to participate himself.

This is a description of the "baseline" situation. We plan to introduce a number of variations, ideas we have discussed include:

- using groups where the members are already acquainted, or otherwise have increased solidarity prior to the actual run
- constructing groups from different populations, e.g. students, workers, housewives
- using non-homogeneous populations, e.g. a mix of students and non-students
- varying the co-ordinator's style or otherwise manipulating the "cost" of rebellious action
- introducing a stooge who can introduce programmed responses to portions of our situation

The goal is to use the "baseline" situation to formulate a preliminary understanding of what generates alternative courses of action. By careful choice of our manipulations, we can then target sets of subsequent runs to solidify, elaborate, or modify our initial understandings. This particular logic of discovery has been labeled "grounded theory" by Glaser and Strauss. Our goal in relating existing theory to our situation is similar: we begin with a provisional acceptance and then use the insight provided by our data to revise, extend, and rearrange the several theoretical traditions mentioned above. The second part of this paper provides an example of how we are working back and forth between a macro sociological mobilization perspective and the data provided by our first sets of runs.

PART II

Here we relate the project to macrolevel research based on a mobilization perspective. First, we indicate what we mean by the "mobilization perspective"; and we discuss what led us to study mobilization by catalyzing it in a structured replicable situation. Later, we show how parts of our research test expectations that arise from the mobilization perspective. Finally, we discuss how the research is designed to be exploratory and suggestive of new theory.

We use the concept "mobilization", to refer to the processes by which people develop capability and readiness for collective action. Mobilization involves organizing people, obtaining control of resources, and preparing the people and resources for collective action. Much recent research claims that an understanding of mobilization processes is crucial to an understanding of protest movements, riots, revolutionary uprisings, as well as less rebellious forms of collective action. Authors such as Tilly, Gamson, Obershall, McCarthy and Zald, argue that the amount, the form, and the timing of collective action are often more contingent upon forces facilitating mobilization than upon forces generating anomie or hardship. They try to show how a group's mobilization is shaped by its organization, by its members' prior political and organizational experience, and by the group's assessment of the probable costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. Whether we look at businesses, political parties, social movements, or mobs, we'll find that people acted purposively when they mobilized collective action.

If mobilization is purposive action, it is also difficult action. It takes time and effort, skill at resource management, as well as skill at catalyzing and coordinating action. The risks of failure or repression are often considerable. Were it easy for people to mobilize, there would be

much more collective struggle against institutions and authorities than there has been. It seems to us that in most times and places there has been no shortage of dissatisfactions or grievances, even where rebellious collective action has been rare. We believe that if you focus in on a group of people who are all in the same boat by virtue of oppression or social strain, you will probably find them adrift. If, by chance, you see them chart a course and pull together, you can bet they had some prior organization or experienced organizer. They need organizing experience to help them realize that they can't help themselves individually, that they must not wait for a miracle, and that by pulling together they may rescue themselves.

The claim here is that mobilization involves tasks that are necessary but difficult. During much mobilization, especially in a national political arena, some of the difficult tasks are performed deliberately by experienced political actors with longstanding interests, skills, and connections to potential allies. At the same time it is important not to lose sight of the fact that on some occasions and especially in smaller political arenas, these tasks are performed more or less spontaneously by more or less ordinary people. Much mobilization research investigates experienced organizations and organizers as they activate constituencies, accumulate resources, and wield them in large political arenas. Our research project is different but complementary. We fabricate a small political arena where we observe ordinary people cope with a problem situation. Our fabrication is designed to investigate more closely (1) why it is so difficult for groups of ordinary people to "spontaneously" diagnose their situation and do something about it collectively, and (2) what it looks like when groups of ordinary people actually do mobilize. We have created a structured, replicable situation that catalyzes mobilization, so that we can look closely at the social processes that take place.

What do we expect to find? Here are some expectations that emerge directly from the perspective of macro level research on mobilization:

(1) The degree and form of organization among our subjects before they are put in the problematic situation, constrains and shapes any subsequent mobilization. For a number of our sessions we are planning to recruit groups of subjects who know each other and have acted together, e.g., bowling teams, neighbors, or co-workers. We expect that compared to groups of strangers, such groups will assess the situation quicker and more coherently, that they will show greater resistance, and that they will mobilize around a plan of action that poses more of a challenge to the Manufacturers' Human Relations Consultants (MHRC).

Among groups composed off strangers, we have observed natural variation in the amount of solidarity and informal organization that develops amongst participants as they arrive and begin the session. In our research to date the group that mobilized most thoroughly and audaciously had informally organized itself as a group during twenty to thirty minutes of lively conversation while we were late getting the session underway. Furthermore, our impression of groups with the least informal organization prior to the beginning of the session is that the resistance they subsequently mobilized, was rather weak.

(2) We expect that how subjects deal with the situation is substantially influenced by their prior political and organizational experience. Parts of our pre- and post-questionnaires collect this information. We anticipate that people who are more experienced with collective action will find it easier to act collectively against our authority. Furthermore, the political means they have used in the past should help account for the political means they use in

our session. One of our more interesting sessions, with participants recruited in Ann Arbor, included one subject who used to run with the local Weatherman faction of SDS (if he is to be believed), and another subject who used to write for the student newspaper. Towards the end of the session, the ex-SDSer wanted to seize and destroy the videotape. The ex-newspaperman wanted to go to the newspaper and to expose the Manufacturers' Human Relations Consultants. The group discouraged the ex-SDSer, and was on its way to the newspaper when we began the debriefing.

(3) We plan to run a variation on our "baseline" situation that manipulates the costs of alternate courses of action available to the subjects. We anticipate that mobilization will prove very responsive to such a manipulation. We will be able to tell if we are right not only from variation in the collective action that participants actually mobilize, but also from what they say to each other when mobilizing, and from what they say to us when debriefed. As noted above, our post questionnaire includes a series of questions asking participants for their assessment of a variety of possible courses of action.

It is important to recall that in our "baseline" situation, the authority can do nothing repressive to the participants except verbally reprimand them; unless they act violently, in which case he can, of course, call the police. The "baseline" situation keeps cost low. But, it appears that subjects heed the costs that remain. When our ex-SDSer suggested seizing and destroying the tapes, two other subjects cautioned him. One said: "No. That's destruction of property." The other said: "Don't do that, we could get in a lot of trouble."

The final two expectations are directed against some whipping boys of mobilization researchers. They point to ways our expectations may differ from those of researchers with other perspectives.

(4) We expect not to find volatile personalities, anomic characters, and father-haters joining disproportionately in the mobilization of more drastic forms of collective action. Nor do we expect to find extraordinary social processes differentiating drastic rebellions from protests that go through more conventional channels for redress of grievances.

(5) Although there is some disagreement within our research group, most of us expect not to uncover any general mobilization process or natural history. We expect to find variation in the sequencing and timing of mobilization activities, variation that results from the strategic responses of participants to events and problems that develop in the course of the session.

We do not consider the mobilization we observe in our structured setting to be a miniature or embryonic form of processes that generally lead up to riots, social movements, or rebellions of any particular stripe. We are ultimately interested in a large family of rebellious events. At the same time we do not naively expect that they all manifest some general characteristic process or natural history. Various members of the family share varying resemblances. We believe that elements of our fabrication resemble some wildcat strikes and job actions in some respects, some riots in others, the origins of a few social movements in still others. We still differ amongst ourselves on the nature and extent of these resemblances.

Finally, there are some aspects of our research which go beyond the mobilization perspective described above.

Research from the mobilization perspective generally assumes that people assess their situation rationally. Researchers sometimes make this assumption too easily, without first investigating how people in problem situations try to understand what is going on, formulate their interests, and develop plans. Assumptions of rationality can help dismiss politically suspect collective behavior research, but such assumptions make us uncomfortable. They make it hard to ask what events, structural arrangements, and historical experiences, give people the capacity to rationally assess their plight. Rationality is simply assumed.

Our fabrication allows us to watch closely as groups that vary in structure, composition, and experience, assess a problem situation. Strong compliance norms and a lurking authority make it difficult to say or do anything with rebellious implications. Some groups find it harder to overcome these obstacles than others. Groups with higher initial solidarity seem to find it easier to exchange distress signals when the authority first acts illegitimately. They tentatively offer and reciprocate expressions of concern. They gain the confidence to formulate and articulate their grievances. Groups that begin our sessions with less solidarity and organization have more difficulty rationally dealing with the situation.

We have added, in our basic design, two breaks (see phases 7 and 9 above) in order to give participants more opportunity to assess the situation. During these breaks, the authority is out of the room, and the group has no task demanded of it. Some groups have used these breaks to figure out that what is going on is illegitimate and should be resisted. Without these breaks

subjects seem more likely to become confused or apathetic.

Other factors that seem to give subjects the capacity to sensibly assess their plight include political and organizational experience, and education. More highly educated subjects seem to have more knowledge of the norms governing research, and thus more confidence that their discomfort with the MHRC's research is not their own personal problem. Subjects with more political and organizational experience seem quicker to discuss the politics of the situation with other subjects they do not know well.

Unlike some collective behavior researchers, we suspect that in most "real world" situations, as in our sessions, an "irrational" definition of the situation will more often lead to passive compliance than to misdirected rebellion.

While we do not want to retrace the steps of researchers from the collective behavior perspective, we are unhappy with the mobilization camp's disparagement of everything that smacks of being cognitive and social psychological. We are coming from the mobilization camp; and we certainly anticipate that such factors as group structure, subjects' prior political and organizational experiences, the social control strategy of the authority, and the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action, will all weigh heavily in determining the outcome of our sessions. Yet, we are observing varying amounts of slippage between the objective political structure of our situation, and the subjects' perceptions of that structure. This slippage can be substantial and consequential. In the "baseline" situation, the authority has virtually no repressive power; certainly, there are no material costs he can bring to bear upon rebellious participants. Still, for much of the session, many of our subjects, like Milgram's feel that they do not have the power to say "no". We are trying to understand how a number of people confronting a problem authority perceive

the relative power of the authority, themselves individually, and themselves collectively. We are interested in how these perceptions, as well as the objective structure of the situation, affect their mobilization for collective action.

FOOTNOTES

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"The design and execution of this project is in everyway the result of a joint effort by all of the authors. The designated senior authors are responsible for the writing of this paper. Any errors or omissions are the subject of continuing controversy within the research group."

1. For those interested in a fuller picture of just what our scenario contains, two appendices to this working paper are available upon request. The first is a twenty-four page "scriptbook" which provides instructions for the co-ordinator and other project personnel concerning each of the fourteen phases, as well as details on how to handle projected non-compliance at each stage. The second appendix contains copies of the seventeen pages of forms and questionnaires which are presented to the subjects throughout the course of a session.