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The Spiral of Silence and the Social Nature of Man

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Ever since it was first presented at a psychology conference in 1972 (Noelle-Neumann, 1972) and shortly thereafter in the *Journal of Communication*, the spiral of silence theory has attracted considerable attention in the social sciences. Nevertheless, the theory has often been misunderstood. Many of these misconceptions derive from the first article describing the theory, which was published in the *Journal of Communication* in 1974 and seems to have left its mark on how the theory is perceived to this day (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

George Gerbner, the editor of the *Journal of Communication* at the time, decided to publish a substantially abridged version of the paper, arguing that it was not possible to present "the whole waterfront" of such a complex theory in a journal article. Although his reasoning was undoubtedly correct and hence understandable, it is precisely the article's lack of complexity that has led many to assume until today that the spiral of silence theory can be reduced to one core hypothesis, i.e., that people who believe that they hold a minority opinion tend to fall silent and conceal their views in public.

Although this assumption is, indeed, a key element of the spiral of silence theory and, as such, is not incorrect, it is also not entirely correct when put in such simplified terms. In fact, the tendency to speak out or remain silent is only part of a very extensive theoretical approach that attempts to explain how public opinion affects peoples' lives and behavior, how it ensures social cohesion and contributes to the decision-making process.

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION?

Discussing the concept of public opinion in theoretical terms is particularly encumbered by the thicket of confusion, misunderstandings, and communication

problems surrounding the concept. "There is no generally accepted definition of public opinion." It was with this statement that W. Phillips Davison began his article on public opinion in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1968. "Nevertheless," Davison continued, "this term has been employed with increasing frequency." Today, more than 30 years later, the very same sentence could still be used to start an article of this kind.

According to reference book entries around the world, the term "public opinion" allegedly came into being in the 18th century. It is often associated with prerevolutionary France and the French Minister of Finance, Jaques Necker. Yet the term is actually far older than that. The earliest indications of its use date back as far as antiquity, where it appears in a letter by Cicero to his friend Atticus (ad Atticum VI. 1, 18, 2). At the start of the modern age, the term is found in various languages, such as Spanish, English, German, and French, for example, in the essays of Michel de Montaigne ([1588] 1962, pp. 115, 143) and, finally, in the writings of Jean-Jaques Rousseau in the mid-18th century. Rousseau employed the term so frequently and matter-of-factly that it must have already been widely used at the time.

Since antiquity, a great number of synonyms for public opinion have also been used, including such simple expressions as *opinione* and *opinion*. Early instances of such usage are found, for example, in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, William Shakespeare, William Temple, John Locke, and David Hume. The first known use of the phrase "climate of opinion" in English was discovered by Robert K. Merton in the works of Joseph Glanvill (1661). In 1965, the prominent American political scientist Harwood Childs published his book, *Public Opinion: Nature, Formation and Role*, including almost 50 definitions of public opinion in the second chapter, "The Nature and History of Public Opinion."

Why has the term public opinion taken on such a confusing wealth of different meanings? From antiquity onward, public opinion and the various synonyms for the concept were employed in the sense of social control. Public opinion was understood as a form of broad social consensus to which both the government and each individual member of a particular society must adhere. As Aristotle declared, "He who loses the support of the people is a king no longer." This was expressed in a similar way by Erasmus of Rotterdam and Machiavelli, as well as by William Temple in a collection of his writings compiled by Jonathan Swift (Erasmus, [1516] 1968; Machiavelli, [1532] 1971; Temple, 1731). Or, as David Hume ([1741/1742] 1963) succinctly commented in 1739, "It is . . . on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular" (p. 29).

According to an account by Thucidides, Pericles refers to "unwritten laws" in a speech commemorating those who died in the Peloponnesian War (Niedermann, 1991). This term, which was widely used in antiquity, was taken up again in the 18th century by Rousseau, ([1762] 1953), who described unwritten laws as being "graven not in marble or bronze, but in the hearts of the citizens . . ." (p. 58). As strange as it sounds to us now, unwritten laws were synonymous with public opinion.

In a passage addressing the issue of public opinion in the 1588 (1962) edition of his *Essais*, Montaigne describes Plato's contemplations on how to influence public opinion. According to Montaigne, Plato viewed pederasty as a dangerous passion that should be condemned by public opinion. The way to achieve this, Plato believed, would be to convince poets to portray the practice as a vice. The entire

citizenry, including women, children, and slaves, would then follow the poets' lead and adhere to this new public opinion. As this example illustrates, public opinion was by no means viewed as an intellectual construct pertaining only to the elite, but as a far-reaching, all-encompassing pressure to conform, a form of social control that guides society and ensures social cohesion.

In the 18th century, however, the term public opinion experienced a highly peculiar semantic shift. Reason, which had come to be so highly prized, was now also viewed as the essence of public opinion, which was equated with the opinion of discriminating, well-informed, responsible citizens who were willing to engage the government in reasoned debate. This definition increasingly gained ground. It continued to prevail even in the latter half of the 20th century, as reflected, for example, by Wilhelm Hennis's (1957) definition of public opinion in the 1950s. Similar interpretations of the concept of public opinion are found in the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1979; Beniger, 1992; Herbst, 1992), Michel Foucault (Peer, 1992), and Jürgen Habermas (Goodnight, 1992). At the same time, however, the age-old meaning of public opinion was not lost and continued to thrive. Thus, these two completely different definitions of the concept became entwined, leading to considerable confusion in writings on the subject.

There would be no need to spend so much time discussing how the meaning of a term like public opinion has changed were it not for the fact that conceptualizing public opinion as the domain of an intellectual elite represents a gross misunderstanding of both human nature and the sociopsychological mechanisms at work in a democracy. The most important characteristic of public opinion, which has prompted social scientists to investigate it again and again, is the overwhelming power it wields over both the government and individual members of society. The concept of public opinion as a form of rational judgment is completely incapable of explaining how public opinion is able to strike fear in the hearts of mighty rulers and trigger popular revolts. The power that public opinion exerts can be explained only by returning to the traditional view of public opinion as it has been understood for centuries, i.e., public opinion in the sense of social control. In other words, we must assume that public opinion derives its power from man's social nature, which has developed over the course of evolution, from the modes of behavior that promote social life—and these are not based on rational or logical thought but on emotional, reflexive, subconscious reactions.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE SOCIAL NATURE OF MAN

In Western cultures, which bear the stamp of the Enlightenment, a remarkably great number of people find it difficult to accept the idea of a social nature of man. Viewing public opinion not as the outcome of rational decision-making processes but as the result of subconscious collective behavior is incompatible with the democratic ideal and the notion of the independent individual who makes decisions after thoroughly weighing the advantages and disadvantages.

It is striking that many philosophers and researchers who have dealt with the social nature of man have encountered massive resistance among their contemporaries, as if the results of their investigations represented an attack on man's free will. An early example of such resistance is found in the case of John Locke. In

the following passage, Locke (1894) exquisitely describes how the court of public opinion forces people to conform due to their fear of isolation:

> But no man escapes the punishment of their censure and dislike, who offends against the fashion and opinion of the company he keeps, and would recommend himself to. Nor is there one of ten thousand, who is stiff and insensible enough, to bear up under the constant dislike and condemnation of his own club. He must be of a strange and unusual constitution, who can content himself to live in constant disgrace and disrepute with his own particular society. Solitude many men have sought, and been reconciled to: but nobody that has the least thought or sense of a man about him can live in society under the constant dislike and ill opinion of his familiars, and those he converses with. This is a burden too heavy for human sufferance. (Vol. I, p. 479)

One might have thought that these lines—which are so poignant in terms of the emotion conveyed and their empathy with the human condition—would have immediately opened people's eyes to what can be called the "social nature of man." After all, Locke did not write them merely in passing, but formulated a law based on his observations that he considered to be on a par with divine law and civil law. He called it the "law of opinion, reputation and fashion." When Locke uses the expression "law," he does not do so frivolously or casually. Rather, he explains quite clearly, when an action involves a law, a reward or punishment that is not intrinsic to the act itself must ensue from it (p. 476). The disapproval of their environment: this is the punishment that awaits those who infringe against the law of opinion, reputation, and fashion, and, Locke maintains, this disapproval is feared more than divine punishment or punishment by civil law enforcement authorities.

But these ideas brought Locke no happiness. He was accused of relativizing good and evil in a terrible way, of transforming that which stemmed from divine law into a matter of consensus among private individuals, of degrading moral issues to nothing more than a matter of fashion. Locke thus became the target of precisely the type of public disapproval he had described. Ultimately, in the third edition of his book, he altered the passage describing man's sensitivity toward the disapproval of his environment, replacing it with stilted formulations.

The next great pioneer in the discovery of the social nature of man was Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the mid-18th century. Rousseau (1964) summed up his observations in a few very concise lines: "Man, as a social being, is always oriented outward; he first achieves the basic feeling of life through the perception of what others think of him" (p. 193). Rousseau recognized the battle between people's individual nature and their social nature, between the need to satisfy their own needs and pursue their own interests, on the one hand, and the need to be recognized and respected, on the other. But how, he queried, were people "to find a form of association which defends and protects the person and property of each member with the whole force of the community, and where each, while joining with all the rest, still obeys no one but himslf, and remains as free as before. This is the fundamental problem"(Rousseau, [1762] 1953, pp. 14–15).

The work by ethnic psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) on the significance of gestures among primitive peoples provided a major stimulus for George Herbert Mead of the University of Chicago, who is the next great "giant" along the way toward discovering the social nature of man—whereby "giant" is used in the sense

of Robert Merton, who once remarked, "Our work rests upon the shoulders of giants," meaning that science, if it is to be successful, must develop a continuity over the course of generations, enabling each new generation of scientists to build upon the knowledge gained by the previous generation.

Mead (1863–1931), the discoverer of "symbolic interaction," studied in Germany, albeit in Berlin and not in Leipzig where Wundt was teaching. Yet it was while he was studying in Germany that Mead recognized the significance of Wundt's theory that people communicate via gestures even before any words are uttered, based on their assumption that these gestures have a common symbolic meaning.

Mead crossed over a decisive threshold in the investigation of the social nature of man via his discovery of the inner realm in which individuals imagine what others are saying about them, what others think of them, how others will judge them, prior to the display of any actual external reaction. People thus symbolically anticipate the punishments of isolation and condemnation that will ensue from infringing against the law of opinion, reputation, and fashion.

To understand Mead's work, we must be careful not to confuse the process of symbolic interaction with what is known as empathy, i.e., our ability to put ourselves into other people's shoes, so to speak, and thus understand them better. Symbolic interaction does not entail understanding other people better but, instead, refers to our ability to foresee how others will react to us. Mead distinguishes between "I" and "Me," whereby I signifies people's consciousness of their own identity, whereas Me refers to their self-image, to how they believe they are seen or judged by others. The individual constantly alternates between these two perspectives.

Mead fared no better than his predecessors: He was reviled and ridiculed. The perspective he had outlined was too unconventional. And so it happened that Mead did not actually write his great classic work, *Mind, Self, and Society* ([1934] 1974): After experiencing the scorn of his colleagues, he had resolved not to write any more books. Instead, the book was compiled by several of his students based on his lectures and was published 3 years after his death.

On reading the minutes of a lecture Mead gave at the Sixth International Philosphy Congress at Harvard in 1926, it is obvious that he was trying to please the high priest of philosphy during his day, Alfred North Whitehead. His writing, too, was just as stilted as that of John Locke.

The work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982), who was born 9 years before Mead's death, represents the next milestone along the way to discovering the social nature of man. Goffman was not a sociologist, but a psychologist, and the most important inspirations for his work derived from his 2.5-year stint at a psychiatric clinic. He subsequently taught as a university professor in California and Pennsylvania. The titles of his books and essays strike a new tone: *Behavior in Public Places* (1963a) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963b).

"*Stigma*," "public places": These were totally foreign concepts in the jargon of social scientists at the time. In Germany, the respected sociologist Friedrich Heinrich Tenbruck dismissed Goffman as a mere feature writer, an opinion he once voiced at a dinner hosted by the dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. Sitting at Tenbruck's table was Edward Shils, the renowned social philosopher and recipient of the Balzan award. Shils shook his head and replied, "You are wrong."

What does Goffman mean by stigma? Psychiatric patients are stigmatized; they are not normal. They constantly engage in "facework"; in other words, they "work" on their facial expressions, on their external appearance, trying to overcome their

stigmatization and isolation by adjusting their appearance and behavior, trying to appear normal and be recognized as normal. But then their self-control somehow slips and all of their facework, their efforts to maintain an external appearance that corresponds to how they want to be seen by others, is again in vain.

Why does Goffman speak of the public, of public places? Psychiatric patients feel exposed to the judgment of others in public, they perceive the public as a tribunal. The more open and anonymous the public is, the more unprotected patients feel and the more they suffer.

On reading Goffman's works, it gradually becomes clear that these reactions and emotions do not apply solely to psychiatric patients. Goffman shifts his scientific interest to the question, "What is normalcy and how does it come into being?" Anyone can be afflicted by "stigma," by "spoiled identity" in public. Thus, we approach the broad spectrum of sanctions designed to impugn an offender's honor—from the pillory in the Middle Ages to the media pillory today—sanctions that are intended to stigmatize and isolate the offender from "normal" people.

In the late 18th century, the term *social psychology* came into use and researchers made the first attempts to measure social-psychological phenomena empirically. For Paul F. Lazarsfeld, the renowned Austrian-American social psychologist, what we now know as empirical social research essentially signified "reactions and views on social phenomena, differentiated according to respondents' social constellations." This, at any rate, is how Lazarsfeld's view was described by Paul Neurath, the head of the Lazarsfeld Archives in Vienna. Ultimately, however, this standpoint did not gain widespread recognition. Theodor W. Adorno is said to have once remarked to his students at the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt in the 1950s, "Social psychology? There's no such thing."

Looking through the standard work, *Personality and Social Psychology*, which was published in 1992 by Barbara Krahé, we find that the focus is on the psychology of personality and on analyzing the behavior of different personalities in various social situations. There is no mention of Locke's fearful individual, who is afraid of infringing against the "law of opinion, reputation and fashion." Nor do we find any reference to Rousseau's extroverted man, whose consciousness is rooted in how others react to him. Mead's symbolic interaction is nonexistent. Also absent are people's attempts to achieve the appearance of normalcy, to avoid stigma and spoiled identity via "facework." The great arsenal of sanctions that can be imposed upon the individual by the public tribunal—a controlling public already referred to as the "public eye" by Edmund Burke in the late 18th century (Burke, [1791] 1975, p. 66)—none of these aspects are mentioned in a major textbook on social psychology published in the early 1990s.

The pressure to conform, which ensures social cohesion, is most likely to be found, if at all, under the rubric of "group dynamics," a field of research that experienced its heyday in the mid-20th century under the influence of researchers in the United States. Yet group dynamics focuses on the direct interaction of primary groups, not on the anonymous public. Although individuals can also be stigmatized and threatened with exclusion in primary groups, the processes involved are much more benign than the stigmatization that ensues from losing one's good reputation on the pillory. The theory of group dynamics holds that groups invest a great deal of time and energy in winning back deviant members and resort to exclusion only when there is no more hope of bringing them back into the fold.

The anonymous, intangible court of public opinion, however, functions quite differently, passing quick judgment and hearing no arguments. People must work hard

to hold their ground in the constantly changing atmosphere created by the climate of opinion, threats to their reputation, the danger of unsuspectingly breaking the rules, value change, and "in" and "out" reactions.

Along with their individual nature, their identity—which Mead referred to as "I"—people also have another nature, their social nature or "self"—which corresponds to Mead's "Me." This social nature fears isolation; it is extremely vulnerable. In the Middle Ages, wrongdoers were known to swoon after only a few minutes on the pillory, even though not one hair on their heads had actually been harmed.

Numerous phenomena that we encounter every day are rooted in the social nature of man. Social control, which ensures social cohesion, is effective only because of the social nature of man. One incident that comes to mind here is the controversy surrounding Shell Oil's Brent Spar offshore oil platform in 1995, specifically, the pressure of public opinion that arose in connection with the question of how best to dispose of the defunct platform, i.e., by sinking it into the sea or towing it ashore and dismantling it on land. Given the great value that the public places on environmental protection, this issue had a clear moral dimension. Also not to be forgotten are phenomena such as political correctness and taboos. Fashion, too, could not function were it not for the social nature of man.

In Western cultures, we have had a strong awareness of man's individual nature ever since antiquity. In contrast, we have not developed, or have perhaps even repressed, the consciousness of our social nature, which runs contrary to the notions of reason, independence, and individual responsibility.

EMBARRASSMENT AS AN INDICATOR OF THE FEAR OF ISOLATION

Does man really have a social nature that anxiously avoids isolation at all times? This was the question asked by Florence Van Zuuren, a Dutch psychologist who had studied the works of Mead and Goffman intensively. Van Zuuren pursued this question in her research at the University of Amsterdam's Psychology Department, ultimately presenting her findings at a psychology conference in Perugia in 1983 in a paper entitled, "The Experience of Breaking the Rules."

On the long path toward discovering the social nature of man, Van Zuuren had devised a new method, the method of self-experimentation, which was intended to help researchers recognize and subjectively experience their own social natures. To this end, she and a group of her young colleagues conducted self-experiments on embarrassment, observing and recording their own feelings in embarrassing situations. For instance, they abruptly stopped walking right in the midst of a very busy pedestrian zone, thus experiencing how it felt to be the target of angry looks from other passers-by. They went into a half-empty café and seated themselves at a table where another couple was already sitting, or they went into a store and purchased the same item twice within a short period of time, in each case observing their own feelings on transgressing against these unspoken rules.

Another task involved taking the elevator up to the top floor of an unfamiliar high-rise and just looking around. One participant in the experiment said that even before she had set foot in the building, she was worried that she would not know what to say if anyone asked her what she was doing up there. "I suddenly realized how grotesque I must look in my pink slacks and my pink blouse." She saw herself

from the outside, through the eyes of others. Many of the participants in the Dutch self-experiments reported that they were unable to go through with the actions and break the rules as planned.

Students at the Institute for Communication Research in Mainz had similar experiences when they tested the self-experimentation method in situations such as singing in the pedestrian zone of Mainz, either alone or in a group (it was easier in a group), handing out pieces of cake to passers-by, and doing a wild solo on the dance floor before the start of a party.

These self-experiments demonstrated that human behavior is already subject to a type of internal personal control even before social control comes into play. The individual imagines the threat of isolation prior to the fact. The mere thought of how unpleasant a situation *might* be—even if it has yet to come to pass—prompts people to correct behavior that goes against the rules, that diverges from the public consensus, long before any external social control is exercised by the collective, indeed, long before the collective even learns of the intended infraction.

This is precisely what George Herbert Mead had described: "symbolic interaction," imagining what others will think and how they will react, which influences the individual as if it were already reality.

The same phenomenon was observed by Michael Hallemann, who organized a self-experiment with a group of his fellow students in Mainz. In the experiment, the students set up a booth on a busy street, behind which a banner proclaimed, "Stop Squandering Money on Carnival Celebrations in Mainz!" Other banners urged passers-by to join a newly founded organization advocating "that this and all future carnival parades be cancelled for humanitarian reasons. The money saved should be used to help the Third World." Leaflets stating this demand were piled high on the booth's counter. The students tried to distribute the leaflets to passers-by and gather signatures in support of their campaign.

The gravity of this transgression can be appreciated only in view of carnival's great significance for the self-image and identity of the city of Mainz. Mainz without carnival is hardly imaginable. Suggesting that Mainz stop celebrating carnival is like demanding the elimination of carnival festivities in Rio de Janeiro.

From the window of a neighboring house, one of the students filmed what transpired, as even storekeepers from adjacent streets joined in the effort to isolate the students, trying to fan away unsuspecting passers-by and exhorting them not to get any closer with the warning, "Stay away from them, they're crazy!"

Hallemann (1989) later reported that the experience of having people give him the cold shoulder when he approached them—or watching others make a wide detour to avoid running into him or even having to look at him—was so disturbing that he decided at the time to devote his master's thesis and later his doctoral dissertation to the subject.

Thanks to this dissertation, we now have fundamental insights into the experience of embarrassment, which derives from the social nature of man. Hallemann traced the phenomenon back to Charles Darwin, who recognized blushing as a reflection of man's social nature, as a sign that people are imagining what others think of them.

Thus, a tradition of scholarly work on the phenomenon of embarrassment began, which was another important step toward the discovery of the social nature of man, even if this was initially not the stated aim. Erving Goffman had already focused on the phenomenon of embarrassment in his scientific investigations. Shyness, he maintained, is nothing more than an extremely heightened sense of embarrassment.

Shy people are constantly plagued by the thought of what others are thinking of them.

With help from the Allensbach Institute, Hallemann began systematically investigating the phenomenon of embarrassment. He devised a sentence completion test that was included in a survey of the population. In the test, respondents were shown an illustration of two people talking. One of the two says, "Can you imagine what happened to me yesterday—it was so embarrassing: I. . . . " The accompanying question reads, "Here are two people talking. Unfortunately, the man/woman was interrupted in mid-sentence. But what do you think he/she wanted to say, what could have happened to him/her?"

Hallemann gleaned a total of 30 potentially embarrassing situations from the verbatim responses recorded during the interviews. These situations were then printed on cards and presented to respondents in normal surveys of the population, with respondents being asked to decide which situations they would find embarrassing and which would not be embarrassing.

The results obtained in this and other surveys revealed a striking similarity in how respondents in a number of different countries reacted, including Spain, the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Only the findings ascertained in Great Britain represented a curious exception: Apparently, the English have a much less pronounced sense of embarrassment than the populations of the other countries tested. On the whole, however, the findings indisputably point to the pancultural character of the social nature of man and the conflict between man's individual nature and his social nature.

THE THEORY OF THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

The spiral-of-silence theory can be understood only in light of this constellation of ideas and the history of the investigation of the social nature of man. Pressure to conform, fear of isolation—these are the concepts we must keep in mind if we wish to comprehend the theory, which describes the dynamics of public opinion in situations where the climate of opinion is shifting—and, again, this in view of the conceptual constellation described above, the idea that people have a social nature that causes them, among other things, to experience fear of isolation, which has a considerable influence on their behavior in public.

The spiral of silence theory is not static. Nor does it describe any theoretical ideal; it constructs no "social circuitry," so to speak. Accordingly, the theory does not originate from abstract theoretical thinking, but from a puzzle, from a remarkable research finding for which an explanation had to be found. It was in search of this explanation that the theory ultimately arose.

The puzzle was encountered in connection with election research conducted during the 1965 federal election campaign in Germany. Months before Election Day in September 1965, the Allensbach Institute launched a series of surveys tracking the entire campaign. Over the course of 10 months, from December 1964 to shortly before Election Day, the survey findings on voting intentions remained practically unchanged. Month after month, the two major parties, the governing Christian Democratic Party and the opposition party, the Social Democrats, were in a dead heat, with about 45% of the population intending to vote for each party. In these circumstances, it seemed impossible to predict which party was most likely to win

the election. Throughout the entire campaign, the two parties remained locked in a neck-and-neck race.

In the final few weeks and days prior to the election, however, the situation suddenly changed, with survey findings showing a so-called "last-minute swing." After a standstill that had persisted for months on end, the percentage of respondents who said that they intended to vote for the Christian Democrats in the upcoming election suddenly climbed to almost 50%, whereas the share who intended to vote for the Social Democrats dropped to less than 40%. In the end, the election outcome confirmed these final survey findings: The Christian Democratic Party clearly won the election, with 49% of the vote, and the Social Democrats obtained 40%.

On attempting to determine what had caused this last-minute change in voting intentions, the puzzle was encountered that ultimately led to the development of the spiral of silence theory. Namely, although voting intentions—as measured via the question, "If the next federal election were held this Sunday, which party would you vote for?"—remained unchanged over the course of many months, responses to the following trend question shifted dramatically over the same period of time: "Of course, nobody can know for sure, but what do you think: Who is going to win the election?" In December 1964, the percentage of respondents who expected the Social Democrats would win the election was about the same as the share who anticipated a Christian Democratic victory—in fact, the Social Democrats even had a slight edge. But then the results began to change direction. The percentage of respondents who expected a Christian Democratic victory rose relentlessly, whereas the Social Democrats continually lost ground. By as early as July, 1965, the Christian Democrats were clearly in the lead; by August, almost 50% anticipated a Christian Democratic victory. It was as if the two measurements—i.e., how voters intended to vote and which party they expected to win—had been made on different planets. It was not until late in the campaign that the bandwagon effect came into play, with 3%–4% of voters being caught up by the general current and swept along in the direction of the expected winner.

How could party strength possibly have remained constant for so long while, at the same time, expectations as to who would win the election changed so dramatically? We suspected that the situation might have been at least partly related to a visit by the Queen of England to Germany in the summer of 1965. Under sunny skies, she traveled up and down the country, accompanied at all times by cheering crowds and with Chancellor Ludwig Erhard, a Christian Democrat who was extremely popular anyway, repeatedly at her side. Had the images of this state visit, the cheerful atmosphere, perhaps given rise to an optimistic mood among the supporters of the governing Christian Democratic party, prompting them to gladly proclaim their convictions? And might the supporters of the Social Democrats thus suddenly have felt surrounded by political opponents on all sides? Had they allowed themselves to be intimidated by their opponents' ebullient mood and ultimately fallen silent, to the point where their own political camp was hardly visible in public, even though it was actually no smaller than that of their opponents? Had the social nature of man, man's fear of isolation, caused the Social Democrats' supporters to fall silent?

Subsequently, especially during the emotionally charged federal election campaign of 1972, the Allensbach Institute gradually gathered survey data pointing to man's fear of isolation, to the tendency to speak out or fall silent in controversial, morally loaded debates. The pattern that had been observed during the 1965 campaign was detected again on other occasions—and thus the spiral of silence theory

slowly began to take shape. The following is a brief summary of the theory's most salient points.

1. People experience fear of isolation. They have a fear—probably developed over the course of evolution—of being rejected by those around them.
2. For this reason, people constantly monitor the behavior of others in their surroundings, attentively noting which opinions and modes of behavior meet with public approval or disapproval.
3. But people do not only observe their environment. They also—in part unconsciously—issue their own threats of isolation via what they say and do, via behavior such as turning away from someone, knitting their brow, laughing at someone, etc. These are the signals that individuals perceive, showing them which opinions meet with approval and which do not.
4. Because most people fear isolation, they tend to refrain from publicly stating their position when they perceive that this would attract enraged objections, laughter, scorn, or similar threats of isolation.
5. Conversely, those who sense that their opinion meets with approval tend to voice their convictions fearlessly, freely, gladly, and, at times, vociferously.
6. Speaking out loudly and gladly enhances the threat of isolation directed at the supporters of the opposing position, reinforcing their sense of standing alone with their opinion and thus also their growing tendency to conceal their opinion in public. A spiraling process begins, whereby the dominant camp becomes ever louder and more self-confident, whereas the other camp falls increasingly silent.
7. This process does not occur at all times and in all situations, but only in connection with issues that have a strong moral component, in other words, in situations where ideology, agitation and emotions come into play. The process of public opinion is not set in motion if there is no underlying moral fundament implying that those who think differently are not merely stupid but bad. This moral element is what gives public opinion its power and allows it to levy the threat of isolation that sets the spiral of silence in motion.
8. Only controversial issues can trigger a spiral of silence. Topics on which there is social consensus—by which we mean true consensus and not merely outward agreement—give rise to no disagreement and thus leave no room for a spiral of silence. Hence, a spiral of silence cannot arise in connection with the question of whether people are in favor of protecting the environment. Everyone is for that. Yet a spiral of silence most certainly can arise with respect to the question of how much priority environmental protection should take over other goals, such as economic growth, or what measures are more in the interest of environmental protection, as exemplified by the controversy over how to dispose of the defunct Brent Spar oil platform.
9. The actual strength of the different camps of opinion does not necessarily determine which view will predominate in public. An opinion can dominate in public and give rise to the pressure of isolation even if the majority of the population holds the opposing view that has come under pressure—yet does not publicly admit to holding this position.
10. The mass media can significantly influence the spiral-of-silence process. If the majority of the media takes the same side in a morally charged controversy,

they exert a substantial, presumably even decisive influence on the direction that the spiral of silence takes. Thus far, we know of no instances in which there was a spiral of silence that ran contrary to the media tenor.

11. As a rule, people are not consciously aware of either the fear or the threat of isolation. They observe behavior in their environment that is indicative of self-confidence and strength and react with fear and silence to threats of isolation levied by their surroundings.

12. Public opinion is limited by time and place. As a rule, a spiral of silence only holds sway over a society for a limited period of time. In this regard, there are both short-lived elements, such as the previously cited controversy over the sinking of the Brent Spar oil platform, and extremely long-term elements, such as the growing tendency in Western societies over the course of the past centuries to attach ever greater importance to the value of equality. In geographical terms, the area in which a certain climate of opinion predominates can be of varying size. Thus, there have even been a few cases of globally valid public opinion in recent history (Rusciano & Fiske-Rusciano, 1990), for example, the public opinion that isolated South Africa around the world for decades and ultimately forced the apartheid regime to step down from power. Generally, however, the process of public opinion and thus the spiral of silence tend to be limited by national borders or the borders of a particular cultural group. When viewed in hindsight or from an outsider's vantage point, it is hard to comprehend the degree of agitation and emotional fervor that accompany a spiral of silence.

13. Public opinion serves as an instrument of social control and indirectly ensures social cohesion. Whenever there is especially strong integrative pressure in a society, as found in connection with the spiral of silence, this generally indicates that the issue or controversy that triggered the spiral of silence poses a particularly great threat to social cohesion. In extreme cases, the spiral of silence culminates in a situation where certain topics either can only be broached using a specific vocabulary (political correctness) or cannot be mentioned at all (taboo), lest people wish to be the target of extremely harsh signals of social isolation. Because these "vulnerable spots"—in other words, issues that pose a threat to social cohesion—crop up in different areas in different societies, the topics to which the rules of political correctness or even taboos apply vary from one society to the next: In Germany, for example, this includes practically all issues that are either directly or indirectly related to Germany's National Socialist past; in the United States, it applies to racial issues.

TESTING THE THEORY OF THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

As we can see, the spiral-of-silence model is contingent on a number of conditions and is not designed to be a universal theory that can explain every social situation. The phenomenon of the spiral of silence is only part of a more comprehensive theory of public opinion. Given the complexity of the spiral-of-silence model and the numerous conditions that must be fulfilled for the theory to apply, the question arises of how the theory can be empirically tested, an issue that many researchers

have addressed over the past few decades. In the process, there have been a number of misapprehensions concerning the theory.

The gravest misunderstanding is encountered in connection with the concept of the *quasi-statistical sense*, a term used in *The Spiral of Silence* (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) to describe people's tendency to monitor their environment constantly, thereby assessing which opinions are gaining ground and may be expressed in public and which views are losing ground and, hence, connected with the threat of isolation. The idea of quasi-statistical perception must not be misunderstood to mean that most people have a cash register in the back of their heads, so to speak, with which they continually estimate and record the percentage of the population that holds one opinion or the other. On the contrary, the spiral-of-silence theory assumes that the perception of which opinions meet with public approval or disapproval is not, as a rule, a conscious process. People who are not directly subjected to the pressure of isolation in a particular situation are apparently unable to rationally comprehend the behavior of those who do find themselves under pressure from the climate of opinion.

For this reason, there is generally no point in attempting to test the spiral-of-silence theory via hypothetical questions such as, "Do you tend to remain silent if you think that your opinion is held by the minority?" Questions asking respondents to estimate the percentage of people who hold a particular view are also of little value. When asked directly, "Do you think your opinion is shared by the majority?" most respondents tend to say "Yes." Yet speaking out and falling silent do not depend on whether people, on considering the matter rationally, claim to be in the majority. People who hold a view that is subject to pressure from the climate of opinion still become increasingly less willing to speak out even if they deny this when asked directly during the interview. In 1997, Caroll Glynn, Andrew Hayes, and James Shanahan completed a metanalysis of a total of 17 studies designed to test the spiral of silence, ultimately determining that most of the studies included in their analysis revealed only a slight connection between respondents' willingness to speak out and whether they assumed that they held the majority opinion. Hence, the authors concluded that there was only weak empirical corroboration for the assumptions on which the spiral of silence theory is based. In fact, however, practically all of the investigations included in the metanalysis focused on abstract, hypothetical situations. None of the studies analyzed created an interview situation in which there was in fact perceptible pressure from the climate of opinion.

This, however, is the prerequisite for a successful test of the spiral of silence. First, at the time when the test is conducted, there must be a social situation that could potentially give rise to a spiral of silence: In other words, there must be an issue that has a strong moral dimension, that is in the public spotlight, and on which the public is divided into different opinion camps. A spiral of silence is particularly likely to come into being in situations where the majority of the mass media clearly side with one of the opinion camps involved in the debate. Second, the pressure of the climate of opinion that emanates from the issue must be so strong that respondents directly perceive the threat of isolation during the interview and are not forced to imagine such pressure in a hypothetical situation.

Finally, on analyzing the findings, the behavior of respondents whose opinion is *actually* in the majority or gaining ground must be compared with the behavior of those who are in fact in the minority or whose opinion is under pressure from the climate of opinion. It may seem logical at first glance to compare "consonant" respondents—i.e., persons who believe that they hold the majority

opinion—with "dissonant" individuals—that is, those who believe that their views run contrary to the majority opinion—regardless of the concrete opinion they hold. Yet this approach obtains misleading results. According to the spiral-of-silence theory, the threat of isolation is inseparably entwined with concrete issues and opinions. Whether people rationally feel that their opinion is shared by the majority is irrelevant. Supporters of a standpoint that is subject to pressure from the climate of opinion tend to fall silent even if they, like most people, claim during the interview to hold the majority view.

If a suitable social situation for testing the spiral of silence can be identified, that is, a situation that involves a *real* struggle for public opinion, the following information must be obtained via surveys and media content analyses in order to test the spiral of silence.

1. The distribution of opinions on the issue among the population: Which view is held by the majority, and which by the minority? This information is needed to identify and compare the supporters and opponents of a particular opinion in the analysis phase of the investigation.

2. The climate of opinion, in other words, the population's general feeling as to which opinion is stronger. This can be ascertained by means of questions such as "How do you think most people feel about this?" Although this question is not, as mentioned previously, suitable for identifying those individuals who are under pressure from the climate of opinion, it can identify issues that entail pressure from the climate of opinion. When the percentage of respondents who believe that most people hold a particular opinion is considerably greater than the share who take this stance themselves, this is a sure sign that we are dealing with an issue that could ultimately trigger a spiral of silence.

3. Future expectations: Which camp of opinion will become more significant in future? Which is gaining ground? Which is losing ground?

4. Willingness to advocate a certain position or speak out in public. This can, for example, be measured via the train test, which is the question originally used by the Allensbach Institute to test the spiral of silence: "Suppose you are taking a long train ride and one of the passengers in your compartment starts talking strongly in favor of (or against) opinion X. Would you want to talk with this person so as to get to know his or her point of view better, or wouldn't you want to do that?" In countries such as the United States, where long train trips are not the norm, other question wordings can be used. The most common version is the so-called reporter question: "Suppose a television reporter approached you on the street and asked you on camera about. . . . "

5. The degree of emotionalization surrounding an issue, the strength of its moral component. There are a number of indicator questions that point to the degree of emotionalization that an issue entails. Using one tried and tested model, respondents are presented with a number of topics and asked, "Which of these are delicate issues that might get you into hot water if you were to talk about them?"

6. The intensity and bias of reporting on the issue by the opinion-setting mass media. Whereas the first five points in this brief outline concern information that can be obtained by means of survey research, this last point can best be clarified via quantitative media content analyses.

A TEST DURING THE 1992 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Considering the difficulties that many researchers have encountered in testing the spiral-of-silence theory, this section gives a detailed description of an investigation that employed a successful empirical approach for testing the theory. The study was completed by Cheryl Katz and Mark Baldassare (1994), who were able to identify a special social constellation that could potentially lead to a spiral-of-silence process. Taking advantage of this fortuitous situation, which they recognized at just the right moment, they conducted a test that included most of the factors mentioned above, ultimately obtaining findings that strongly pointed to the existence of a spiral of silence during the 1992 U.S. presidential election campaign.

The 1992 U.S. presidential election campaign was marked by extreme fluctuations in the population's opinion of President Bush. After the Gulf War, Bush's popularity had climbed to a level seldom found in the history of opinion research, with 80% to 90% of the American population expressing approval of his policies in the spring of 1991. By the fall of 1991, however, his popularity had begun to decline sharply, following a strong drop in positive reporting on television evening news programs. This is shown by the findings of the Washington-based *Media Monitor*, which has been continually tracking political reporting by the mass media since 1987 using the methods of quantitative media content analysis. An important aspect for communication researchers was the finding that opinions on Bush first became more negative in media coverage, followed considerably later by the population's expression of more negative opinions in Gallup surveys (Media Momentum, 1992).

These were the circumstances in which Katz and Baldassare (1994) conducted their test of the spiral-of-silence theory: circumstances that were quite favorable for such a test, thanks to the dynamic nature of the situation and the existence of precisely the social constellation—a shifting climate of opinion—to which the spiral of silence theory applies. Katz and Baldassare based their study on a series of telephone surveys in Orange County, California. The first wave of 600 interviews was conducted in May 1992, followed by a second wave in September 1992. The general political climate in Orange County tended to favor the Republican Party and thus President Bush. Fifty-seven percent of respondents in another representative survey described the political climate in Orange County as conservative. Only 15% claimed that it was "liberal." Yet here, too, the surveys conducted by Katz and Baldassare revealed a rapid shift in the climate of opinion during the 1992 election year. By the time the first wave of the survey was conducted, Bush's popularity in Orange County had dropped from about 80% in earlier surveys to 46%. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had a good opinion of Clinton grew substantially, from 28% in May 1992 to 42% in September. In the end, Bush won the election in Orange County with a relatively slim lead of 43% of the vote, whereas Clinton received 32%. The dynamics of the situation in Orange County were thus undeniable.

To measure respondents' willingness to speak out, Katz and Baldassare employed the reporter question described previously. In analyzing their findings, they did not compare respondents who claimed, when asked directly, to share the presumed majority opinion with those who thought their views conflicted with the majority; rather, they observed the two camps of opinion. In earlier surveys completed

in 1988, 1989, and 1991, Bush supporters were just as willing as other respondents to speak out. Now, however, in a situation where the media tenor had turned against Bush and his popularity was rapidly falling, Bush supporters became increasingly unwilling to speak out. In May 1992, 30% of Bush supporters said that they would be willing to be interviewed by a reporter about the election campaign, whereas 42% of Clinton's supporters said the same. The assumptions on which the spiral-of-silence theory is based were thus confirmed. This test was particularly remarkable given that it was completed in a Republican stronghold. Here, the actual distribution of opinions was not decisive but, rather, the general trend. Bush supporters fell silent even though their opinion was shared by the majority in their immediate personal surroundings. Despite the proximity of a protective reference group, they were still not immune to the climate of opinion and the threat of isolation.

Ever since the dawn of the age of Enlightenment about 300 years ago, philosophers and social theorists in Western societies have habitually devoted special attention to the question of man's rationality. The tremendous advances in the natural sciences point to the enormous accomplishments that the human intellect is capable of achieving. Consequently, the reasoning goes, it should also be possible to organize human coexistence based on man's intellect, to organize human society in a sensible, rationally ordered manner. It is also much more in keeping with the democratic ideal to assume that people base their opinions on rational decisions, that they arrive at their position by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of a particular standpoint, if necessary even by means of a totally subjective, egotistical cost–benefit analysis, so to speak.

Yet there is scant evidence indicating that human social life does in fact function solely—or even primarily—in this manner. The spiral-of-silence theory approaches the issue of social cohesion from a completely different perspective, from a completely different school of thought. Those who attempt to view the theory within the framework of rational choice theories—by trying, for example, to explain the tendency to speak out or fall silent in terms of a cost–benefit analysis—have clearly misunderstood the theory, which is concerned with social psychology and not the logic of the decision-making process. The spiral-of-silence theory deals with emotions, fears, and reflex reactions. In many instances, for example, it is neither sensible nor advantageous for people to conceal their opinion: On the contrary, they might even benefit more from voicing their opinion courageously and loudly. Yet most people act differently in the face of pressure from the climate of opinion.

The rationally inexplicable and oftentimes inappropriate sense of embarrassment, the sudden fear of isolation, the feeling that "I can't say that; that's dangerous"—all of these phenomena have no directly plausible, "manifest" function, to use the terminology of Robert K. Merton. Yet there are signs that they do have an indirect, "latent" function, enabling society to reach consensus and thus to take action on controversial issues that would otherwise lead to social division.

Ernst Pöppel, a neuroscientist in Munich, recently remarked that the centuries in which man discovered the natural world surrounding him will now be followed by the centuries in which man discovers his own nature, including his own social nature. As long as we do not recognize and attempt to decipher the social nature of man, as long as we continue to believe that opinion formation and public behavior are based solely on a rational process resembling a cost–benefit analysis, we will continue to misunderstand how humans behave and thus how societies function.

The spiral-of-silence model is intended to contribute to our understanding of the social nature of man.

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