The Authoritarian Personality

The Authoritarian Personality is a 1950 sociology book by Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford, researchers working at the University of California, Berkeley, during and shortly after World War II.

The Authoritarian Personality "invented a set of criteria by which to define personality traits, ranked these traits and their intensity in any given person on what it called the T scale ('F for Fascist')." The personality type Adorno et al. identified can be defined by nine traits that were believed to cluster together as the result of childhood experiences. These traits include conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intellectualism, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and "toughness", destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and exaggerated concerns over sex.

Though strongly criticized for bias and methodology, the book was highly influential in American social sciences, particularly in the first decade after its publication: "No volume published since the war in the field of social psychology has had a greater impact on the direction of the actual empirical work being carried on in the universities today."

Institutional context

The impetus of The Authoritarian Personality was the Holocaust, the attempted genocidal extinction of European Jews by Adolf Hitler's National Socialist party. Adorno had been a member of the "Frankfurt School", a group of philosophers and Marxist theorists who fled Germany when Hitler shut down their Institute for Social Research. Adorno et al. were thus motivated by a desire to identify and measure factors that were believed to contribute to antisemitic and fascist traits. The book was part of a "Studies in Prejudice" series sponsored by the American Jewish Committee's Department of Scientific Research.

Sources and influences

The Authoritarian Personality was based in part on earlier Frankfurt School analyses undertaken in Germany, but with a few key changes. First, their Marxist and radical roots were downplayed. For example, the earlier "authoritarian personality/revolutionary personality" axis was changed to an "authoritarian personality/democratic personality" axis in America. Thus, values and behaviors earlier associated with revolutionary Marxism were now associated with support for democracy. Second, the book abandoned and/or modified traditional Marxist sociological and economic explanations for human behavior in favor of psychological explanations, earning scorn from more orthodox Marxists. Generally, Adorno et al. took an antipositivist position. More generally, the Frankfurt School has been critical of reductionism and the third-person perspective in the social sciences. Instead, it recognizes that social science research is inevitably value-laden, which calls for a model of scientist who is a self-reflective interpreter, rather than a technical problem-solver. Furthermore, it assigns a practical purpose in social science. Following a marxist tradition, it requires that theories in social science should not only describe and explain the social world, but also should serve as a guide to action and as a tool for social change. Thus, the Frankfurt School emphasized the role of the scientist as a agent of social change.

Content

A central idea of The Authoritarian Personality is that authoritarianism is the result of a Freudian developmental model. Excessively harsh and punitive parenting was posited to cause children to feel immense anger towards their parents; yet fear of parental disapproval or punishment caused people to not directly confront their parents, but rather to identify with and idolize authority figures. Moreover, the book suggested that authoritarianism was rooted in suppressed homosexuality, which was redirected into outward hostility towards the father, which was, in turn, suppressed for fear of being infantilized and castrated by the father. This hypothesis was consistent with prevailing psychological theories of the time, and even though Frenkel-Brunswik reported some preliminary support, empirical data have generally not confirmed this prediction. Authoritarianism was measured by the F-scale. The "F" was short for "pre-fascist personality." Another major hypothesis of the book is that the authoritarian syndrome is predisposed to right-wing ideology and therefore receptive to fascist governments.

Methodology

The study employs both quantitative and qualitative components. The first part of the research resembles a survey type of research with structured questionnaires. Based on the scores on the questionnaires, a smaller number of participants was selected for clinical interviews and administration of the Thematic Apperception Test. Interviews were coded with the techniques of content analysis.

Sample

"The majority of the subjects could be characterized as white, non-Jewish, native-born, middle-class Americans and the authors guessed that their findings would hold for this population." [Critique point]: The individuals were sampled from formal organizations. There are reasons to believe that there are systematic difference between such a sample and the aforementioned population (see section Overall Criticism).

Response format

Likert type items ranging from -3 to +3 without a middle point.

Psychometric scales

- Anti-Semitism Scale
- Ethnocentrism Scale
- Political & Economical Conservatism Scale

Anti-Semitism scale

This is a listing of the content categories featured in the items. These traits are attributed to Jewish people.

- Offensive (conceited, sensual, dirty)
- Threatening (ruthless, competitive, radical)
All items were phrased in affirmation of the Anti-Semitic sentiment. Brown (2004, p. 48), together with many others, criticizes this choice as “unwise”.

The items were phrased in a superficially moderate language, which nonetheless conveyed the saliency of Jews to the respondent and a negative sentiment towards them.

**Ethnocentrism**

Split-half reliability for the scale was .91 (high). The correlation between Ethnocentrism and Anti-Semitism scales was .80 (relatively high). This result is “evidence that antagonism to the culturally unlike is a generalized sentiment”

**Political and economical conservatism**

Split-half reliability for PEC scale was .73 (moderate). The scale’s correlation with A-S and E was not strong, but in none of the groups was it negative. “[...] neither ethnocentrism nor Anti-Semitism ever showed a tendency to go with leftist liberal views.”

**F Scale**

The F scale targets an authoritarian, anti-democratic personality profile that makes a person susceptible to Fascist propaganda. The items were written in accordance to fascist propaganda materials as well as primary held TAT protocol data and interviews with ethnocentric participants.

- Conventionalism: Adherence to conventional values.
- Authoritarian Submission: Towards ingroup authority figures.
- Authoritarian Aggression: Against people who violate conventional values.
- Anti-Intracception: Opposition to subjectivity and imagination.
- Superstition and Stereotypy: Belief in individual fate; thinking in rigid categories.
- Power and Toughness: Concerned with submission and domination; assertion of strength.
- Destructiveness and Cynicism: hostility against human nature.
- Projectivity: Perception of the world as dangerous; tendency to project unconscious impulses.
- See Overly concerned with modern sexual practices.

Across various participant groups, the average item-total correlation was 0.33. Subsequent factor analysis confirmed a one-dimensional structure of these content subsets of items (Eysenck 1954, p. 152, ref by Brown, p. 53). The first form of the F-Scale correlated 0.53 with A-S, 0.65 to E and 0.54 to PEC. The scale was revised by dropping items with low item-total correlations and/or low predictive value of A-S and E scores. The revised form correlated by 0.75 to a combined A-S/E scale, and 0.57 to PEC. Ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism and potentiality for fascism were inter-related to each other, as well as to conservatism, although not as prominently.

**Correlations with IQ, SES, and education**

Ethnocentrism is negatively correlated with both IQ and years of education. Subsequent analyses by Christie showed that education is the mediating factor in this set of relationships.

Intelligence is not as strongly correlated to E. per se. if years of education are paritalled out, the partial correlation being as small as -.20. Christie also estimated the expected correlation between “either IQ and F scores or years of education and F scores for a representative cross-sectional sample, range between -50 and -60”.

**Clinical and projective data**

**Interviews**

The interviewers were instructed to obtain information of the following areas. There were more specific instructions and points of emphasis within each of these areas.

- Vocation
- Income
- Religion
- Clinical Data
  - Family Background: Sociological Aspects
  - Family Figures: Personal Aspects
  - Childhood
  - Sex
  - Social Relationships
  - School
- Politics
- Minorities and Race

[Intique Point] Interviewers (but not coders) were aware of the participants responses and were instructed to study them before interview. This choice was also "severely criticized"

"In considerable degree, [...], the projective data confirm the covariation of implicit antidemocratic trends with prejudice which was demonstrated by the questionnaire data".

**Construction of personality**

- Self glorification vs Objective Self Appraisal
- Conventional Idealization of Parents vs Objective Appraisal
- Family status-concerned vs Family status-relaxed

Additional: Coping with Ambivalence about Self and Others, Lack of acceptance of aggressive feelings towards the parents, Projection of sexual and aggressive impulses to minorities, and its psychological function. “Repression of impulses leads to projection which functions as rationalization for an expression.”

[Intique Point] Coding and interpretation is informed by psychoanalytic theory.

**Cognitive style**

- Ridity vs Flexibility
- Intolerance of Ambiguity Vs Tolerance of Ambiguity

(see Jaensch’s Typology)

[Intique Point] Due to the coders having access to the protocols, the dependency between prejudice and rigidity may be biased.

**Overall criticism**

**Sampling**

Participants were recruited through formal organizations. Christie reports though that people belonging to at least one organization differ significantly from people that do not belong to organizations at all. Thus the sample taken was not representative of white, non-Jewish, middle-class, Americans. The correlations between A-S, E and F vary in different samples, subsequent studies showed. However, a negative correlation was never found between those scales.

**Acquiscence Response Set**
A number of studies have examined the external criterion validity of the F scale, with various demographic and political groups. Such groups included: German cosmetic factory workers (Cohn and Carsch, 1954), English fascists and communists, compared to 'politically neutral' soldiers (Coulter, 1953). Both studies found high scores (>5) in F-Scale. However, the Coulter study also found the Communists scored higher in F-Scale than the politically neutral group. Eysenck (1954, ref. by Brown, p. 80) commented that Coulter’s results indicate that the F-Scale actually measures general authoritarianism, rather than fascist tendencies in particular. Christie (1956) attributed Coulter's findings to sampling fluctuation, pointing out the politically neutral group was unusually low in F-Scale, compared to 50 known group means at the time. Rokeach (1960) obtained F-Scale scores from 13 Communist college students in England. Their mean was the lowest of all known groups. Brown, Brown, (2004, p. 80) states: "...the Berkeley researchers seem to have been correct in their belief that the F-Scale is a measure of fascism."
Further reading


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The theory of an authoritarian personality was an influential though controversial mid-twentieth-century theory to explain the mass appeal of fascism and ethnocentrism. Methodological and conceptual criticisms of the original theory, however, lead to alternative theories and culminated in research suggesting two distinct dimensions of ideological attitudes, Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) or Social Conservatism and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) or Anti-Egalitarianism. “The authoritarian personality”. New York: Harper and Row (pp. 228). In brief, the authoritarian is predisposed to follow the dictates of a strong leader and traditional, conventional values. The unconscious conflicts that are unleashed thereby are solved when the person projects the “forbidden” drives and aggressions of his superego onto other people. As a rule, ethnic, political or religious minorities are selected as a screen for these projections, because this way there are no social sanctions to fear.