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Power and Fear: Explaining the Authoritarian Personality

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Power and Fear: Explaining the Authoritarian Personality

Abstract

As the ghost of Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself. And also me." Truer words were never spoken. Actually, these words were never spoken, but were lifted from an article in *The Onion*, in which the deceased Roosevelt advises Americans to lay aside all other fears and come together in mutual terror of his haunting specter. Sadly, many Americans pay no heed to this sage advice, and continue to be scared stiff by gays, foreigners, taxes, global climate change, and anything else that threatens to interrupt the flow of their life. Bob Altemeyer's article, "The Other Authoritarian Personality," describes these fears as part of a larger personality predisposition, which he calls right-wing authoritarianism. Most of the time, authoritarians blend in with society; they do not usually go about expressing their extreme level of respect for authority or their intolerance of individuality. However, as Karen Stenner relates in "The Authoritarian Dynamic," when authoritarians feel anxious or threatened, their true beliefs emerge. From there, Jack Levy's explanation of prospect theory and Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau's discussion on 'affect' contribute to an understanding of why authoritarians cannot tolerate change and why they feel especially threatened by information contrary to their established beliefs. Each of these four works separately speaks to important components of attitude and behavior, but synthesized they reveal that the essential emotional ingredient of the authoritarian personality is fear.

POWER AND FEAR: EXPLAINING THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY

Ryan Winter

As the ghost of Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself. And also me.” Truer words were never spoken. Actually, these words were never spoken, but were lifted from an article in *The Onion*, in which the deceased Roosevelt advises Americans to lay aside all other fears and come together in mutual terror of his haunting specter.¹ Sadly, many Americans pay no heed to this sage advice, and continue to be scared stiff by gays, foreigners, taxes, global climate change, and anything else that threatens to interrupt the flow of their life. Bob Altemeyer’s article, “The Other Authoritarian Personality,” describes these fears as part of a larger personality predisposition, which he calls right-wing authoritarianism. Most of the time, authoritarians blend in with society; they do not usually go about expressing their extreme level of respect for authority or their intolerance of individuality. However, as Karen Stenner relates in “The Authoritarian Dynamic,” when authoritarians feel anxious or threatened, their true beliefs emerge. From there, Jack Levy’s explanation of prospect theory and Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau’s discussion on ‘affect’ contribute to an understanding of why authoritarians cannot tolerate change and why they feel especially threatened by information contrary to their established beliefs. Each of these four works separately speaks to important components of attitude and behavior, but synthesized they reveal that the essential emotional ingredient of the authoritarian personality is fear.

In his essay “The Other Authoritarian Personality,” Bob Altemeyer relates his findings from multiple survey research projects he designed to study common beliefs of right-wing authoritarians (RWAs). Altemeyer wished to discover exactly what makes RWAs unquestioningly obey authorities but abuse those considered inferior. At first, his tests found no significant results. Baffled by his lack of findings, Altemeyer tried adding a new personality type, social dominance, to the mix. The results astounded him. Social dominators (SDOs) had confused his original scales because, like RWAs, they value a rigid social hierarchy, but unlike RWAs, SDOs did not defer to authority. In other words, they kicked down at those below them, but did not bow to their superiors.²

Now that the two personalities were differentiated, Altemeyer separated the groups and re-evaluated their responses. He found that RWAs are unusually religious and self-righteous, and they place a higher value on tradition, conformity, and obedience.³ They often contradict their stated beliefs, delude themselves, and engage in doublespeak. For example, high-scoring RWAs proclaim their patriotism loudly, but do not seem to realize that many of the policies they advocate so

¹ The Onion 2009.

² Altemeyer 1998, 88-9.

³ Ibid., 91.

vehemently actually violate the Bill of Rights.⁴ They feel that the world is being taken over by the morally weak and that society is crumbling into anarchy. Thus, for RWAs, the world is a dangerous place.⁵ SDOs, on the other hand, usually share none of these opinions. They are more willing than RWAs to hurt others to get power, and unlike the self-righteous RWAs, SDOs are aware of and unapologetic about their prejudices.⁶ Interestingly, SDOs do not consider the world to be a dangerous place any more than the average person does, and while the RWAs are equally spread across gender, a much higher percentage of SDOs are male. Although some RWAs score high on the SDO scale as well, the correlation between the two groups was a modest .22, meaning most RWAs are not SDOs and vice versa.⁷ Through his brilliant survey research, Altemeyer was able to define the characteristics of authoritarians and distinguish them from others who value power but do not share other authoritarian traits.

It is well-known that religious fundamentalism, obedience, self-righteousness, and an extreme level of conformity are major components of the authoritarian personality. However, as stated above, these values are usually dormant and require a specific type of situation to elicit their expression. “In *The Authoritarian Dynamic*,” Karen Stenner makes the case that those who are predisposed to authoritarianism spend most of their lives thinking and acting like everyone else. It is only under conditions of normative threat that authoritarian predispositions emerge and affect their behavior.⁸ Similarly, libertarians, who value individuality, tolerance, and autonomy, also express these beliefs most when threatened. Therefore, libertarian predispositions are activated when a group tries to suppress individual freedom and diversity.⁹ Although at first it seems counterintuitive that people only express their personalities part of the time, Stenner’s evaluation helps explain real-world phenomena. For example, many authoritarians are nationalistic and oppose immigration. However, if this prejudice does not affect their everyday lives, their beliefs are not often expressed. It is only when their job, or the jobs of others in the in-group, are perceived to be threatened by cheap immigrant labor that an individual will begin bringing up anti-foreigner sentiments. Fear also explains why religious fundamentalists become so enraged when atheist groups attempt to remove public Christmas decorations or displays of the Ten Commandments in courthouses. Their beliefs are being challenged, so they respond according to their authoritarian predispositions.

Because authoritarian action is triggered by normative threat, a study of how humans act under situations of anxiety and fear can be useful to the topic at hand. In the context of voting

⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁶ Ibid., 96-7.

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ Stenner 2005, 58.

⁹ Ibid., 63.

behavior, Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau describe how people respond to candidates that evoke enthusiasm, anger, or anxiety. They claim that every piece of information humans receive is processed in one of two ways. The dispositional system monitors habits and everyday activities we do unconsciously, while the surveillance system is activated to deal with new and unexpected situations.¹⁰ When new information is inconsistent with our expectations, it is consciously processed by the surveillance system. Therefore, when we are *aware* of our emotions, they are more likely to be anxiety-inducing and negative.¹¹ However, a voter who receives unexpected negative information about a candidate they support will not always change their preferences. In order to consciously reject the candidate, the new information must make the voter feel threatened; otherwise, they will put the information out of their mind and rely on their already-formed positive attitude towards that candidate.¹² Although not intended to explain authoritarian behavior, this study gives some interesting insights on how threat affects cognition. As described above, authoritarians act just like everyone else in their everyday life—at these times they are using the dispositional system. However, confronted with an unfamiliar situation that triggers insecurity and anxiety, authoritarians rely instead on the surveillance system. By applying this theory of voting behavior to the analysis of the authoritarian personality, many behaviors such as adherence to tradition, conformity, deference to authority, and the belief that the world is a dark and dangerous place can be more easily understood.

One final reading that presents compelling parallels to the study of authoritarianism is Jack Levy's "Applications of Prospect Theory to Political Science." His article largely deals with how people behave differently depending on their perceived position in relation to the status quo. Prospect theory, a fascinating alternative to expected-utility theory, predicts that people will work harder to prevent losses than to win comparable gains. Because people overweigh losses and cannot let go of what they once had, they are slow to adjust to the new status quo after losing. However, when they win, the status quo is quickly adjusted upwards.¹³ One implication of loss aversion in prospect theory is that people are much more likely to choose a status quo option over an uncertain future. In fact, a slight wording change can cause people to choose an option that seems to preserve the status quo, even when they would not have done so otherwise.¹⁴ Even if the two choices have an identical expected value, people choose the one that sounds less risky. Unless, that is, they feel that the status quo has already been lost. In this case, people will intentionally seek out risk to restore whatever they feel they have lost. Unlike expected-utility theory, in which people rationally weigh the pros and cons of each option, Levy argues that humans allow their judgment to become clouded by

¹⁰ Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau (2007), 153.

¹¹ Ibid., 154.

¹² Ibid., 155.

¹³ Levy (2003).

¹⁴ Ibid., 222.

losses and engage in increasingly risky behavior to restore the status quo, often acting against their best interests in the end. Levy's explanations of when people seek or avoid risk can be employed to better understand the authoritarian personality. As Altemeyer has established, authoritarians overwhelmingly favor conservative policies, and should therefore be even more biased towards the status quo. When their worldview is challenged, rather than balancing costs and benefits, authoritarians seek out risk to return to the way things used to be.

Doubtless, these authors would find some issues with being lumped together as one block of research to validate a theory of authoritarianism. Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau would probably say that the theory of authoritarianism's relationship with fear ignores most of the conclusions towards the end of their paper. As they found in their studies, anxiety about a political candidate actually results in increased information search, which would seem to contradict the premise that authoritarians avoid information that confuses or threatens them.¹⁵ However, Stenner and Altemeyer would respond that this study was of a representative sample of the population, not a sample of RWAs, so of course their conclusions would not support a theory about a small segment of the population. Stenner actually references Altemeyer's work, calling it a valiant attempt but of limited utility; she says that his arguments are tautological, and that they confound conservatism with authoritarianism. By determining if a person is a RWA by their answers to survey questions and then using those same responses to claim he has found the primary characteristics of authoritarians, Altemeyer leaves himself vulnerable to the charge of circular logic.

In the end, these writers would probably agree that parts of their work fit together and help to reveal that it is fear which underlies and motivates authoritarian action. An example that illustrates this synthesis is the issue of gay marriage. Altemeyer found that right-wing authoritarianism correlates strongly with opposition to homosexuality. Stenner picks up from there, explaining that in their everyday life authoritarians act just like everyone else, but are only radically anti-gay when they feel that their beliefs about marriage and family are being threatened. Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau describe the initial mental processing that occurs when people first hear something new and unexpected. The surveillance system is activated, which means the issue is new and uncomfortable and anxiety is the most likely result. Finally, Levy's work explains the stubbornness to concede to gay rights. Although it would not affect their own lives at all if same-sex marriage were legalized, authoritarians will fight harder to preserve the status quo of keeping gay marriage illegal than they would to win similar gains. Taken together, these four disparate ideas on psychology and political behavior say something more than any of them alone, and indicate the true nature of authoritarianism.

¹⁵ Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau (2007), 174.

The real motivation behind anti-gay movements is not hatred, but fear. Only when the enemy is seen as a threat to traditional values can they be dehumanized and hated in the abstract. People who treat gays in this way are called homophobes—and the stem *phobe* is no coincidence. The world is a dangerous place for authoritarians, and with so many forces threatening the status quo, fear underlies almost every belief they hold. The word xenophobia is used to describe their fear of foreigners, and many authoritarians call themselves “God-fearing,” meaning their fundamentalist religious beliefs are held out of terror of divine retribution. Through this combination of four diverse ideas on cognition, personality, and behavior expression, the authoritarian personality can be understood as being motivated primarily by fear.

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