Authoritarian Aggression and Social Stratification
A Research Note

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Abstract

Ever since Seymour Martin Lipset's famous paper on authoritarianism and the left (1959), it has been widely assumed that blue collar workers are uniquely susceptible to the temptations of hate. This assumption was tested and (it seemed) confirmed by Melvin Kohn & Carmi Schooler (1983), among others. Yet in our recent research we have found contrary evidence — evidence suggesting, in fact, that comparatively high-status professionals are significantly more authoritarian than other strata of the workforce. The starting point for this research was our hypothesis that the attitude questions in Erik Olin Wright's 15-nation study of Class Structure and Class Consciousness might correlate with Bob Altemeyer's time-tested "Right Wing Authoritarianism" scale. Early tests of this thesis indicate that this seems to be true, at the .70 level; and subsequent analysis of Wright's first United States survey (1980) reveals a number of further correlations. Most notably, and contrary to the oft-reported findings of Kohn & Schooler, we found that white collar "experts" in Wright's study appear to have significantly more aggressive and authoritarian attitudes than lower status workers. (Their mean authoritarianism scores, respectively, are 2.85 and 2.31.) These are preliminary findings, to be sure, and we are certainly not trying to vindicate the old chestnut that classical working-class status guarantees virtue — but if in fact this finding is borne out in further studies, it may prove important.

A close friend of ours was watching TV in a hospital cafeteria in April, 1993, when regular programming was interrupted to carry live coverage of the climactic moment when the Branch Davidian

compound in Waco, Texas, was burned to the ground by the FBI. As the smoke cleared, a cheer rolled through the room. Well over 100 people — janitors, nurses, patients, doctors, aides and others — were suddenly festive. Fists pumped and people rejoiced, calling out "yes!"

Our friend felt misgivings — after all, lives were being lost — but evidently such misgivings were not widely shared. A Gallup poll the next day showed that 87% of the public blamed the Branch Davidians for the conflagration, while 73% defended the decision to pump tear gas into the cult compound — indeed, a majority said the FBI should have taken this step sooner. Asked if Attorney-General Janet Reno should resign in the wake of "yesterday's actions in Waco," 88% replied "no." No segment of the public gave Reno less than 80% support, and college graduates, in particular, gave her a resounding 95% vote of confidence (McAneny, 1993).

Later, of course, many objections and reservations were voiced about the government's handling of the Waco affair. In all, eighty five cult members died in the fire, some of whom were children. But many citizens, perhaps most, remain unshaken in their conviction that the government was right to act so violently.

Why? Can we say what causes so many people to sympathize so warmly with official violence in cases like this one?

Of course, the Branch Davidian affair was unique in many ways, and it is difficult to say, four years later, just what people felt at that moment. But it would not be implausible to surmise that an element of authoritarianism figured in this response. Scores of studies now echo what Adorno, Sanford, Frenkel-Brunswik, and Levinson first systematically demonstrated in 1950, namely, that a good-sized fraction of survey respondents in many places combine aggressive intolerance with a conformist eagerness to affirm and submit to authority — and to ensure that others accept au-

thority as well. This has been recently confirmed, for example, by researchers in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany whose work reflects the continuing influence of Adorno and "the Berkeley team" (Meloen, van der Linden & de Witte, 1996; Meloen, 1998, 1987; Lederer & Schmidt, 1995; Hopf, 1998; and Hopf *et al.*, 1995). And related results have been obtained by a growing circle of social scientists whose research stems from the parallel research tradition inspired by the University of Manitoba psychologist Bob Altemeyer (1998, 1996, 1988, 1981).

Right Wing Authoritarianism

While Altemeyer has not, in our opinion, departed as far from the premises and findings of the Berkeley researchers as he supposes, he is undeniably the catalyst of a major new research tradition. This research pivots around Altemeyer's main innovation, a psychometrically reliable survey instrument — the "RWA" or Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale — which he first crafted in the early 1970s and which, by 1988, he had personally administered to more than 20,000 respondents (mainly Canadian college students). Altemeyer's early results were striking. As he reported in 1988, 73% of his recent respondents were high-scorers on the RWA scale, a percentage which had been rising steadily over time. And since 1990, parallel results have been obtained in many places, including Russia (McFarland, Ageyev & Djintcharadze, 1996), South Africa (Duckitt & Farre 1994), Israel (Rubinstein 1996, 1995), Denmark (Enoch 1994), and elsewhere (see Altemeyer, 1996, for full details).

These results are significant.[1] Authoritarianism, it appears, is widespread. And of the three primary dimensions of authoritarianism tapped by the RWA scale — aggressiveness, submissiveness, and conformism — the heart of authoritarianism, for Altemeyer (as for Adorno), is aggressiveness. There is no mystery, as Altemeyer explains, about the covariance of submissiveness and conformism, since they palpably resemble and re-

inforce one another. But why should aggressiveness enter in as well? Why does hostility coincide with submissiveness? And with conformism?

The challenge, then, lies in "solving the mystery of authoritarian aggression" (Altemeyer 1988: 105-198). And the importance of this challenge is political as well as social scientific, since high RWA scores are routinely associated with aggressive, intolerant, and undemocratic sentiments.

Briefly: High RWA scorers show little concern about unconventional groups and individuals who suffer government violence. They voice little support for civil liberties, or even, in the United States, for the Bill of Rights. (In Russia, overtly anti-democratic views correlate .74 with high RWA scores, while in the U.S. there is a .50 correlation with willingness to repeal the Bill of Rights.) High scorers urge submission to the government and say that they would personally help the authorities "stomp out the rot," "get rid of the rotten apples who are ruining everything," and "smash the perversions [that are] eating away at our moral fiber." They favor harsh punishment of criminals, and say they would enjoy administering this punishment personally. They are, on average, far more racially and ethnically biased than Low scorers, in Russia and South Africa as well as in North America. High scorers reject gay people with AIDS and homosexuals in general (indeed, "RWA scores may explain hostility toward gays and lesbians better than any other personality variable") and they are reluctant to condemn gay bashers. High scoring men confess to a disproportionate number of assaults against women. They resist equality for women, reject feminism, and view the homeless as "lazy, not unlucky." (See Altemeyer [1998 & 1996: 16-49] for data on many RWA-based studies; cf. Meloen [1998,1997] and Smith [1996: 229-231] for additional data; and cf. Walker, Rowe, & Quinsey [1993] for evidence concerning the propensity of high scoring men to report assaults against women.)

In the research so far, in other words, "authoritarian aggression" covaries with conformism and submissiveness in these and other specific ways. And below this constellation of attitudes Altemeyer finds three personality traits which, taken together, appear to explain most of the variance in these attitudes: "Self-Righteousness," "Fear of a Dangerous World," and "Mean Spiritedness."[2]

What, then, can we say about the origins of personality traits of this type? The classic, neo-psychoanalytic viewpoint of Adorno, Sanford, Frenkel-Brunswik and Levinson (1950) pivoted around the notion of early childhood psychodynamics. Personality was thought to be forged in the family, at a young age, once and for all. Most personality researchers today, however, accept the premise that personality traits are continuously reshaped across the lifespan (see, e.g., Funder *et al.*, 1993). This is not to deny, of course, that early childhood is centrally important.[3] But the formation of personality is now widely perceived as a lifelong process. Altemeyer agrees, and offers evidence to suggest that aggressive, submissive, and conformist tendencies wax and wane over time. He shows that higher education, for example, tends to lessen authoritarian tendencies, while a liberal arts education in particular tends to lower RWA scores quite strikingly (as many people have guessed). On the other hand, RWA scores tend to rise, even if they have fallen before, when young adults become parents.

The latter result may be explainable in terms of parental experience. Active parents play an unavoidably authoritative role in their children's lives, and many of them become more authoritarian in the process; and their children, in turn, acquire authoritarian tendencies roughly proportional to their parents' authoritarianism. Given this background, it is reasonable to suppose that aggressiveness, mean-spiritedness, extreme fearfulness, and other apparently authoritarian personality traits are, in part, adaptive responses to the exercise of authority.

This is an intriguing hypothesis, springing from a rich empirical tradition and (we believe) meriting further inquiry. And we would contend that a related hypothesis is equally plausible for the workplace. Authority is wielded with rare force and universality in myriad workplaces. Thus, if aggressive and submissive tendencies are, in fact, learned or reinforced in parent-child interactions — as the data suggest — it seems entirely likely that relations between workplace superiors and subordinates will also yield personality-relevant results, and on a wide scale.

Work and Personality

The intuition that work affects personality is far from new. As long ago as 1922, in *Die Arbeiterfrage,* Heinrich Herkner was able to cite an entire literature on the influence of factory labor on "the spiritual life *{Seelenleben}* of workers" (29ff.). Key pioneers in this field were English critics (Ruskin, 1851; Cooke-Taylor, 1891), followed by such French and German scholars as Bücher (1902), Féré (1904), Traub (1904), and Abbé (1906). It was not, however, until the first systematic studies were conducted — by the Verein für Sozialpolitik, under the guidance of Max and Alfred Weber, and by the social critic Adolf Levenstein — that the place of authority in the *Seelenleben des Arbeiters* was made a prime object of inquiry. The Verein studies, in particular, paid special attention to the "changes in personality" resulting from experiences of work and workplace authority (Weber, Herkner & Schmoller, in Bernays, 1910: vii). The relevant findings of these studies, however, remained comparatively meager.[4] Several studies by "psychotechnicians" in the 1920's (Poppelreuter, Giese et al.) were similar in intent, but also yielded comparatively limited findings (cf. Campbell, 1989; Geuter, 1992; Smith, 1994). Far richer results emerged from the 1930's studies of the critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Erich Fromm, which led, by a direct path, to *The Authoritarian Personality* and subsequent works, of which, for our purposes, the 1983 study by Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler is most relevant.[5]

In this major study, Kohn & Schooler showed that several relevant adult personality traits can — and often do — change markedly as a result of workplace experience. Though "personality [also] has great importance in determining who goes into what kinds of jobs and how they perform those jobs," Kohn & Schooler concluded, after meticulous research over 20 years, that the data "unequivocally" support the thesis that "job conditions play an important part in shaping personality" (122, ix).[6]

Specifically, Kohn & Schooler concluded that comparatively self-directed and complex work, for which higher education is often a prerequisite, stimulates "ideational flexibility," tolerance, independence, and openness. And simpler, less autonomous work spurs anxiety, hostility, rigidity, intolerance, and conformism.[7]

This conclusion, in turn, led to several inferences about "authoritarian conservatism," which Kohn & Schooler define as "rigid conformance to the dictates of authority" combined with "intolerance of nonconformity" (16, 327). This clearly prefigures our own hypothesis, and remains the best effort to explore the effects of work on personal authoritarianism.[8] But Kohn & Schooler treated authoritarianism as a side theme, neglected aggression, and used a flawed measure consisting exclusively of protrait items (thus making themselves vulnerable to the famed "response set" criticism of *The Authoritarian Personality*; see Altemeyer, 1981).[9]

Altemeyer's merit is that he crafted a reliable alternative to flawed scales of this type. His limitation is that he overlooks the workplace as a site of social learning. In this study, we adapt Altemeyer's method to look more carefully at questions of the type posed by Kohn & Schooler.

We propose, that is, to explore the effects of the workplace on personal authoritarianism by means of RWA-like survey instru-

ments. Our hypothesis is that experiences of workplace authority have appreciable (and measurable) effects on authoritarian aggression and submission. Preliminary efforts to test this hypothesis (see below) show considerable promise.

Findings

The best source of information on authority relations in the workplace is a data archive compiled, since 1980, by the Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness. This project, conceived by Erik Olin Wright of the University of Wisconsin in Madison, is a giant and finely-wrought survey research effort. The Comparative Project's survey instrument, which has been the basis for surveys in 15 nations, presents respondents with a lengthy series of items designed to shed light on questions of authority, autonomy, and skill. The archive gathered in this way (and which is available to scholars from ICPSR) is a research resource of unusual value.[10]

Twenty years ago, one of us (Smith) helped Erik Wright draft a series of "consciousness" questions for the Comparative Project in its pretesting phase. To date, however, relatively little has been written about this aspect of the Comparative Project, and one of Wright's associates has expressed public doubts about the value of attitude research (Marshall, 1983). Wright himself has probed the attitude data on several occasions (1997, 1989 [with Howe & Cho], and 1985), mainly, however, to test stratification theory, not to explore personality. (And, thus far, Wright has restricted his attention to Swedish, Japanese, and U.S. responses to five attitude items, neglecting, for the moment, his own wider multinational data on many other issues relevant to attitudes and personality.)

On balance, then, relatively little has been learned yet from the Comparative Project about attitudes, and what has been learned is primarily non-psychological.

Interestingly, however, in recent trial surveys we found evidence to suggest that Wright's data, analyzed in a different way, may in fact yield significant insight into the social psychology of authority, work and aggression. When Smith originally helped develop Wright's attitude questions in the late 1970's, he expressly intended to tap authoritarian-like sentiments (Smith 1981); this intent now seems to have borne fruit. A recent survey of 125 Introductory Psychology students showed a healthy .70 correlation between the 1996 version of Altemeyer's RWA scale and an 11-item attitude subscale drawn from the Comparative Project's consciousness instrument. (This is the weighted score of a simple multiple linear regression of all 11 items.) Subsequent factor analysis, using data from Wright's first United States survey (ICPSR file # 9323), suggests that five of these items are especially strongly associated; all five register factor loadings of .528 or higher, and most quite closely resemble RWA items. And two of the other items on our 11-item subscale register nearly comparable loadings on the same factor (.463 and .362 respectively).

These results are welcome and encouraging. The net result is that *we may now have a promising means of analyzing Wright's authority data with an RWA-like authoritarianism scale drawn from Wright's own study.* This gives us a chance to better understand how authoritarian-like attitudes covary with actual experiences of workplace authority and position. And early findings suggest that we may indeed learn a considerable amount along these lines. A preliminary factorial analysis of the Comparative Project's first United States survey, for example, shows a clear pattern of associations between RWA-like sentiments, as measured by our 11-item scale, and Wright's 12-box matrix of workplace ownership, authority, and expertise.

Wright's matrix is presented in Table 1, below. Then, in Table 2, we learn, from the results of our preliminary study, that *each of Wright's two dimensions of workplace power appears to associate*

quite systematically with the attitudes tapped by our scale. (The mean authoritarian-like score for all respondents was 2.41 on a 1.00-5.00 scale. Table 2 shows difference from this mean).

Table 1: Wright's Matrix

Owners	Non-Owners Skill Resources Dimension			Organizational Resources Dimension:
	Experts	Skilled	Non-skilled	
1 Employers, >10 employees	4 Expert Managers	7 Skilled Managers	10 Non-skilled Managers	Managers
2 Small Employers	5 Expert Supervisors	8 Skilled Supervisors	11 Non-skilled Supervisors	Supervisors
3 Self-employed	6 Expert Non-managers	9 Skilled Workers	12 Non-skilled Workers	Non-managers

Table 2: Our Findings

Owners	Non-Owners Skill Resources Dimension			Organizational Resources Dimension:
	Experts	Skilled	Non-skilled	
1 -.17	4 +.19	7 +.01	10 -.04	Managers
2 -.15	5 +.15	8 -.02	11 -.07	Supervisors
3 -.07	6 +.44	9 +.19	12 -.10	Non-managers

- Horizontally, we see that, among non-owners, scores vary directly with expertise, *whether or not* managerial authority is associated with expertise. "Experts" tally the highest scores, skilled employees fall in the middle, and non-skilled workers record lower scores. (Owners, in turn, tally the lowest scores of all.)
- Vertically, non-managers score higher than either managers or supervisors in every category except for unskilled labor. And the differences between managers and supervisors are negligible in every case.

These are very suggestive findings, however tentative and partial. And the immediate relevance of this research is clear, for

example, in connection with the issue of workplace violence. Work-related assaults and murders in the U.S. Postal System, for example, have occurred so often that the phrase "going postal" has entered the vernacular (Kelleher 1996). Yet dramatic episodes of violence are actually a small fraction of a much larger phenomenon. Allcorn, in one of the rare extended treatments of this subject, argues effectively that "anger and aggression are omnipresent in the workplace" (1994: 25). And Baxter & Margavio show that anger and violence of this type are often closely linked to changes in the structure of workplace authority (1996); this is particularly clear, it seems, in the highly relevant case of the U.S. Post Office, which has undergone virtually continuous restructuring since the beginning of partial privatization since 1970 (Baxter 1994).

"Authoritarian aggression," meanwhile, is far from a rare or pathological condition. Studies show that a majority or near-majority of survey respondents in many places score "slightly high" or "very high" on the RWA scale, indicating that some degree of punitive hostility towards political, ethnic, and cultural minorities is very common. In fact, Altemeyer was first inspired to study authoritarianism a quarter of a century ago by his fear that the "Silent" or "Moral" majority might become an authoritarian and, ultimately, an undemocratic majority — a fear he continues to regard as amply justified (1996).

Meanwhile, in future research we hope to cast our net even wider. Besides seeking further insight from the Comparative Project's attitude scale — an inviting prospect, given the richly multinational character of this data archive — we hope to probe other possible connections as well. McFarland & Adelson (1996), for example, report a highly significant association between Altemeyer's RWA and the Pratto-Sidanius "Social Dominance Orientation" (SDO) scale, and Altemeyer (1998, 1996) notes many further interscalar correlations. And several other issues interest us as well, including, e.g., the sense in which "aggression" is re-

lated to "intolerance" (as studied, for example, by Sullivan *et al.*, 1995) and the connection, if any, between Altemeyer's "Dangerous World" and Lerner's "Just World."

But that remains for the future.

Notes

1. Appropriately, Altemeyer's 1996 book was recently awarded the Prize for Behavioral Science Research from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

2. It would take us too far afield to dwell on this point, but these three personality traits — which Altemeyer distilled from nearly three decades of data — closely resemble several of the key traits identified by Frenkel-Brunswik in *The Authoritarian Personality* (e.g., the fearful belief that "the world is a jungle," which Frenkel-Brunswik calls the "jungle-world" thesis).

3. This is particularly richly revealed in the literature of cross-cultural psychology, which, under the influence of John and Beatrice Whiting, Robert and Sarah LeVine, Sara Harkness, T. Berry Brazelton and many others, has focused a bright light on early parent-child experience in many cultures, most notably in Europe, North America, and east Africa. And there is a parallel literature in the child development field (represented by Mary D. S. Ainsworth, Jack Block, Alan Sroufe, Mary Main and others) which has produced important related results. For bibliographic details see Smith (1998a).

4. Six thick volumes of results were ultimately generated by the Verein, all published from 1910-14. These results were very rich in many respects, but did not yield very clear or abundant insight into specifically characterological issues. See Smith (1998b) for details.

5. Fromm & Horkheimer initially focused on authoritarianism and the proletariat, but by the time their research agenda gave rise to *The Authoritarian Personality*, their class focus had been left behind.

6. And not just personality traits. See, e.g., the recent finding that even the incidence of heart disease is linked to variations in the experience of on-the-job autonomy (Marmot *et al.*, 1997).

7. They show, also, that a variety of other relevant job conditions (time pressure, "heaviness," "dirtiness," etc.) yield further personality effects, which are not, however, immediately relevant.

8. Cf. the substantial volume by Hoff, Lempert, and Lappe (1991), which focuses on many related questions, including, e.g., the effects of work on personality in terms of "moral reasoning" judged in Kohlbergian terms. And see Jaerisch (1975) for a research inquiry in which conceptions and scales from *The Authoritarian Personality* were examined in connection with a study of workers and the radical right in the late 1960s.

9. Working with a galaxy of collaborators, Kohn continues to dig deeply into issues of social structure and personality change, most recently in connection with the social transformations underway in eastern Europe; see e.g. Kohn *et al.* (1997).

10. Comparative Project surveys have been conducted in 15 nations since Wright first pretested this project in the late 1970s. These nations follow, in roughly the order in which they were surveyed: (1) the United States, (2) Sweden, (3) the United Kingdom, (4) Canada, (5) Norway, (6) Australia, (7) Denmark, (8) Japan, (9) New Zealand, (10) West Germany, (11) Russia, (12) South Korea, (13) Spain, (14) Taiwan, and (15) Portugal. Surveys 11-15, and replications of the U.S. and Swedish studies, were conducted in the 1990s; the other surveys were carried out earlier.

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KLARA HITLER'S SON:
READING THE LANGER REPORT ON HITLER'S MIND

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Abstract

This essay is a spin-off from my book on psychological warfare in the Melville Revival, 1919-1999. Unbelievably, leading scholars in the twentieth-century "revival" of Herman Melville (1819-1891) read their subject as a bad Jew; bad because, like the abolitionists and other radical puritans, he thought Judeo-Christian morality ought to be lived out in everyday life and could not be compromised in the interests of "expediency." Such rigorous and consistent moralism was viewed as wild-eyed zealotry or monomania by the pragmatic moderate men who intervened between readers and Melville's texts, annexing Melville's art and the lessons of his bumpy career to their own corporatist agendas. The same scholars (Dr. Henry A. Murray, Charles Olson, and Jay Leyda) who frowned upon Melville/Ahab the Hebraic moralist were simultaneously involved in the creation of propaganda during the Roosevelt administration. Neither antisemitism in the Melville Revival nor Murray's Jungian reading of Hitler's soma and psyche can be understood without reference to the Tory response to Hebraic radical puritanism as it surfaced in the English Civil War. With Herman Melville and Captain Ahab on his mind, Dr. Henry A. Murray and his Harvard colleague Walter Langer suggested to FDR that Nazi evil was drawn from Jewish blood, applying racial theory to the long-distance psychoanalysis of Hitler. Of course, Murray and Langer did not profess antisemitism; quite the contrary. Such a deficit in self-understanding was the inevitable outcome of conservative Enlightenment.