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Citation

Can Authoritarianism Lead to Greater Liking of Out-Groups? The Intriguing Case of Singapore

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Authoritarianism refers to the individual's willingness to submit to authorities that are perceived as established and legitimate and to conform to social norms and traditions endorsed by society at large, as well as a general aggressiveness toward groups that deviate from the modal norm (Altemeyer, 1981). Since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, the seminal work by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950), numerous empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the seemingly inextricable link between authoritarianism and negative attitudes about out-groups (for a meta-analysis, see Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Indeed, in the authoritarian mind, minorities are readily perceived as "bad, disruptive, immoral, and deviant" people who do not fit into society (Duckitt, 2001, p. 85).

However, what if authoritarians live in a society in which a very strong and established authority most explicitly endorses diversity and multiculturalism, thereby enforcing a social norm that is in direct opposition to authoritarians' "natural" negative attitudes toward minorities? Over the past 50 years, the Singaporean government (run by the People's Action Party) has been highly committed to regulating its ethnically diverse society and promoting multiculturalism through a variety of ingenious yet most consequential measures. A prime example is the imposition of strict ethnic quotas in public residential estates (i.e., Housing and Development Board flats, which house more than 80% of the population): The ethnic distribution of residents (95% of whom are owners) in every apartment block is required to reflect the ethnic distribution in the nation to safeguard against the formation of residential enclaves and stereotypes (for a more elaborate account of the Singaporean government's measures to endorse diversity and multicultural interaction, see Noor & Leong, 2013). The potential influence of such institutionalized intergroup ideology on individuals'

attitudes is generally neglected in psychological research (Guimond, de la Sablonnière, & Nugier, 2014).

We hypothesized that in the Singaporean context, the very strong social norm enforced by the authority may curb or even reverse the relationship between authoritarianism and negative attitudes about out-groups that is consistently observed in all other countries. Demonstrating that authoritarianism can be positively related to out-group-friendly attitudes would be unique; to the best of our knowledge, no such finding has ever been reported or even considered as a possibility. As an underlying mechanism for this reversed relationship, we propose a mediating role for citizens' perception of the government's unambiguous position toward multiculturalism.

We analyzed data from 249 Singaporean students (the target sample; mean age = 21.63 years, SD = 1.50; 32.5% male) and 245 Belgian students (the comparison group; mean age = 19.16 years, SD = 2.50; 37.5% male).[1] These students anonymously completed a questionnaire; 16 Singaporean respondents and 26 Belgian respondents were excluded from the analyses because they were not citizens belonging to the ethnic majority group. To obtain a broad measure of authoritarianism, we used nine traditional right-wing authoritarianism items[2] (Altemeyer, 1981; 7-point Likert scales) as well as nine items from the Refined Schwartz Value survey (Schwartz et al., 2012; 6-point Likert scales) that tap into the core values of authoritarianism (see Altemeyer, 1998): conformity (conformity to rules: three items; interpersonal conformity: three items) and tradition (three items). We combined

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these items and computed a single component representing the latent authoritarianism construct. This component explained virtually identical amounts of variance in the two samples (Belgian sample: 25.99%; Singaporean sample: 26.70%), and multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis testing the structural equivalence of the single-factor model[3] across the Belgian and Singaporean data yielded good fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.66$; comparative fit index = .94; root-mean-square error of approximation = 0.053, 95% confidence interval = [0.043, 0.062]; standardized root-mean-square residual = 0.059.

To measure attitudes toward other ethnicities and cultural groups, we asked respondents to complete a five-item measure of multiculturalism (Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010) using 5-point Likert scales. In addition, they rated how they felt toward each of the most salient minority out-groups for their sample (see Table 1) on four bipolar scales from 1 to 7, with anchors of *cold-warm, negative-positive, hostile-friendly*, and *contempt-respect*. Finally, respondents completed an adapted version of the multiculturalism scale in which they rated their perceptions of the government's position on each item of the multiculturalism scale.

As shown in Table 1, the Belgian control group showed the usual negative relationships between authoritarianism and multiculturalism and between authoritarianism and positive attitudes about out-groups, as found in all previous research. In the Singaporean sample, however, there were significant, positive relationships between authoritarianism and multiculturalism and between authoritarianism and positive attitudes about out-groups, in line with our hypothesis. Formal tests confirmed that the unique, positive relationship pattern in Singapore significantly differed from the usual pattern

found in the control group, Fisher zs = −5.97, and −4.30, both ps < .001, for multiculturalism and attitudes about out-groups, respectively.

Table 1 also shows that, among Singaporean citizens, the belief that their government endorses multiculturalism was very prominent and substantially stronger than in the control group, $F(1, 478) = 579.03$, $p < .001$. Moreover, this belief was strongest among participants with the highest scores for authoritarianism and was also significantly and positively related to multiculturalism and attitudes about out-groups in Singapore. As hypothesized, mediation analyses using the bootstrapping procedure by Preacher and Hayes (2008) showed that the relationships of authoritarianism with multiculturalism and attitudes about out-groups were mediated by perceived government support for multiculturalism, yielding significant indirect effects for multiculturalism, 0.05, $SD = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval = [0.016, 0.096], and attitudes about out-groups, 0.03, $SD = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval = [0.006, 0.079]. Hence, authoritarians' more positive attitudes toward out-groups and multiculturalism in Singapore indeed seem to reflect conformity to the perspective explicitly endorsed by the authority.

The present study advances a novel, provocative perspective on the widely adopted postulate that authoritarianism is inevitably associated with increased prejudice. In particular, the present results demonstrate that when a strong authority explicitly and relentlessly endorses diversity and multiculturalism (combined with meritocracy; see Noor & Leong, 2013), such a perspective can be adopted even (and especially) by people who are intuitively most opposed to diversity.[4] Future researchers may want to clarify whether the unique relationship between authoritarianism and attitudes about out-groups that we

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Key Variables

			Correlation	
Sample and measure	Mean	α	Authoritarianism	Government multiculturalism
Belgian sample				
Government multiculturalism (1–5)	2.60 (0.70)	.86	.26***	—
Multiculturalism (1–5)	3.50 (0.77)	.82	−.28***	−.13
Attitudes about out-groups (1–7)[a]	4.38 (0.85)	.95	−.26***	−.08
Singaporean sample				
Government multiculturalism (1–5)	4.06 (0.60)	.90	.20**	—
Multiculturalism (1–5)	4.02 (0.51)	.82	.26***	.53***
Attitudes about out-groups (1–7)[b]	4.39 (0.86)	.95	.13*	.21**

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations.
[a]Target out-groups were Moroccan, Turkish, Black African, Eastern European, and Asian immigrants.
[b]Target out-groups were Malay-Singaporean citizens, Indian-Singaporean citizens, Chinese immigrants, Malay immigrants, Indian immigrants, and White immigrants.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

found in this specific context is due solely to the adoption of a salient social norm enforced by the authority. It could also be an indirect result of the actual government policies that stimulate intergroup contact. Indeed, intergroup contact has been demonstrated as especially effective in changing high authoritarians' negative attitudes about out-groups (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009) and may therefore also account, at least in part, for the unique overall relationship in the Singaporean context.

Author Contributions

A. Roets developed the study. A. Roets and E. W. M. Au collected the data. A. Roets conducted the data analysis, which was checked by A. Van Hiel. A. Roets, E. W. M. Au, and A. Van Hiel all contributed to writing the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. Correlations between individual difference variables typically stabilize when n approaches 250 (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013).
2. Some right-wing authoritarianism items can be unreliable in non-Western samples (e.g., Gray & Durrheim, 2006). We therefore selected items that were relatively culture-neutral, and we chose nine items to match the number of items on the Refined Schwartz Value survey.
3. Because of the very particular and repetitive wording of the items in the Refined Schwartz Value survey, error correlations between these items were allowed but fixed to be equal across both groups.
4. A supplemental measure of external motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) showed no significant relationships with multiculturalism, which suggests a genuine adoption of the government's perspective rather than mere social desirability in responding.

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