

Reality Enthusiast
Anti-theist for social justice.

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Bob Altemeyer's "The Authoritarians"
The Game

In October of 1994, University of Manitoba psychology professor Bob Altemeyer performed an experiment. After screening participants using a personality survey disguised as an opinion poll, he selected 68 highly authoritarian college students to play a political governance and resource management simulation called the Global Change Game. In this game, each player represents 100 million people in one of nine different regions of the world. Play consists of making decisions about how to deal with various social, economic, and environmental matters. Each player's viability depends on three factors: food, health care, and employment. Lose access to one factor, and you earn a black armband. Earn three black armbands and all the people you represent die. A worldwide environmental crisis occurs at a randomly determined point during game play, testing the players' ability to respond to a global emergency.

The game also involves regional leaders, called "Elites", who control their region's bank account, which they can use to buy factories, hospitals, armies, and so on. They're allowed to travel the world, to make deals with other Elites, and to declare war if they can gather enough support from their fellow region members. Success in war means increased territory and assets. Elites can also secretly funnel some of their region's money into their own pockets. (Unbeknownst to the rest of the players, the Elites are simultaneously vying for the prize of World's Richest Person.)

The Global Change Game was originally designed to educate students about various challenges facing the modern world, including population growth, hunger, climate change, international relations, war, and resource distribution. But that day in 1994, Bob Altemeyer used it for a different purpose: to see what would happen in a world populated exclusively by right-wing authoritarians.

A Quick Clarification

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is a personality trait, not a political orientation. Altemeyer explains :
I'm using the word "right" in one of its earliest meanings, for in Old English "riht" (pronounced "writ") as an adjective [that] meant lawful, proper, correct, doing what the authorities said....I've always called it right-wing authoritarianism rather than simply authoritarianism in acknowledgment that left-wing authoritarianism also exists. An authoritarian follower submits excessively to some authorities, aggresses in their name, and insists on everyone following their rules. If these authorities are the established authorities in society, that's right-wing authoritarianism. If one submits to authorities who want to overthrow the establishment, that's left-wing authoritarianism, as I define things....[S]omeone who lived in a country long ruled by Communists and who ardently supported the Communist Party would also be one of my psychological right-wing authoritarians even though we would also say he was a political left-winger.

When Authoritarians Ran the World

So what happened in Altemeyer's game? First, the Elite from the Middle East doubled the price of oil. Then, the former Soviet Union invaded North America, causing a nuclear holocaust that killed all 7.4 billion people on Earth. The end. Or it would have been the end, except that when a nuclear war happens in the Global Change Game, the game restarts and participants get to try again. In this instance, because nuclear annihilation happened so early, facilitators restarted the game from nearly the beginning.

Given a second chance, the former Soviet Union opted for conventional warfare instead of a nuclear strike, invading China and killing 400 million people. One Elite called a United Nations-style meeting to discuss future crises, but the participants could not reach any agreements. The pre-programmed ozone-layer crisis occurred. No one even bothered to call a summit this time. Europe was the only region to voluntarily reduce emissions. Poverty spread in the underdeveloped regions as populations soared, a situation compounded by a general refusal to promote birth control. Latin America converted much of its trees to one species, (the one that produced the most profitable lumber) despite being warned that this would make their ecosystem vulnerable. Elites neglected the social, environmental, and economic issues of their regions, choosing to use their resources to increase military power (and their own personal wealth) instead. By the end of the game, the authoritarians had divided their world into armed camps, each threatening the others with nuclear war. Over a billion people died of starvation and disease, bringing the final death toll to 2.1 billion. It was a spectacularly unsuccessful run of the game, one which Altemeyer would later refer to as "Doom Night".

When Non-Authoritarians Ran the World

The same month, Altemeyer ran a different Global Change Game with nothing but low-RWAs. The first thing they did was to create, by mutual consent, a worldwide organization to deal with major issues. No wars or threats of wars occurred. (The North American Elite tried to start one, but the others in his region would not allow it.) The number of armies assigned at the beginning dropped as time went on. When facilitators announced the scheduled global warming crisis, the Elites met as agreed and contributed enough money to buy technology to replenish the ozone layer. Starvation

and disease claimed only 300 million in Africa and 100 million in India. (Europe provided aid, but North America did not.) By the end of the game, the world population had increased to 8.7 billion, almost none of whom had incurred any black armbands, meaning their access to food, healthcare, and jobs was mostly intact. Demilitarization, mutually beneficial trading, sustainable economic programs, and low levels of money hoarding by the Elites (the North American Elite won that secret game) contributed to what was a highly successful run of the game compared to most. Cooperation predominated in the low-RWA run of the game, with the person who assumed the role of the Elite from North America being the only monkey wrench in the works.

Clearly, there was a big difference between the simulated world created by high-RWAs and the one created by low-RWAs.

What is Right Wing Authoritarianism?

Right Wing Authoritarianism is defined by three personality aspects:

- 1 - degree of submission to established and legitimate societal authorities,
- 2 - levels of aggression in the name of these authorities, and
- 3 - level of conventionalism.

The 22-question Right-Wing Authoritarian scale found on page 11 of, "The Authoritarians" measures these personality aspects. (The entire book can be downloaded for free at Bob Altemeyer's website.) The survey asks respondents for their level of agreement with such statements as, "The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get back to our traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas", "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished", and "This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group's traditional place in society."

The original RWA survey Altemeyer put together in 1973 took "eight studies, run over three years, involving over 3000 subjects and 300 items" to create. It has been extensively revised and refined since then. The survey is well-regarded in the psychological research community, where it has proven accurate in predicting of authoritarian attitudes and behavior. "A strong record of replication has accumulated over time," writes Altemeyer. "Scores on the RWA scale really do measure tendencies toward authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism."
Submission

Authoritarians think that all people – including themselves – should submit to "legitimate" authority in almost every conceivable circumstance. High RWAs submit to such authority, "even when it is dishonest, corrupt, unfair and evil", according to Altemeyer. They believe the things their authorities tell them even if there is evidence to the contrary. And when those authorities do something wrong, authoritarians do not blame them.

High-RWAs tend to value lawfulness above human life, except when the law-breaker is one of their treasured authority figures. Altemeyer writes, "If you give them moral dilemmas (e.g. should one steal an absurdly expensive drug to save a life?) they're more likely to say, 'The law is the law and must be obeyed' than most people are." However, "they do not see laws as social standards that apply to all. Instead, they appear to think that authorities are above the law, and can decide which laws apply to them and which do not – just as parents can when one is young." They insist on showing more respect for "their fathers, the president of companies where they worked, and so on," than most people. When Altemeyer replicated the Milgram study, they were less likely to blame the person who actually ordered the shocks, rather "they blamed the poor devil who was ordered to deliver the shocks, and the victim, more than most others did."
Aggression

"High RWAs tend to feel more endangered in a potentially threatening situation than most people do, and often respond aggressively," writes Altemeyer. "They usually avoid anything approaching a fair fight. Instead they aggress when they believe right and might are on their side. 'Right' for them means, more than anything else, that their hostility is (in their minds) endorsed by established authority, or supports such authority. 'Might' means they have a huge physical advantage over their target, in weaponry say, or in numbers, as in a lynch mob. It's striking how often authoritarian aggression happens in dark and cowardly ways, in the dark, by cowards who later will do everything they possibly can to avoid responsibility for what they did. Women, children, and others unable to defend themselves are typical victims."

Authoritarians favor more severe punishments for those who break the law than most people. Why? "For one thing, they think the crimes involved are more serious than most people do, and they believe more in the beneficial effects of punishment," writes Altemeyer. And, "they admit it feels personally good, it makes them glad, to be able to punish a perpetrator." Altemeyer also notes that authoritarians "tend to strongly endorse capital punishment."

All of this "suggests authoritarian followers have a little volcano of hostility bubbling away inside them looking for a (safe, approved) way to erupt," an idea Altemeyer writes, "was supported by an experiment I ran in which subjects were

(supposedly) allowed to deliver electric shocks to someone trying to master a list of nonsense syllables. The subject/teacher could choose the level of shock for each mistake the learner made. Since the punishment was sanctioned by the experimenter, this opened the door for the authoritarian. The higher the subject's RWA scale score, the stronger the shocks delivered."

There are, however, two situations where authoritarian punitiveness is often mitigated. "Authoritarian followers usually would go easy on authorities who commit crimes," writes Altemeyer, "and they similarly make allowances for someone who attacks a victim the authoritarian is prejudiced against."

What makes authoritarians so aggressive? "[I]t turns out in experiments that a person's fear of a dangerous world predicts various kinds of authoritarian aggression better than any other unpleasant feeling I have looked at," Altemeyer writes. "High RWAs are, in general, more afraid than most people are." This may be due in part to the attitudes passed on to them by their primary authority figures: their parents. "[T]hey were raised by their parents to be afraid of others," writes Altemeyer, which he knows, "because both the parents and their children tell us so."

What enables high-RWAs to release their aggression without being troubled by their conscience? "[S]elf-righteousness appears to release authoritarian aggression more than anything else," writes Altemeyer.

Conventionalism

Authoritarian followers tend to believe that everyone should have to follow the norms and customs of the authorities they consider legitimate. "[I]f you ask subjects to rank the importance of various values in life, authoritarian followers place 'being normal' substantially higher than most people do."

More

Robert Altemeyer's *The Authoritarians* (along with Alice Miller's, "For Your Own Good," a book about which I hope to write later) helped lead me to atheism by providing a nuanced, accurate, and compelling description of a cluster of psychological predispositions that make fundamentalist religion irresistibly attractive to some personalities. I grew up with the people described in the pages of this book. They were my parents, Sunday school teachers, Christian school teachers, Christian camp counselors, and church-going associates. Their own descriptions of themselves (as simple, reasonable, humble, truth-seeking people driven by nothing more than love for their fellow human beings) lost power once I started looking at work like Altemeyer's that studied their behavior and attitudes in a scientific manner. When I first read this book in early 2007, before I reached the chapter where Altemeyer states, "The two traits, authoritarianism and fundamentalism, go together so well that nearly everything I have said about high RWAs in the previous chapters also applies to high Religious Fundamentalists," I had already easily made the connection myself, due to my personal familiarity with these people. After realizing fundamentalist Christians were either unaware of or in denial of some very powerful motivations for their beliefs, (beliefs that now looked to me like elaborate justifications for pre-existing attitudes, valuable more for their comforting effect than their truthfulness) I became much more skeptical of their claims. It would be a few years before I would arrive at the conclusion of atheism, however.

You can download Altemeyer's book for free at his website. I highly suggest reading the whole thing. But if you would like to read a list of some of his points on Right Wing Authoritarian followers that I found interesting, read on. Anything in quotation marks comes directly from the book.

"[T]he RWA scale and the Social Dominance scale do not 'tell us how authoritarian we are.' They only suggest how authoritarian we are inclined to be. Our behavior says how authoritarian we are."

"Prejudice has little to do with the groups it targets, and a lot to do with the personality of the holder."

"Authoritarian followers dislike so many kinds of people, I have called them 'equal opportunity bigots.'"

In a survey where respondents were asked how willing they would be to assist the authorities in rounding up members of a cult deemed illegal by the federal government, high-RWAs were more willing than most. They continued to be more willing when the targeted group was switched to Communists, homosexuals, political radicals, journalists, or the Ku Klux Klan. And shockingly, when Altemeyer (after explaining to the respondents what a high-RWA was) changed the scenario to make high-RWAs the group targeted by the government, they still continued to favor the law more than others!

Authoritarian followers tend not to develop their [omn] ideas, but copy them from others. This results in poor reasoning skills, as shown on tests where high-RWAs more often than others incorrectly identify syllogistic fallacies as sound so long as they agree with the conclusion.

"[R]esearch reveals that authoritarian followers drive through life under the influence of impaired thinking a lot more than most people do, exhibiting sloppy reasoning, highly compartmentalized beliefs, double standards, hypocrisy,

self-blindness, a profound ethnocentrism, and—to top it all off—a ferocious dogmatism that makes it unlikely anyone could ever change their minds with evidence or logic.”

“[H]igh RWAs indeed had more trouble remembering details of the material they’d encountered [in various memory and inference tests], and they made more incorrect inferences on a reasoning test than others usually did. Overall, the authoritarians had lots of trouble simply thinking straight.”

When high-RWAs were asked if they’d ever questioned the existence of god, and if so what they had done when this question arose, “Most of all, they prayed for enlightenment. Secondly, they talked to their friends who believed in God. Or they talked with their parents. Or they read scriptures. In other words, they seldom made a two-sided search of the issue. Basically they seem to have been seeking reassurance about the Divinity, not pro- and con- arguments about its existence—probably because they were terrified of the implications if there is no God.”

“[A]uthoritarians’ ideas are poorly integrated with one another. It’s as if each idea is stored in a file that can be called up and used when the authoritarian wishes, even though another of his ideas—stored in a different file—basically contradicts it. [...] The ideas were copied from trusted sources, often as sayings, but the authoritarian has never ‘merged files’ to see how well they all fit together.”

“[W]hen I asked students to write down, anonymously, their biggest faults, right-wing authoritarians wrote down fewer than others did, mainly because a lot of them said they had no big faults. When I asked students if there was anything they were reluctant to admit about themselves to themselves, high RWAs led everyone else in saying, no, they were completely honest with themselves.”

Despite their assumption of righteousness, when tested, high-RWAs were no more likely than others to report a clerical error that gave them a higher grade than they knew they deserved.

When given negative results (which were actually randomly assigned) in what they thought was a self-esteem test measuring potential for success in life, high-RWAs did not want to see evidence of the validity of the test. Only when they received positive results did they want to learn more about the test. This was not true of low-RWAs, who wanted to see the evidence either way.

High-RWAs associate mostly with people who have the same beliefs and opinions as they do, and thus have little idea how much they differ from others. “When I give feedback lectures to classes about my studies and describe right-wing authoritarians, it turns out the high RWAs in the room almost always think I am talking about someone else.”

“If you spend a lot of time around rather prejudiced people, you can easily think your own prejudices are normal.”

“Because authoritarians depend so much on their in-group to support their beliefs (whereas other people depend more on independent evidence and logic), high RWAs place a high premium on group loyalty and cohesiveness.”

“Authoritarian followers want to belong, and being part of their in-group means a lot to them. Loyalty to that group ranks among the highest virtues, and members of the group who question its leaders or beliefs can quickly be seen as traitors.”

Authoritarians rely on social support to maintain their ideas. They ignore the reasons someone might have for lying when they find those lies agreeable. They are only critical of the motives of others when they find their message disagreeable.

High-RWAs are dogmatic. “By dogmatism I mean relatively unchangeable, unjustified certainty.”

“It’s easy to see why authoritarian followers would be dogmatic, isn’t it? When you haven’t figured out your beliefs, but instead absorbed them from other people, you’re really in no position to defend them from attack. Simply put, you don’t know why the things you believe are true. Somebody else decided they were, and you’re taking their word for it. [...] [Y]ou don’t have to know anything to insist you’re right, no matter what. Dogmatism is by far the best fall-back defense, the most impregnable castle, that ignorance can find. It’s also a dead give-away that the person doesn’t know why he believes what he believes.”

“High RWAs are also slightly more likely to ‘blame the victim’ for misfortunes suffered. This is especially so when the victim has done something the authoritarian disapproves of (e.g., a young woman who is raped after going to a party sexily dressed, a young man who gets beaten after leaving a bar, a woman who is killed by her husband when she leaves him, seeks a divorce and starts dating another man). But it even shows up in some situations in which the victim was utterly blameless.”

Again, the list above focuses on the personality of the Authoritarian Follower, which is addressed in the first part

of the book. Altemeyer goes on to discuss many more interesting aspects of authoritarianism in great and enlightening detail. He investigates religious fundamentalism at length. He also looks at why people become authoritarians, suggesting that in addition to possible genetic factors influencing dominance and submission behaviors, the homogenous culture preferred by authoritarian followers prevents them from having too many experiences with outsiders that might call their dogma into question. He points to the work of George Lakoff in connecting a person's family background ("strict father morality" versus "nurturant parent") with that person's worldview and moral system. He also discusses Authoritarian Leaders, as well as Social Dominators. He includes a study on authoritarians in government, in which "Republicans scored almost 40 points higher than the Democrats on the average[.]"

And finally, he discusses what might be done to combat authoritarianism, including reducing fear, reducing ethnocentrism, teaching children not to automatically trust authorities, and educating people on the negative effects of authoritarianism.