

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313729864>

# Authoritarianism

Chapter · December 2017

DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-12-809324-5.05481-X

---

CITATION

1

---

READS

7,449

2 authors:



[Andreas Hadjar](#)

Université de Fribourg

202 PUBLICATIONS 3,069 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Klaus Boehnke](#)

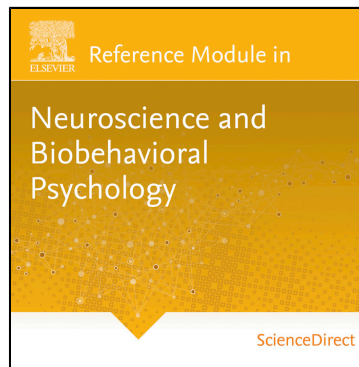
Constructor University

325 PUBLICATIONS 8,739 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

**Provided for non-commercial research and educational use.  
Not for reproduction, distribution or commercial use.**

This article was originally published in the online Reference Module in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Psychology, published by Elsevier, and the attached copy is provided by Elsevier for the author's benefit and for the benefit of the author's institution, for non-commercial research and educational use including without limitation use in instruction at your institution, sending it to specific colleagues who you know, and providing a copy to your institution's administrator.



All other uses, reproduction and distribution, including without limitation commercial reprints, selling or licensing copies or access, or posting on open internet sites, your personal or institution's website or repository, are prohibited. For exceptions, permission may be sought for such use through Elsevier's permissions site at:

<http://www.elsevier.com/locate/permissionusematerial>

From Hadjar, A., Boehnke, K., 2017. Authoritarianism. In: John Stein, J.S. (Ed.), Reference Module in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Psychology. Elsevier, pp. 1–6.

ISBN: 9780128093245

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Elsevier

## Authoritarianism<sup>☆</sup>

**Andreas Hadjar**, University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg  
**Klaus Boehnke**, Jacobs University Bremen, Bremen, Germany

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

<b>Authoritarianism: The Concept</b>	1
Historical Background	1
Concept of the Authoritarian Personality	2
Criticism	2
Contemporary Developments of the Authoritarianism Concept	3
Similar Contemporary Concepts	3
<b>Correlates of Authoritarianism</b>	3
Antecedents	3
Class, Socioeconomic Status, and Education	3
Family Socialization	4
Cross-cultural Differences	4
Consequences	5
<b>Treatment Approaches</b>	5
<b>References</b>	5
<b>Further Reading</b>	5

### Glossary

**Attitude** Persistent mental state of readiness to react to a certain object or class of objects in a certain way; learned disposition to behave in a consistent way toward a given class of objects.

**Disposition** Relatively long-lasting emotionally rooted attitude.

**Ethnocentrism** Tendency to divide the social world into groups with which one identifies and to which one submits (in-groups) and groups of outsiders (out-groups) to which one is hostile; characterized by glorification of the in-group and defamation of the out-group.

**Personality structure** Unit that underlies individual ways of behaving and gives consistency to otherwise contradictory-seeming mannerisms and behavioral or attitudinal specialties.

**Personality syndrome** Acquired pattern of personality characteristics bearing resemblance to the personality structures of others who shared similar experiences and problems and made similar adaptations.

**Xenophobia** Abnormal fear of strangers.

### Authoritarianism: The Concept

There is no concept in the social sciences that is more closely connected to the events in Germany and throughout the world in the 1930s and 1940s than the authoritarianism concept. For decades, this approach served as the main explanation of fascism and anti-democratic thoughts or action in psychology. Today it is used to explain a variety of social phenomena ranging from right-wing extremism and other authoritarian tendencies, as well as voting behavior to acts of political violence throughout the world.

#### Historical Background

Precursors of the authoritarianism concept can be traced back to the early and mid-1930s. At that time Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich studied voting behavior of Germans between 1929 and 1933 to find reasons for the increase in the number of voters for the fascist NSDAP party from less than 1 million to approximately 17 million voters during that period. Within his framework of thinking, he concluded that ideologies of subordination to authority were internalized by subordinate individuals and eventually became a stable personality structure. Some years later, researchers of the so-called Frankfurt School, such as Erich

<sup>☆</sup>*Change History:* May 2016. Andreas Hadjar and Klaus Boehnke made some changes to the text.

Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, carried out a study on “Authority and Family” and systematized the idea of an authoritarian personality structure that is strongly determined by the societal context. In the 1940s, members of the Frankfurt School, who were forced to leave Germany due to their Jewish and Marxist background, engaged in a much larger research project—partly supported by the American Jewish Committee—in their US exile. Influenced by their experience of racism and inhumanity in fascist Germany, the group around Adorno set out to uncover psychological forces that promote fascist and anti-democratic attitudes and to find possible ways to fight fascist tendencies in society. They used quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., questionnaire-based surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews). Individuals surveyed in the US-based studies were mainly students and members of the American middle class.

### Concept of the Authoritarian Personality

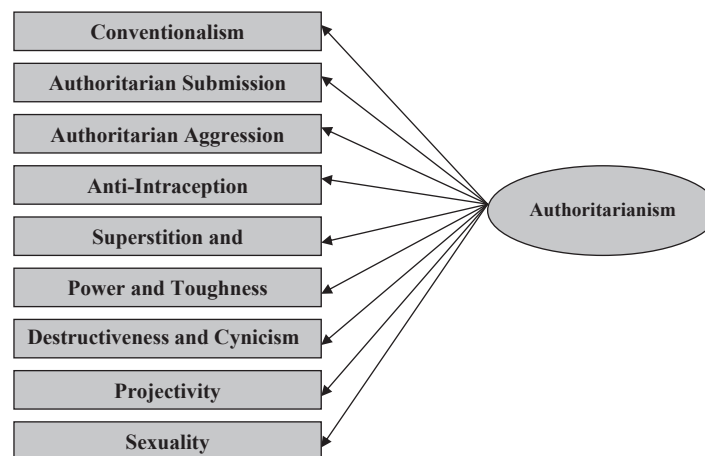
The main proposition of Adorno was that the political, economic, and social attitudes of an individual form a coherent structure of thought, which is an expression of an underlying, hidden personality structure. In accordance with Freudian psychodynamic theory, this personality structure is assumed to have developed during early childhood. Authoritarian relations within the family, an authoritarian parenting style, and a general lack of love and warmth determine it. Antidemocratic individuals often experience feelings of hatred against authorities—namely their father as the family’s bread winner—during their childhood. Because they never were able to express this hatred in any way against their father or their parents, they direct such feelings of hatred toward convenient scapegoats—inferiors and social minorities (e.g., immigrants/foreigners, homosexuals, or the handicapped)—later in life. Main characteristics of authoritarian personalities include a preoccupation with superiority and one-upmanship, an intolerance of behavior and objects that are different, a tendency to classify all things into black and white/right and wrong, a strict adherence to received views and prevailing social trends, and superficial respect for authority figures. Adorno et al. developed the so-called F-scale (fascism scale) to measure such an antidemocratic personality structure (Fig. 1).

The scale is constructed to measure a syndrome that comprises nine dimensions or subscales not always present simultaneously:

1. Conventionalism: rigid adherence to the conventional values of the middle class
2. Authoritarian submission: an uncritical and submissive attitude toward idealized in-group authorities
3. Authoritarian aggression: a tendency to look out for and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values
4. Anti-intracception: rejection of all inwardness, of the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded, and of self-criticism
5. Superstition and stereotypicality: the belief in mystical determinants of the individual’s fate, a disposition to think in rigid categories
6. Power and toughness: a preoccupation with the dimension of dominance–submission, strong–weak, leader–follower; identification with power figures; overemphasis on the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness
7. Destructiveness and cynicism: a generalized hostility and vilification of the human
8. Projectivity: to project unconscious emotional impulses onto the outside world and to believe that wild, evil, and dangerous things go on in the world
9. Sexuality: an exaggerated concern with sexual matters

### Criticism

The accomplishment of Adorno et al. was to create an insight into the phenomenon of an authoritarian personality. However, there are methodological and empirical limitations. One of the foremost points of criticism is that the theory attempts to explain societal



**Figure 1** The authoritarianism construct.

processes (Germany's turn to fascism) on the basis of knowledge about individual personality development. Another major criticism is that the authoritarianism concept and the F-scale questions appear highly ideological. This criticism is repudiated by a number of psychologists, including Gerda Lederer, who points out that F-scale items are related to moral and individual values, human relations, the self, family, and sexuality and are not at all ideological. At least the popular reception of the concept, however, is highly politicized. Particularly in the 1950s, it was used to characterize not only fascist but also communist movements. Yet other points of criticism are concerned with methodological problems of Adorno's empirical work, indicating, for instance, a sampling problem. Adorno generalized from a nonprobability sample that consisted of white middle-class Americans. Also, several studies showed problems with the construct validity of the F-scale, i.e., they doubt that the F-scale measures exactly what it intends to measure. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals in order to gain information on their parents' educational style were criticized as being more of a memory exercise than a pool of information about parental authoritarianism. Some studies replicating Adorno's work found no evidence to support the central findings, particularly on the impact of authoritarian socialization. One study even reports evidence for a positive relationship between authoritarianism and xenophilia. However, taking into account the multitude of existing studies, one can see the existence of the phenomenon authoritarian personality as confirmed.

### Contemporary Developments of the Authoritarianism Concept

A major scientific debate centers on the role of context for authoritarianism. While the psychodynamic foundations of the authoritarianism concept neglect social context—drawing special attention to early-childhood experiences and biological predisposition—contemporary authoritarianism research conceptualizes authoritarianism not only as a personality syndrome, but also as a response to situational conditions, that is, as being influenced by societal and individual conditions, threats and ideological climates. Accordingly, [Oesterreich \(2005\)](#) speaks of an "authoritarian reaction."

The initiator of the new research stream on authoritarianism is Robert Altemeyer. His approach leaves the theoretical basis of the Freudian psychodynamic theory behind and focuses on learning processes highlighting agents of socialization, such as family and peer group, and the context of society. In his work the so-called right-wing authoritarianism is influenced by situation or environment rather than just personality development. [Altemeyer \(1988\)](#) reduces the dimensions of authoritarianism to three: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism.

Another fruitful stream of contemporary authoritarianism research relates authoritarianism to threat and fear (e.g., [Duckitt, 2001](#)). Combining classical assumptions with the threat theory conceptualized by [Stephan and Stephan \(2000\)](#), authoritarianism appears to be a consequence of rapid social change perceived as individual or collective threat (e.g., unemployment, processes of culture change)—as outlined by [Rippl et al. \(2007\)](#).

Furthermore, in the 1980s and later, many social scientists attempted to develop new instruments to measure the authoritarian personality. Others tried to explore by qualitative research methods the conditions that lead to such a personality structure. Recently there have also been calls to reintegrate psychodynamic thinking into contemporary authoritarianism research ([Korniyeva and Boehnke, 2013](#)).

### Similar Contemporary Concepts

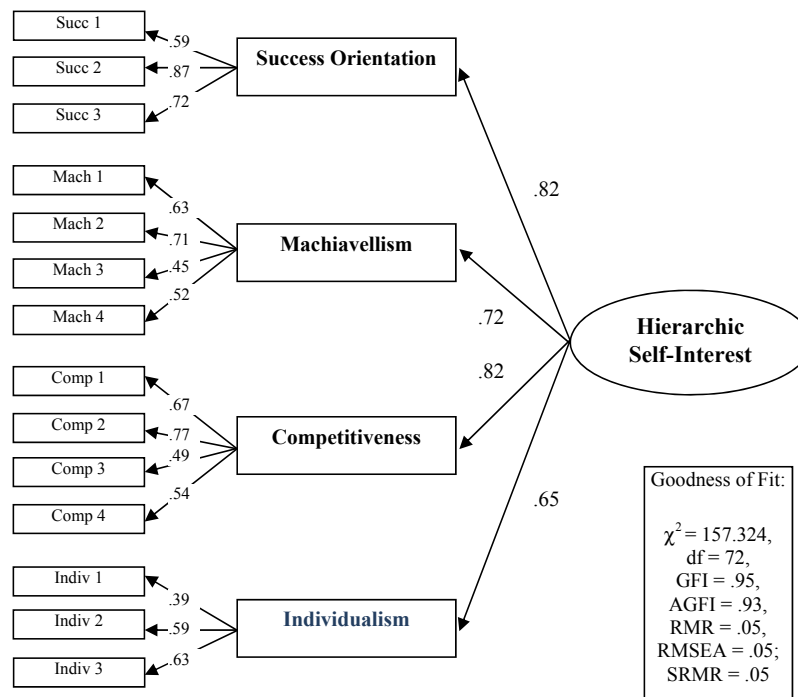
There are two contemporary competitors to the authoritarianism concept. During the past decade, [Sidanius and Pratto \(1999\)](#) studied what they call the social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO refers to fundamental values to accept social hierarchies. These values form a personality structure in the Freudian sense and determine so-called legitimizing myths, which are moral and intellectual justifications of individual or institutional discrimination. Whereas SDO still recognizes psychodynamic assumptions, the concept of hierarchic self-interest (HSI) is based on a paradigm of lifelong socialization in a market-oriented economy. HSI is an expression of the individual effort to perform "better than others" in a hierarchically structured society, an internalized elbow mentality, and it appears as a syndrome of values that comprises three core dimensions (success orientation, competitiveness, and individualism), as [Hagan et al. \(1998\)](#) showed in their youth studies. Since HSI is a syndrome and second-order construct (see [Fig. 2](#) for an example from empirical research), it is not ultimately determined but can be modified by integrating other first-order factors (e.g., Machiavellianism and acceptance of social inequality). HSI turned out to be a stable predictor of xenophobia. This finding is in a way paradoxical because market-oriented HSI values apparently lead—under the condition of increasingly limited resources—to a tendency of ethnocentric market restriction. Roots of HSI are seen in modes of workforce participation of men and women and parental styles so that high HSI values may be interpreted as expressions of familial or socioeconomic disintegration.

## Correlates of Authoritarianism

### Antecedents

#### *Class, Socioeconomic Status, and Education*

Empirical evidence suggests that authoritarianism is found among the lower classes to a higher degree than among the middle classes. Lipset assumes in his working class authoritarianism thesis that lower classes tend to have an authoritarian view on politics; therefore, they are more likely to support extremist movements that promise fast and simple solutions to social



**Figure 2** Hierarchic self-interest (structural model). Reproduced from Hadjar, A., 2004. *Ellenbogenmentalität und Fremdenfeindlichkeit bei Jugendlichen. Die Rolle des Hierarchischen Selbstinteresses (Elbow Mentality and Xenophobia Among Adolescents. The Role of Hierarchic Self-interest)*. VS, Wiesbaden, p. 219.

problems and that blame inferior scapegoats for the problems. This authoritarian view results from low education, the degree of isolation of the class, economic and psychological uncertainty, and the specific family life in lower classes. People originating from deprived classes have fewer resources to cope with threats. In regard to education, the lower authoritarianism of more highly-educated does not only relate to their specific economic (financial) resources, but also to higher cognitive skills in dealing with problems, reflection skills and their distinct socialization environments. Depending on the exact kind of authoritarianism scale that was used and how class was measured, results of empirical studies support this thesis, particularly the influence of education on authoritarianism. A higher level of education seems to be the decisive characteristic of non-authoritarian people.

### Family Socialization

Adorno et al. (1950) emphasize the role of the family for the development of the authoritarian personality. Other scientists studied the mechanisms that lie behind the relationship of socialization and authoritarianism in more detail. They suggested that the transmission of authoritarian attitudes from parents onto children depends heavily on the strength of social and emotional ties between parents and children. Central to an authoritarian socialization are parenting styles that encompass violence and do not recognize the needs of children. Authoritarian families usually are ruled by the father and do not allow children to participate in family decisions.

### Cross-cultural Differences

In dealing with the concept of authoritarianism, it must be discussed whether this concept applies only to the Western world or whether it is universal. Based on data from more than 100 countries, Meleon et al. (1988) show that there is a strong relationship between culture, attitudes, and politics. State authoritarianism is highly related to authoritarian attitudes among the citizens. These attitudes seem to result from a culture that is based on hierarchies and a traditional family structure. Comparisons of authoritarianism among adolescents in East and West Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall show very clearly that different socialization cultures lead to different degrees of authoritarianism: East German adolescents agreed with authoritarian statements more than West Germans did. However, scales to measure authoritarianism cannot be used throughout the world in the same way and the same composition. Words and contexts are interpreted differently in different cultures. Studies in Japan, for example, showed that authoritarian structures and authoritarian attitudes do exist but cannot be measured in terms of authoritarianism instruments that suit the US.

## Consequences

The best studied and most powerful relation is the one obtained for authoritarianism and ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is an attitude characterized by the glorification of one's own group (in-group) and the defamation and discrimination of other groups (out-group). Xenophobia, racism, and nationalism are other orientations similar to ethnocentrism. An authoritarian personality tends to be more ethnocentric. Under certain circumstances (situational factors), the just mentioned attitudes can lead to discrimination, violence, and hate crimes.

Authoritarianism is also connected to other attitudes, namely sexism, anti-Semitism, cognitive rigidity (dogmatism), and political and economic conservatism. Authoritarian personalities tend to devalue women, homosexuals, Jews, but also Muslims. They strongly support the market economic system and back conservative political movements. Authoritarianism also may explain oppression, chauvinism, and negative put-downs on the individual level and the level of society. Many of the empirical findings on consequences of authoritarianism may, however, rightly be accused of bearing an element of tautology because almost all consequences addressed could also be seen as elements of the authoritarian syndrome per se.

## Treatment Approaches

From knowledge about explanatory factors of authoritarianism, particularly socialization, a list of treatment measures can be derived. The founders of the Frankfurt School suggested enlightenment and an education fostering responsibility. That means making the mechanisms of society transparent to a broad audience. The psychologist Kurt Lewin (1948), who conducted several experiments on group conflict in small groups, pointed out that democratically acting group leaders are necessary to prevent authoritarianism. Group leaders as well as all other group members must be enabled to play their role in the democratic process. Authoritarian leadership styles must be replaced by consultative and participative leadership styles. To support this process of democratization, the democratic leader has to leave space for self-determination with clearly defined and reasoned borders to the group members rather than predetermining a more or less restricted space with rigid borders. Democratic skills cannot be passed on in a simple way; they must be learned and interactively developed in every generation, in all institutions of society, including the family, the school, and the workplace. Whereas a Freudian approach to authoritarianism would suggest that there is no treatment for authoritarian personalities in adulthood, from the perspective of lifelong socialization a remedy seems possible. To push back authoritarian tendencies in daily life settings, people's integration into groups (working groups, peer groups, and families) must be supported. People must be given participation opportunities in group decisions; rules, actions, and decisions shall be explained to them in a detailed and reasoned way; they shall be encouraged to look at themselves and others from different perspectives; and every kind of rigid discipline and physical or mental violence must be absent in dealing with people who tend to be authoritarian.

Considering the situational perspective, society needs to address certain threats and in particular its causes (e.g., unemployment, poverty, war, discrimination) to reduce authoritarianism. Providing people with equal opportunities to "produce" their well-being may be the best way to tackle authoritarian thinking.

## References

- Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D.J., Sanford, R.N., 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. Harper, New York.
- Altemeyer, B., 1988. *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Duckitt, J., 2001. A dual-process cognitive-motivational theory on ideology and prejudice. *Adv. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 33, 41–113.
- Hadjar, A., 2004. *Ellenbogenmentalität und Fremdenfeindlichkeit bei Jugendlichen. Die Rolle des Hierarchischen Selbstinteresses (Elbow Mentality and Xenophobia Among Adolescents. The Role of Hierarchic Self-interest)*. VS, Wiesbaden.
- Hagan, J., Hefler, G., Classen, G., Boehnke, K., Merckens, H., 1998. Subterranean sources of subcultural delinquency beyond the American Dream. *Criminology* 36, 309–342.
- Kornyeyeva, L., Boehnke, K., 2013. The role of self-acceptance in authoritarian personality formation: reintroducing a psychodynamic perspective into authoritarianism. *Res. Psychoanal. Psychol.* 30, 232–246.
- Lewin, K., 1948. *Resolving Social Conflicts*. Harper & Brothers, New York.
- Meleon, J.D., Hagendoorn, L., Raaijmakers, Q., Visser, L., 1988. Authoritarianism and the revival of political racism: reassessments in the Netherlands of the reliability and validity of the concept of authoritarianism by Adorno et al. *Polit. Psychol.* 9, 413–422.
- Oesterreich, D., 2005. Flight into security: a new approach and measure of the authoritarian personality. *Polit. Psychol.* 26, 275–298.
- Rippl, S., Baier, D., Boehnke, K., 2007. *Europa auf dem Weg nach Rechts?* VS, Wiesbaden.
- Sidanius, J., Pratto, F., 1999. *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Stephan, W.G., Stephan, C.W., 2000. An integrated threat theory of prejudice. In: Oskamp, S. (Ed.), *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination*. Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, pp. 23–46.

## Further Reading

- Brown, R., 1995. *Prejudice. Its Social Psychology*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Christie, R., Jahoda, M., 1954. *Studies in the Scope and Method of the Authoritarian Personality*. Free Press, Glencoe, IL.
- Martin, J.L., 2000. The authoritarian personality, 50 years later: what lessons are there for political psychology. *Polit. Psychol.* 22, 1–26.

Pettigrew, T.F., 1999. Placing authoritarianism in social context. *Polit. Groups Individ.* 8, 5–20.

Rippl, S., Seipel, C., Kindervater, A., 2000. Autoritarismus. Kontroversen und Ansätze der aktuellen Autoritarismusforschung (Authoritarianism: Controversies and Approaches of Contemporary Research on Authoritarianism). Leske & Budrich, Opladen.

Stellmacher, J., Petzel, T., 2005. Authoritarianism as a group phenomenon. *Polit. Psychol.* 26, 245–274.