

I

Introduction: The Authoritarian Dynamic

Some people will never live comfortably in a modern liberal democracy. How they got to be that way, what consequences it has for the rest of us, and the conditions under which we will feel those effects are the subjects of this book. This work focuses on a particular type of person: one who cannot treat with natural ease or generosity those who are not his own kindred or kind, who is inclined to believe only “right-thinking” people should be free to air their opinions, and who tends to see others’ moral choices as everybody’s business – indeed, the business of the state. It is about the kind of people who – by virtue of deep-seated predispositions neither they nor we have much capacity to alter – will always be imperfect democratic citizens, and only discouraged from infringing others’ rights and liberties by responsible leadership, the force of law, fortuitous societal conditions, and near-constant reassurance.

This is not a person peculiar to any particular society or era; readers everywhere will recognize this character among their ranks (Greenstein 1987). The only variation is in the designation of “us” and “them” (Tajfel and Turner 1979; 1986; Tajfel 1981; Moscovici 1984; Turner 1987), and of what counts as right and wrong. What remains constant is this familiar triad of racial, political, and moral intolerance: the tendency to glorify some “in-group” and to denigrate “out-groups” (Turner and Brown 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979; 1986; Tajfel 1981; Turner 1987), to venerate and privilege a set of ideas and practices, and to reward or punish others according to their conformity to this “normative order” (Stenner 1997). Across time and place, we find that those inclined to discriminate against members of other racial and ethnic groups also rush to protect the “common good” by “stamping out” offensive ideas and “cracking down” on misbehavior, and show unusual interest in making public policy about what other people might be up to in private. At the other end of this spectrum are those who interact eagerly and respectfully with all manner of people, who think the common good mostly a chimera best

The Authoritarian Dynamic

served by letting “a thousand flowers bloom,” and who cannot imagine being bothered about, let alone bothering lawmakers about, what others do behind closed doors. The rest of us fall somewhere in between: not openly averse to other peoples but usually favoring our own, uneasy about restricting what individuals may say but less so how and when and where they say it, generally wanting to keep private moral choices out of the public realm but at some point “drawing the line.”

The common content and the familiarity of this triad – the regularity with which these things “go together” in individuals – suggest the first and basic argument of this book. Individuals possess fairly stable predispositions to intolerance of difference, that is, varying levels of willingness to “put up with” differing people, ideas, and behaviors. Our attitudes toward minorities, immigrants, and foreigners could not be predicted from our views on dissidents, deviants, and criminals (and vice versa) if not for some relatively enduring predisposition to be intolerant of all manner of difference (Adorno et al. 1950; Allport 1954; Marcus et al. 1995).

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITARIANISM

The concept of a predisposition to intolerance is certainly not my invention. Across a half-century of scholarly research set in motion by the landmark *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950),¹ and invigorated recently by the careful contributions of Altemeyer (1981; 1988; 1996), such a predisposition to intolerance – widely labeled “authoritarianism” – has been acknowledged and delineated. In its original formulation, authoritarianism was understood as a personality syndrome of nine covarying traits, the surface expressions of an enduring psychodynamic conflict within the individual originating in rigid and punitive childrearing and involving the repression of hostility toward parental authority and its displacement onto societal out-groups: racial and ethnic minorities, political dissidents, and moral deviants.

This original formulation of the concept of authoritarianism has been subject to some serious theoretical and methodological critiques in the intervening years. On the theoretical front, the concerns include, most notably, the implausibility and nonfalsifiability of the Freudian account of its childhood origins (Altemeyer 1988); the inconsistent relationship between authoritarianism and childhood experiences (Christie and

¹ I would actually argue that the notion has roots that reach back prior to the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), at least as far as the seminal *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1941).

Introduction

Jahoda 1954; Altemeyer 1981; 1988); and the failure of this purported personality dimension to show consistent association either with general measures of personality and psychological adjustment such as neuroticism, anxiety, and self-esteem, or with interpersonal behavior (Titus and Hollander 1957; Ray 1976, 1981; Altemeyer 1981).² On the methodological front, the concerns include the dubious merits of some of the original research strategies (Hyman and Sheatsley 1954); the tautology between the F-scale measure of authoritarianism and the attitudes and behaviors it was meant to predict (Christie and Jahoda 1954); and the infamous “acquiescence response set” that may have produced spurious consistency within, and relationships between, unbalanced scales (Altemeyer 1981; Ray 1983).

These critiques are so well known that they do not bear repeating here (for fine early reviews of the major themes, see Christie and Jahoda 1954; Brown 1965; Kirscht and Dillehay 1967; for more recent reviews, see M. B. Smith 1997; Martin 2001). And yet there are few concepts in social science that have aroused more interest or generated a more voluminous literature. The idea that there is a readily recognizable disposition that *somehow* brings together certain traits – obedience to authority, moral absolutism and conformity, intolerance and punitiveness toward dissidents and deviants, animosity and aggression against racial and ethnic out-groups – remains widespread. This is true whether the disposition is conceived in the original Freudian formulation as a particular personality type originating in rigid and punitive childrearing (Adorno et al. 1950), or as a syndrome of attitudes produced by simple social learning (Altemeyer 1981; 1988; 1996). Since both personality and belief systems are typically measured by willingness to agree with certain attitude statements – understood as the surface manifestations of the underlying “disposition” or “syndrome” – scholars with widely varying notions of what authoritarianism *is* often agree on the broad contours of what it looks like and what it does (Adorno et al. 1950; Stouffer 1955; Rokeach 1960; Katz 1960; Lipset and Raab 1970; Greenstein 1987; Altemeyer 1988; Ray 1988; Duckitt 1989; Staub 1989).

Yet this theoretical permissiveness has been costly. When agreement with certain statements can signify anything from possession of an “authoritarian personality” to learned prejudice toward specific attitude objects, the waters are sufficiently murky that there are few falsifying outcomes to adjudicate between competing perspectives. And certainly we can think of many ways in which it does matter whether

² Here authoritarianism did show some association with measures of anxiety, but this result has not been consistently replicated.

The Authoritarian Dynamic

authoritarianism is a universal personality type or a pattern of cultural learning that could be “unlearned,” as when deciding whether exposure to difference might aggravate or educate, might intensify or diminish intolerance. Likewise, as it stands there is little incentive or capacity for scholars to distinguish between the sources of authoritarianism, the fundamental predisposition itself, and its attitudinal and behavioral “products.” And this matters, quite simply, because the different components behave differently, and are differently related under different conditions. When we are unclear what authoritarianism actually is, and whether the things we are measuring and associating are the predisposition itself, its causes, or its consequences, theoretical confusion and seemingly contradictory findings abound. Like blind men declaring different parts of the elephant to be the whole animal, scholars regularly fail to recognize that they have seized upon only one piece of the puzzle, and that their proclamations regarding the entire beast might be limited to that piece currently within their grasp.

Thus scholars might find that some variation in intolerance is accounted for by psychological factors and proclaim the existence of an authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950; see also Martin and Westie 1959; Martin 1964). Confusion then reigns when this “personality syndrome” appears to ebb and flow with the changing environment, as when behavioral manifestations of authoritarianism respond in the aggregate to shifting levels of societal threat (Sales 1972; 1973; Doty, Peterson and Winter 1991). As Sales and Friend (1973: 163–164) dryly note, the “notion that central personality traits . . . might change in response to changes in the contemporaneous environment is hardly a commonplace in current personality theorizing.” In much the same vein, readers already dubious that “individual differences” explain much of social interaction become confirmed in their skepticism when such differences fail to predict behavior consistently across different situations, since sometimes authoritarians behave like authoritarians but at other times are indistinguishable from the pack (Titus and Hollander 1957; Titus 1968; Ray 1976; Altemeyer 1981). Moreover, if personality is the whole thing, rather than a partial determinant of the thing, we are drawn to the unpalatable conclusion that differences across cultures (and subcultures) are a function simply of variations in “national character” and discount the reasonable alternative of differential social learning (see McFarland, Ageyev, and Abalakina 1993).

But neither can simple social learning (Altemeyer 1981; 1988; 1996) tell the whole story. Although cultures vary in their levels of subscription to certain ideas, there is an eerie cross-cultural sameness to the elements that end up being “marketed” together (Forbes 1985; Duckitt 1989;

Introduction

Staub 1989; Altemeyer 1996), while individuals within a culture vary in their attraction to those ideas (Adorno et al. 1950; Martin and Westie 1959; Martin 1964; Duckitt 1983; Forbes 1985; Altemeyer 1996). Again, without careful distinction among the causes, essential elements, and consequences of authoritarianism, we risk mistaking one component for another or for the whole, and deceiving or confusing ourselves regarding its nature and dynamics. So when a scholar finds associations between racial prejudice and political and moral intolerance, but lacks any functional notion of a common engine driving attitudes across these domains, little wonder he declares the covarying responses nothing more than a “syndrome” produced by social learning (Altemeyer 1981; 1988; 1996). But this leaves us with an authoritarian “attitude package” no more coherent or necessary than any other combination the agents of socialization might have reinforced, and varying among individuals not by virtue of the needs it might be serving for them, but simply in accordance with their exposure to the (sub)cultural message.

In sum, then, the surface consensus on what authoritarianism *looks like* sits atop unreconciled arguments and seemingly contradictory evidence regarding exactly what it is and where it comes from, what it does and when it does it, and, of course, how best to measure the thing. The latter issue has consumed an inordinate amount of scholarly attention. It is largely responsible for the archetypal instance of “throwing out the baby with the bathwater” in which the study of a predisposition that is acknowledged to be a grave threat to liberal democracy was all but abandoned due to concerns about the reliability and validity of the scale devised to measure it. Then, in a classic case of overcompensation, Altemeyer’s (1981; 1988; 1996) determined but empirically driven response to these concerns virtually made a fetish of scale reliability at the expense of providing a satisfactory account of the nature, origins, and mechanics of the predisposition itself. These, then, and especially the latter – figuring out the “dynamic” of authoritarianism, that is, the circumstances in which it is activated and deactivated and the varying “returns” of intolerance we reap in these different conditions – are the tasks to which I dedicate myself in this book.

Before continuing on to the second chapter and the development of my own argument, let me explain, first, the philosophy that inspired and animates this endeavor, and the nature of the data, methods, models, and literature the reader will confront in consequence. This understanding will be critical to the reader’s ability to follow the logic of the forthcoming empirical investigations and to evaluate their intellectual contributions. I will then close this introduction with an account of the organization of the book, outlining the major purpose and content of each of its chapters.

The Authoritarian Dynamic

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE BOOK

As I have made clear, I am certainly not the first to suggest that individuals possess varying predispositions to put up with differing people, ideas, and behaviors. Still, it may not appear much of a contribution even to generate (let alone to resuscitate) the notion that intolerance of difference is driven by a predisposition to intolerance of difference. So let me address this issue directly at the outset. It seems to me that even this first, apparently obvious notion merits a thoroughgoing revival and reexamination. Social scientists face endless tension between formulating general laws describing regularities in the behavior of a whole class and understanding in all its complexity the behavior of a particular case. We struggle always, both as individual scholars and within subfields and disciplines, to find the appropriate balance between theoretical generality and specificity. Of course, both have their place. But in research on intolerance, as in many other fields,³ it may be this pendulum has swung too much in favor of increasing specificity, such that we are missing valuable opportunities to illuminate regularities in human behavior across domains (racial, political, and moral), across cultures, and across time.

Thus, we may achieve a highly textured understanding of exactly why holocaust survivors in Skokie, Illinois, resisted attempts by Nazi sympathizers to march through their town in June of 1978 (Barnum 1982; Gibson and Bingham 1985). But we might miss the import of the facts that the residents varied widely in their resistance; that, in general, aversion to free speech is associated with sympathy for precisely the kind of views they were trying to suppress; and that the more vociferous opponents of the march may actually have had the most to gain from allowing it to proceed.

Likewise, we might develop a rich, highly specified account of white Americans' animosity toward those of African descent, one that references slavery's rise and demise in the United States (Frederickson 1971; Franklin and Moss 1988; M. M. Smith 1997) and the history of the civil rights movement (Woodward 1966; McAdam 1988; Chong 1991); how this animosity may be fueled by or expressed in terms of violation of core American values (Sniderman and Hagen 1985; Kinder 1986; McConahay 1986; Sears 1988; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Wellman 1993; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears, Sidanius and Bobo 2000); and how attitudes toward blacks – again, seemingly for reasons peculiar to the U.S. experience – have become inextricably linked with attitudes toward

³ See Bowser (1995) regarding the importance of cross-national studies in comparative research on racism.

Introduction

welfare and crime (Glaser 1996; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 1997; Gilens 1999; Mendelberg 2001). But in so finely tuning in to one nation's story of one manifestation of intolerance, we may miss the eerie echoes of what the Turks purported to dislike about the Armenians, what the Argentineans feared about the leftist dissidents, and how our Western European contemporaries talk about "guest workers" (see Lederer 1982; Staub 1989; Mendelberg 2001). Moreover, we know that white Americans incensed about blacks' purported welfare dependency and criminality generally can be relied upon also for complaints about Jews, homosexuals, and the ACLU (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Again, this suggests that Americans' tangled perceptions of race, crime, and welfare might have as much to do with the kinds of fears about disorder, "moral decay," and "the enemy within" that had the Nazis itching to "cleanse" the Weimar Republic of Jews, deviants, and dissidents as with anything peculiar to the American experience.

So we do not need theories packed with proper nouns to understand general patterns of behavior that have been observed since a variety of increasingly complex societies started worrying about whether and how their members would get along. I certainly do not intend to demean the value of highly specified accounts, which clearly have a vital place in our scholarly enterprise. I mean to suggest only that the ledger has become rather unbalanced, that such attention to names, dates, and places risks obscuring important regularities in human behavior that help all of us better understand our particular cases, and that there is much to be gained at this point by stepping out from among the trees and taking in a more expansive view of the forest.

DATA, METHODS, MODELS, AND LITERATURE: WHAT TO EXPECT

This, then, is the philosophy animating the current investigation, and it has a number of important consequences for my use of data, methods, models, and literature. First, many of the analyses presented consist of repeated tests – against data generated by different designs and instruments – of one simple but apparently powerful model. This model, which I have labeled the "authoritarian dynamic," essentially consists of just two explanatory variables and their interaction, that is, two major factors thought *in union* to produce manifest expressions of intolerance: authoritarian predisposition and conditions of threat (either naturally experienced, subjectively perceived, or experimentally manipulated).

As for the critical endogenous variables ultimately accounted for by these factors, they are simply overall measures of intolerance in various domains – racial, political, and moral intolerance and its corollary,

The Authoritarian Dynamic

punitiveness – and summary measures of general intolerance *across* the different domains. Thus the racial intolerance indices typically contain diverse items variously reflecting negative sentiments regarding blacks and, occasionally, affection for white supremacist movements or seemingly excessive in-group glorification. Likewise, the political intolerance scales might sum items tapping support for general principles of political tolerance, as well as for various “left-” and “right-wing” targets exercising specific political freedoms such as making speeches and holding rallies, teaching in public schools, and having literature in public libraries. The moral intolerance indices typically gauge a wide array of opinions regarding public regulation of private moral choices in matters such as school prayer, abortion, censorship, and prostitution, and perhaps feelings regarding homosexuals and/or opinions about their rights and protection. Summary measures of punitiveness might include attitudes toward the death penalty, opinions on whether courts deal harshly enough with criminals, and, occasionally, views on the appropriate balance between the rights of criminals and victims. And finally, overall indices of general intolerance are formed simply by averaging these four components of intolerance.

The point being made throughout is that a simple dynamic – a general mechanism consisting of just an enduring individual predisposition responding to changing conditions of threat – can account for a good deal of the variation within, and a great deal of the variation across, these different dimensions of intolerance. Thus to deem the analyses presented here “underspecified” – though surely true by the conventions of contemporary political psychology – would amount to holding the model to an inappropriate standard. The task of maximizing the “variance explained” within a certain domain is a vitally important part of our scholarly enterprise. But as noted, many others have dedicated themselves, and continue to dedicate themselves, to filling out the specifications with comprehensive accounts of all the ideas, interests, emotions, and conditions influencing particular expressions of intolerance.

Likewise, regarding the endogenous variables, one might lament my lack of distinction, say, between “traditional racism,”⁴ “racial resentment,”⁵ and “racial policy preferences” (McConahay 1986; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Kinder and Sanders 1996); between supporting political freedom in the abstract and in specific applications (McClosky and Zaller 1984; Chong 1993; Sniderman and Carmines 1997) to targets of varying ideology and character, exercising different kinds of liberties (Marcus

⁴ Alternately, “old-fashioned racism.”

⁵ Alternately labeled “modern” or “symbolic” racism (see McConahay 1986; Kinder 1986; Sears 1988; Kinder and Mendelberg 2000; Sears et al. 2000).

Introduction

et al. 1995); between sheer homophobia and policy preferences regarding public morality (Sniderman et al. 1989; Golebiowska 1996), and even there between opinions, say, on legalizing “discretionary” and “nondiscretionary” abortions (Alvarez and Brehm 1995). But again, this would be asking that I plough fields already well tended by others at the sure expense of illuminating intolerance in general. Ultimately, I trust that the gains in our understanding of intolerance of difference across domains, cultures, and time will be considered well worth the acknowledged sacrifices of comprehensiveness and specificity.

In the same spirit of universality, note that while I often rely on U.S. data to test my ideas and normally resort to U.S. examples to illustrate points, the theory is entirely general and the phenomenon persists cross-culturally, with little modification other than in the designation of “us” and “them” and (to a lesser extent) of what counts as right and wrong. Within cultures, too, though there will be peculiar varieties and manifestations of authoritarianism among subgroups of the population, the structure and character of the “system” remain the same. To isolate just a couple of examples from the contemporary U.S. experience, we can recognize Nation of Islam authoritarianism among African American men adhering to a particular strain of the Muslim faith transfused with ardent black nationalism, and “super-patriot” authoritarianism among whites believing our federal government to be the pawn in some “Zionist” plot to institute “One World Government.” Again, while there is variation in “us” and “them,” and some fungibility in regard to the content of right and wrong, authoritarianism exists in the fact that there *is* stark designation of friend and foe, and demand for absolute obedience to the rules and rulers of *some* normative order.

Finally, note that the same philosophy of generalization governs my treatment of the relevant literature, where I cite specific arguments and evidence regarding intolerance only if they highlight some substantial commonality of determinants or important regularity in behavior across domains, cultures, or time. Ultimately, this means that I mostly confine my references to literature explicitly dealing with the concept of authoritarianism. Even here, I will generally offer broad characterizations of the literature that highlight common themes, central arguments, reliable findings, persistent empirical puzzles, widely shared conclusions, and major disagreements. It has been said that authoritarianism is one of the most heavily cited concepts in all of social science (Van Ijzendoorn 1989;⁶ Altemeyer 1996). It would be impossible to deal fairly with the many participants in this long-running debate, to do justice to the finer

⁶ As of 1989, there were more than 1,200 studies on the subject (Van Ijzendoorn 1989).

The Authoritarian Dynamic

points of their arguments, and to consider all the details of the evidence while still leaving time, space, and energy to achieve the larger goals I have described. Fortunately, there are already some fine, comprehensive reviews of the authoritarianism literature to which the reader can refer for more detail (Christie and Jahoda 1954; Altemeyer 1981; 1988; 1996).

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Let me close this introduction now with an account of the organization of the book, outlining the major purpose and content of each of its chapters. I intended with this first chapter simply to introduce the general notion of a predisposition to intolerance of difference, to acquaint readers with the concept of authoritarianism and its major theoretical disputes and empirical puzzles, and to explain the philosophy of my own endeavors so as to suggest what the reader can expect to encounter and how these efforts might be evaluated. In Chapter 2, I develop my own argument regarding what I have termed the “authoritarian dynamic.” I distinguish between the fundamental predisposition, its manifold sources, and its attitudinal and behavioral “products,” while specifying the conditions of “normative threat” (Stenner 1997) under which the predisposition will yield these manifest expressions of intolerance. I then expand these ideas into a more general notion of normative threat increasing “constraint” (Converse 1964) across the entire intolerance domain.

Chapter 3 attends to the necessary business of describing and explaining the virtues of the three original data collections – one survey and two experiments – that provide the bulk of the evidence for the empirical investigations reported throughout. Chapter 4 then launches the first of those investigations: a kind of “snapshot” of the entire argument. Here I employ both survey and experimental data to show how the concept of the authoritarian dynamic – in which the activation of the predisposition and its impact on intolerance depend upon conditions of normative threat – manages both to reconcile the extant theories and to expose as only *seemingly* contradictory the empirical “puzzles” described in Chapters 1 and 2. Following these initial demonstrations of the behavior of the authoritarian dynamic, I return to the theoretical discussion, endeavoring to anticipate and address likely misconceptions of the theory. I then demonstrate the over-time stability of authoritarianism relative to political conservatism and party identification, and show how that stability increases (just as does the *impact* of authoritarianism) in conditions of normative threat. This last investigation broaches the notion (then