Chasing the Elusive Left-Wing Authoritarian: An Examination of Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Left-Wing Authoritarianism Scales

Arlin James Benjamin, Jr. University of Arkansas-Fort Smith

Abstract

The present research attempts to replicate and extend Altemeyer's (1996) research on left-wing authoritarianism. Two hundred and twenty participants completed the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Altemeyer, 1996), Left Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Altemeyer, 1996) Attitudes Toward Violence Scale (ATVS; Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, & Bonacci, 2006), the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984), and the Consideration for Future Consequences Scale (Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). The results largely replicated Altemeyer's (1996) research. The results showed no evidence of high scorers on the LWA Scale. Furthermore, the results confirmed Altemeyer's typology of authoritarian styles, demonstrating that right-wingers and wild-card authoritarians tend to score higher on measures of authoritarian aggression and lower on at least one measure of epistemic closure relative to non-authoritarians and left-wingers.

Chasing the Elusive Left-Wing Authoritarian: An Examination of Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Left-Wing Authoritarianism Scales

Research on authoritarianism now spans over a half century. Much of that research has concentrated on what is characterized as right-wing authoritarianism (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996, 1998, 2003; Rokeach, 1960). Although much has been written about right-wing authoritarianism, relatively little attention has been given to the existence of left-wing authoritarianism. Ray (1979, 1983, 1985), for example has argued that half of all authoritarians as measured by the Fascism (F) Scale (Adorno et al., 1950) are leftists. Ray's empirical work (1979, 1985) suggests that the F Scale is orthogonal to political ideology. Subsequently, Altemeyer (1996) devised a scale to measure left-wing authoritarianism. Altemeyer's research showed some differences among high scorers on his right-wing (RWA) and left-wing (LWA) authoritarianism scales. The most notable difference was that the highest scorers on the LWA scale only moderately endorsed LWA items, whereas the highest scorers on the RWA scale tended to completely endorse LWA items. Further data analyses by Altemeyer showed that RWA and LWA appear to be independent constructs, and that individuals do possess varying degrees of both RWA and LWA inclinations.

The present study will further examine both RWA and LWA in terms of their relationship with attitudes toward authoritarian aggression and rigidity of thought. We will begin by first defining RWA and LWA, and then examine authoritarian aggression as measured by the Attitudes Toward Violence Scale (ATVS; Anderson, Benjamin, Wood, and Bonacci, 2006), and epistemic closure as measured by the Need for Cognition Scale (NFC; Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao, 1984) and the Consideration for Future Consequences Scale (CFC; Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) is characterized by a number of traits (see Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996, and 1998 for more details):

1. Conventionalism: Authoritarians show a tendency to go along with the prevailing societal norms, especially those norms sanctioned by authority figures in the home, church, etc. Conventionalism can be

also manifest itself in terms of hostile attitudes toward foreigners (McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina, 1993) and members of different ethnicity (e.g., Rubenstein, 1996).

- 2. Authoritarian Submission: Authoritarians show a tendency to essentially do what they are told without question, as long as it's sanctioned by an authority figure. Right-wing authoritarians will readily submit not only to authority figures who they like and respect, but also to those whom they do not like.
- 3. Authoritarian Aggression: Authoritarians are no more or less prone to aggression and violence than the rest of us. However, Altemeyer (1981) has shown that high RWAs tend to be more punitive (i.e., deliver higher shock levels) than individuals who are low RWA in a modified version of Milgram's (1965) teacher-learner experiment. In a series of global simulation game studies, Altemeyer (1996, 2003) showed that high RWAs are more prone to threaten war and initiate wars compared to low RWAs. Similarly, Altemeyer (1988, 1996) has found that high RWAs tend to hold favorable attitudes toward vigilante behavior. High RWAs are hence more likely to resort to extreme punitive measures in order to maintain the perception that they are preserving their way of life (Altemeyer, 1988).
- 4. *Epistemic Closure*. Right-wing authoritarians are not known for their cognitive complexity. Right-wing authoritarians, according to Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996) tend to see the world in black and white, in terms of absolutes. They are not generally interested in looking for the nuances in an argument, or for handling the ambiguities that characterize life in a diverse democratic republic. *Left Wing Authoritarianism*

An interesting theoretical and empirical question regards the potential for authoritarian tendencies to exist among individuals in left-wing movements and states. The strongly authoritarian tendencies that characterized the leadership of Stalinist Soviet Union during the mid 20th century are well documented (e.g., Arendt, 1968). In the US and Western Europe, during the late 1960s through 1980s there is evidence of previously devout communist revolutionaries transforming their rhetoric to what has been characterized as an authoritarian neoconservative position (see, e.g., Seymour, 2008). In one of the more extreme cases, a former Red Army Faction member, Horst Mahler, became a notorious neo-Nazi a number of years after his ouster from the group (Smith & Moncourt, 2009).

Indeed, a number of psychologists have argued that authoritarianism has been endemic in both fascist and socialist societies (e.g., McCloskey & Chong, 1985; Ray, 1979, 1983; Shils, 1954). The work of these investigators has often been challenged on theoretical or methodological grounds (Stone & Smith, 1993). For example, Shils (1954) and McCloskey and Chong (1985) appear to confound authoritarian personality with authoritarian governments. Similarly, Ray has often been accused of showing a lack of theoretical analysis in his own writings, and of misinterpreting the results of his own research (Stone, 1993).

In the 1990s, Altemeyer (1996) attempted to place the study of left-wing authoritarianism on more solid theoretical and empirical footing by developing a scale to measure LWA, based on fairly similar dimensions as his RWA scale. Recall that the RWA scale was defined by three dimensions: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. The definition of LWA is also based on three dimensions, but with a twist: authoritarian submission to those dedicated to overthrowing the establishment, authoritarian aggression against perceived established authorities, as long as it's advocated by revolutionary authorities; and conventionalism in terms of strongly adhering to the norms of behavior endorsed by revolutionary authorities. In other words, high LWAs should differ from high RWAs only in the sense that they subscribe to different authorities. If a leader of a revolutionary organization's cell makes a command, a high LWA should in theory be prone to obey that order. If the revolutionary leaders advocate vandalism or bombings of targeted buildings, a high LWA should be more prone, in theory, to follow through with such actions. If the revolutionary leaders wear combat fatigues, black armbands, and berets, a high LWA should do likewise—again, in theory.

Altemeyer's (1996) own research didn't quite square with the theory postulated above, with nobody in his sample scoring above the moderate point on the LWA scale. However, in the process of comparing LWA and RWA scores, Altemeyer (1996) found four combinations of individuals:

1. *Non-authoritarians*: Non-authoritarians are individuals who score low on both the RWA and LWA scales. These are individuals who show no tendencies toward conventionalism, authoritarian submission,

or authoritarian aggression. On measures of cognitive complexity, they should score relatively highly. As Altemeyer (1996, p. 223) characterizes them, they tend to be "against forcing conventions upon anyone, whether society's or those of a revolutionary movement."

- 2. Left-wingers: Left-wingers are individuals who score relatively higher on the LWA scale than others, and who score low on the RWA scale. However, their LWA scores remain only in the moderate range. Psychologically, these individuals show only a moderate amount of adherence to the norms of leftist authorities, submission to leftist authority figures, and no inclinations toward aggression sanctioned by leftist authority figures.
- 3. *Right-wingers*: These are people who score high on the RWA scale and low on the LWA scale. These are the standard right-wing authoritarians as described by Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996): highly conventional, submissive to established authority figures, favorable toward aggression sanctioned by established authority figures, and who are low in cognitive complexity.
- 4. Wild-card authoritarians: These are individuals who tend to be relatively high scorers on both the LWA scale and the RWA scale. One might characterize them, then as people who seem to believe in submission, aggression, and conventionalism per se, would probably ordinarily support the established order, but would be willing to overthrow that established order if they perceived it to be corrupt or evil. Summary and hypotheses

Although theoretically, it is possible to define and measure the psychological characteristics of leftwing authoritarianism, doing so in practice has so far proved elusive. The present study will focus on the relationship between RWA and LWA to authoritarian aggression (as measured by ATVS) and cognitive complexity (as measured by NFC and CFC). If RWA and LWA are psychologically similar, higher scores on both scales should be associated with higher scores on the ATVS, and lower scores on measures of cognitive complexity (NFC, CFC). If there are left-wing authoritarians, the maximum scores on the RWA and LWA scales should be similar. However, if Altemeyer (1996) is correct, the maximum score on the RWA scale should be higher than for the LWA scale. Furthermore, given previous research (e.g., Benjamin, 2006) there should be positive correlations between RWA and various attitudes toward violence (e.g., war, corporal punishment) and a negative correlation between RWA and cognitive complexity (i.e., NFC, CFC). However, if Altemeyer (1996) is correct, the pattern of correlations obtained between LWA and attitudes toward violence, as well as between LWA and need for cognition and consideration of future consequences should be opposite of the pattern obtained for RWA. Finally, Altemeyer's (1996) four authoritarianism styles will be compared in terms of attitudes toward violence, need for cognition and consideration for future consequences. Right-wingers and wild-card authoritarians should score significantly higher on attitudes toward violence and significantly lower on NFC and CFC relative to left-wingers and non-authoritarians.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty students (139 female, 79 male, and 2 unspecified) at Oklahoma Panhandle State University participated in answering the present study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 59 (M = 23.36, SD = 6.74). The ethnic makeup of the sample included 161 Caucasian, 22 Hispanic, and 37 who designated themselves as "Other".

Materials

A booklet of questionnaires was assembled for the present study. Included were the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA; Altemeyer, 1996), the Left Wing Authoritarian Scale (LWA; Altemeyer, 1996), The Attitudes Toward Violence Scale (ATVS; Anderson et al, 2006), the short form of the Need for Cognition Scale (NFC; Caccioppo, et al., 1984), and the Consideration for Future Consequences Scale (CFC; Strathman, et al., 1994).

Items in the RWA measure conventionalism, submission to authority, and authoritarian aggression (e.g., "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn."; "Laws have to be strictly enforced if we are going to preserve our way of life."). Higher scores on the RWA indicate greater acceptance of authoritarianism. Similarly, items in the LWA measure the extent to which individuals favor conventionalism, submission, and authoritarian aggression in the context of leftist or

revolutionary groups (e.g., "A leftist revolutionary movement is quite justified in attacking the Establishment, and in demanding obedience and conformity from its members." ;"We should devotedly follow determined leaders who will fight the Establishment."; "The members of the Establishment deserve to be dealt with harshly, without mercy, when they are finally overthrown."). Higher LWA scores indicate a greater acceptance of left-wing authoritarianism. ATVS items tap attitudes toward war (e.g., "Killing of civilians should be accepted as an unavoidable part of war."), penal code violence (e.g., "Any prisoner deserves to be mistreated by other prisoners in jail."), corporal punishment (e.g., "Children should be spanked for temper tantrums."), and intimate violence (e.g., "The dominant partner should keep control by using violence."). Higher scores on each of the ATVS sub-scales indicate more favorable attitudes toward violence. The NFC measures the degree to which individuals enjoy cognitively demanding and complex tasks (e.g., "I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems."). Higher NFC scores indicate greater cognitive complexity. The CFC measures the extent to which individuals think about the future consequences of their actions (e.g., "I consider how things might be in the future, and try to influence those things with my day to day behavior."). Higher CFC scores also indicate a higher degree of cognitive complexity. All items were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale, (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). For each questionnaire, items were summed and averaged.

Procedure

Consent forms were distributed to and completed by all participants. Participants then received the questionnaire booklet, and proceeded to complete the aforementioned questionnaires. The approximate time taken for the entire process was one hour, and the participants were debriefed and thanked afterwards.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the correlations between the RWA and LWA scales and the four ATVS sub-scales (War, Penal Code, Corporal Punishment, and Intimate Violence), Need for Cognition Scale, and the Consideration for Future Consequences Scale. The RWA was positively correlated with attitudes toward war, penal code violence, and corporal punishment, and negatively correlated with need for cognition and consideration for future consequences. The LWA was negatively correlated with attitudes toward war, need for cognition, and consideration for future consequences. There was also a significant positive correlation between LWA and the Intimate Violence sub-scale on the ATVS.

Consistent with Altemeyer (1996), the current sample shows a considerably more limited range of scores on the LWA compared to the range of scores found on the RWA. The maximum LWA score was 4.41, whereas the maximum RWA score was 6.15.

To further explore the data set, we examined the top and bottom quartiles of scores for both RWA and LWA scales, and categorized participants as follows (see Altemeyer, 1996): non-authoritarians (low RWA, low LWA), left-wingers (low RWA, high LWA), right-wingers (high RWA, low LWA), and wildcard authoritarians (high RWA, high LWA). This categorization of authoritarianism style was used as a predictor of scores on the following variables: attitudes toward war, penal code violence, corporal punishment, and intimate violence; and need for cognition. Analyses of variance revealed several significant effects. Authoritarianism style had a significant on attitudes toward war, F(3, 62) = 8.28, p <.001. A post hoc analysis of the means using Tukey's HSD test showed that left-wingers had significantly less favorable attitudes toward war than right-wingers and wild-card authoritarians, and that nonauthoritarians had significantly less favorable attitudes toward war than right-wingers. Authoritarianism style had a significant effect on attitudes toward penal code violence, F(3, 62) = 2.83, p < .05. A post hoc analysis of the means using Tukey's HSD test showed no significant differences between the individual authoritarianism styles, however. Authoritarianism style had a significant on attitudes toward corporal punishment, F(3, 62) = 8.59, p < .001. A post hoc analysis of the means using Tukey's HSD test showed that wild-card authoritarians and right-wingers had significantly more favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment than non-authoritarians, and left-wingers. Finally, authoritarianism style had a significant on need for cognition scores, F(3, 62) = 3.62, p < .02. A post hoc analysis of the means using Tukey's HSD test showed that non-authoritarians demonstrated higher need for cognition than wild-card authoritarians.

Authoritarianism style had marginally significant effect on attitudes toward intimate violence, F(3, 62) = 2.62, p = .06; and on consideration for future consequences, F(3, 62) = 2.42, p = .07. Means and standard deviations for these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

The results largely confirmed the hypotheses. First, the correlations between RWA and attitudes toward violence replicated those found previously by Benjamin (2006). In addition, the findings showed significant negative relationships between RWA and need for cognition, and consideration of future consequences.

Second, much as was the case with Altemeyer's (1996) findings, the most authoritarian left-wingers score only moderately on the LWA. Furthermore, the results indicated that although both right-wing and left-wing authoritarians show similar rigidity of thought (e.g., low need for cognition), they take different stands on attitudes towards various forms of authoritarian aggression and violence. For example, although there is a strong positive correlation between RWA and attitudes toward war, there is a weaker but negative correlation between LWA and attitudes toward war. Similarly, we find that whereas high RWA individuals hold highly favorable attitudes toward violence against prisoners (e.g., Benjamin, 2006), high LWA individuals tend to oppose such punitive treatment. The one exception appears to be a significant positive relationship between LWA and attitudes toward intimate violence (see below for a potential explanation for that anomalous finding). In general, right-wingers and left-wingers may very well operate from different sets of cognitive schemas or frames (see, e.g., Lakoff, 2002) when it comes to their acceptance toward violence.

Perhaps more significant was the replication and extension of Altemeyer's four types of authoritarians. As in Altemeyer's research (1996), participants in the current data were divided into non-authoritarians (low RWA, low LWA), left-wingers (low RWA, moderate LWA), right-wingers (high RWA, low LWA), and wild card authoritarians (high RWA, moderate LWA). The data showed that authoritarianism type predicted attitudes toward war, corporal punishment, and violent treatment of penal code offenders, as well as need for cognition. Wild-card authoritarians and right-wingers consistently held the most favorable attitudes toward war, corporal punishment, and violent treatment of penal code offenders. In terms of need for cognition, non-authoritarians had the highest NFC scores, whereas wild-card authoritarians had the lowest NFC scores.

One of the more puzzling findings from the correlational data was the positive relationship between LWA and attitudes toward intimate violence. When the sample was divided into the four authoritarianism styles, it became clear that on intimate violence, wild-card authoritarians (that is those who scored moderate on LWA and high on RWA) showed the most favorable attitudes, whereas those falling within the other three authoritarianism styles showed an equivalent aversion to such violence. Why wild-card authoritarians would show less aversion to intimate violence cannot be gleaned from the current data, but would clearly merit further investigation.

Of course it is worth bearing in mind that the present study, like Altemeyer's (1996) research on LWA, conducted on predominantly white, North American university students, and may or may not be generalizable to non-student populations. Further investigations should examine samples that are more ethnically and culturally diverse, and in non-college and university settings. That said, the present study does lend tentative support for Altemeyer's earlier observation that left-wing authoritarians as commonly conceptualized (i.e., as equivalent to right-wing authoritarians, differing only in ideology) appear to be non-existent. At bare minimum, it would appear that either the construct needs to be abandoned, or its measurement reconceptualized. Contrary to Altemeyer's (1996) approach to authoritarianism, a reconceptualized measure of LWA would most probably be somewhat asymmetrical to how RWA is measured.

Author Note

The author would like to thank Marijo McKinley for her assistance in data collection and data entry.

Correspondence regarding this research may be addressed to Arlin James Benjamin, Jr., Department of Behavioral Sciences, University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, 5210 Grand Avenue, PO Box 3649, Fort Smith,

AR, 72913-3649; email: james.benjamin@uafs.edu. A portion of this research was presented at the National Social Science Association annual conference in Las Vegas, NV.

References

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, W., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Altemeyer, B. (1981). Right-wing authoritarianism. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Altemeyer, B. (1988). *Enemies of freedom: Understanding right-wing authoritarianism.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Altemeyer, B. (1996). The authoritarian specter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Altemeyer, B. (1998). The other 'authoritarian personality.' In M. Zanna (Ed.) *Advances in experimental social psychology* (vol. 30, pp. 47-92). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Altemeyer, B. (2003). What happens when authoritarians inherit the earth? A simulation. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 3,* 161-169.
- Anderson, C. A., Benjamin, A. J., Jr., Wood, P. K., & Bonacci, A. M. (2006). Development and testing of the attitudes toward violence scale: Evidence for a four-factor model. *Aggressive Behavior*, *32*, 122-136.
- Arendt, H. (1968). The origins of totalitarianism. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Bandura, A. (1973). Aggression: A social learning analysis. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Benjamin, A. J., Jr. (2006). The relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and attitudes toward violence: Further validation of the Attitudes Toward Violence Scale. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *34*, 923-926.
- Cacioppo, J. T., & Petty, R. E. (1982). The need for cognition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 116-131.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Petty, R. E., & Kao, C. F. (1984). The efficient assessment of need for cognition. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 306-307.
- Lakoff, G. (2002). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCloskey, H., & Chong, D. (1985). Similarities and differences between left-wing and right-wing radicals. *British Journal of Political Science*, 121, 149-157.
- McFarland, S., Ageyev, V., & Abalakina, M. (1993). The authoritarian personality in the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R.: Comparative studies. In W. F. Stone, G. Lederer, & R. Christie (Eds.), *Strengths and weaknesses: The authoritarian personality today*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- McGregor, H. A., Lieberman, J. D., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Simon, L., Arndt, J., & Pyszczysnski, T. (1998). Terror management and aggression: Evidence that mortality salience motivates aggression against worldview-threatening others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 590-605.
- Milgram, S. (1965). Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority. *Human Relations*, 18, 57-76.
- Ray, J. J. (1979). Does authoritarianism of personality go with conservatism? *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 31, 9-14.
- Ray, J.J. (1983). Half of all authoritarians are Left-wing: A reply to Eysenck and Stone. *Political Psychology*, *4*, 139-144.
- Ray, J.J. (1985) Authoritarianism of the Left revisited. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 6, 271-272. Rokeach, M. (1960). *The open and closed mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rubinstein, G. (1996). Two peoples in one land: A validation study of Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale in the Palestinian and Jewish societies in Israel. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 27, 216-230.
- Seymour, R. (2008). The liberal defence of murder. London: Verso.
- Shils, E. A. (1954). Authoritarianism: "Right" and "left". In R. Christie & M. Jahoda (Eds.), *Studies in the scope and method of "The Authoritarian Personality."* Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

- Smith, J., & Moncourt, A. (2009). *The Red Army Faction: A documentary history volume 1: Projectiles for the people*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Stone, W. F. (1993). Psychodynamics, cognitive functioning, or group orientation: Research and theory in the 1980s. In W. F. Stone, G. Lederer, & R. Christie (Eds.), *Strengths and weaknesses: The authoritarian personality today*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Stone, W. F., & Smith, L. D. (1993). Authoritarianism left and right. In W. F. Stone, G. Lederer, & R. Christie (Eds.), *Strengths and weaknesses: The authoritarian personality today*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Strathman, A., Gleicher, F., Boninger, D. S., & Edwards, C. S. (1994). The consideration of future consequences: Weighing immediate and distant outcomes of behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 742-752.

Table 1 Correlations Between RWA and LWA Scales and Attitudes Toward Violensce, Need for Cognition, and Consideration for Future Consequences

	Right Wing Authoritarianism	Left Wing Authoritarianism
ATVS: War	.34 ***	16 *
ATVS: Penal	.21 **	09
ATVS: Corporal	.35 ***	.03
ATVS: Intimate	.07	.18 **
Need for Cognition	28 ***	20 *
Consideration for Future Consequences	15 *	16 *

^{*} p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 2 Attitudes Toward Violence, Need for Cognition, and Consideration for Future Consequences as a Function of Authoritarianism Style

	Non	Left-Wingers	Right-Wing	Wildcard
	Authoritarians		Authoritarians	Authoritarians
ATVS: War	3.77 (0.95)	2.87 (1.20)	4.73 (0.96)	4.47 (1.20)
ATVS: Penal	3.48 (1.10)	3.34 (0.94)	4.43 (0.94)	4.05 (1.68)
ATVS: Corporal	2.26 (0.84)	2.17 (0.80)	3.51 (1.57)	4.15 (1.74)
ATVS: Intimate	1.19 (0.29)	1.33 (0.41)	1.24 (0.44)	1.92 (1.62)
NFC	4.75 (0.69)	4.44 (0.64)	4.31 (0.92)	3.98 (0.53)
CFC	4.94 (0.69)	4.64 (0.79)	4.95 (0.66)	4.39 (0.78)