

The authoritarian personality

The Authoritarian Personality is the name of an influential book written by **Theodor W. Adorno** and colleagues (1950). The book aimed to explain the conditions that allowed the fascist, Nazi movement to gain power in Europe. It described the **research study** on which the theory was based and explained the **authoritarian personality type**.

Authoritarian personality type

Individuals with an authoritarian personality type tend to treat authority figures with unquestioning obedience. They are hostile to people of inferior status but obedient to people of higher status and are rigid in their beliefs, strictly upholding conventions. It is argued that this type of personality is the result of strict and rigid parenting.

The fascist (F) scale

Fascism is an authoritarian political ideology. Fascist countries normally have a dictator (for example, Hitler in Nazi Germany), a strong belief in a social hierarchy and suppress individual interests for the perceived good of the nation or group of people.

Adorno devised the **F-scale personality test** to determine if someone has an authoritarian (fascist) personality. The F-scale test contained statements, such as:

- Rules are there for people to follow, not change.
- Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.

For each statement, respondents rated their disagreement/agreement on a 6-point scale, from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly).

Criticisms

The F-scale has serious flaws. For example, it is possible to get a high score by selecting responses in agreement. If someone tends to respond agreeably most of the time, they would be rated as authoritarian.

The authoritarian personality explanation is also politically biased by focusing on right-wing authoritarianism and ignoring left-wing authoritarianism, such as Chinese Maoism. It therefore does not take into account the full spectrum of political beliefs.

The research study

Adorno et al.'s research study aimed to test if certain personality types are more obedient than others.

Procedures

In the study, 2,000 middle-class Americans were tested using several measurement scales, including the F-scale (see left), to assess the authoritarian personality.

The highest-scoring participants were deemed to have the most authoritarian personality. These participants were then interviewed in more depth to investigate factors that may have given rise to their personality type. The interviews were coded using content analysis.

Findings

Adorno et al. found that people scoring highest on the F-scale had very conventional, rigid and stereotypical thinking. This 'black and white' thinking meant, for example, that the high scorers perceived no 'fuzziness' between categories of people.

Those high on the F-scale also had fixed views about other groups of people. They identified with 'strong' people and disliked the 'weak', were very conscious of their own and others' status, and showed excessive respect to those of higher status.

There was a strong positive correlation between authoritarian personality traits and prejudice towards others.

Conclusions

It was concluded that people with an authoritarian personality tend to be especially obedient to authority as they believe we need strong leaders to enforce traditional values such as love of country, religion and family. It was suggested that personality (dispositional) factors, rather than situational (environmental) factors, could explain their high obedience.

REFERENCE

Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brunswick, E., Levinson, D. and Sanford, N. (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, Harper.

Tom Buxton-Cope is head of psychology at Stockport Grammar School, a psychology examiner for AQA, and a published author.

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