



Book Review

The Authoritarian Dynamic

K. Stenner

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I will be no exception in my initial thoughts when reading this book: ‘another contribution on the authoritarian personality?’ Despite the wide use of various measures of authoritarianism — also in contemporary research — many researchers agree to the criticisms that the original work of Adorno *et al.* and their successors encountered. Stenner however approaches the field with new ambition to solve the problematic issues. She challenges all previous work on authoritarianism, in particular the use of the Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale from Altemeyer. The main contribution of this book is that it shows which kinds of measurements are needed to assess the conditions in which authoritarianism is important for racial, political and moral intolerance. Let me give a brief summary of the content.

One of the main arguments for this book is that it has remained unclear under which conditions authoritarian predispositions will manifest themselves in specific attitudes and behaviours. Stenner proposes that authoritarianism — defined as ‘the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other’ (p. 14) — is activated to result in racial, political and moral intolerance under the conditions of threats to *oneness and sameness* (normative threats). The question is how to measure this best?

Previous measurements of authoritarianism have been ‘tautological with the dependent variables it is designed to explain’ (p. 21). The RWA scale refers to what ought to be done with minorities and deviants, which are aspects of intolerance that authoritarianism initially set out to explain. Moreover, previous measurements turned out to be indistinguishable from measurements of conservatism. These are the two main reasons to refute Altemeyer’s scale, which instantly prompts the important question how Stenner proposes to measure authoritarianism. She proposes a rather simple solution: measuring child rearing values (*not* how one is raised oneself). Those would ‘reflect one’s fundamental orientations towards authority/uniformity *vs* autonomy/difference’ (p. 24). Only in a student sample she prefers the use of paired words, because students are still often under parental supervision.



Despite the centrality of the measurement, the reader has to search quite well to find out how authoritarianism is exactly measured in the various surveys and experiments Stenner employs in Chapters 3 and 4. Unfortunately, the reader is directed to the online appendices (not printed in the book), which seems a bit strange given the importance of these measures in the argument of the book. My initial enthusiasm for the work of Stenner — convinced of its importance I decided to include her measurement in a new survey in the Netherlands — was tempered a little, when I tried to understand the measurements. Respondents are first asked to evaluate paired child rearing values and — even if they value both or both not as important — are asked to indicate which aspect they perceive most important in child rearing. Then, respondents are asked to order the 6 or 10 rearing values, from most to least important. Try to do it, and find out how often you need to frown. Perhaps it is right away the most crucial criticism to the study of Stenner. If she is so convinced to have a better measurement, why didn't she experiment with many alternative — and easier — measurements of authoritarianism? One could wonder whether authoritarianism cannot be measured with a simple Likert-item, such as 'children always have to follow the rules set by their parents'. Notwithstanding these doubts around the measurements, her measures behave in the expected way, as shown in Chapters 3 and 4. Even more surprisingly, Stenner shows in the proceeding chapters that authoritarianism is quite successful in explaining intolerance, often explaining as much as 25% of the variance.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Stenner shows convincingly that support for authoritarian child rearing values is associated with intolerance more strongly in situations of normative threat. This central proposition is corroborated with various surveys and experiments. The conclusion is that authoritarianism does not lead to intolerance *per se*, but only in the condition of actual or perceived normative threat.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Stenner tackles the existing confusion about concepts of authoritarianism and conservatism. She does so with cross-national data, employing structural equation models. Although some problems arise about the reliability of the measurements scales — also of the measurement of authoritarianism — Stenner shows that authoritarianism is a much better predictor of intolerance than conservatism, in all countries she investigated. Authoritarianism and conservatism are also differently affected by various explanatory characteristics. Despite the attention to this in the chapter, it remains a puzzle why people differ in their authoritarianism. Education, religion and the country's demographic population all seem to matter somewhat, but the study does not really elaborate on why people have different child rearing values. Regarding the discussion on the little explanatory power of religion, Stenner goes short. While she claims the need



of better measurements of authoritarianism all across her book, she uses only 'religious upbringing' as a religious indicator, whereas there are many better measurements of religious integration. Why didn't she use 'religious participation', for example? The extent to which parents were authoritarian in their child rearing is also minimally addressed.

The interviews and experiments with the most authoritarian and libertarian people from the surveys are providing additional evidence on the large distinction between the groups. These interviews — 'putting a face on the theory' is the subtitle of Chapter 7 — show once more that people who strongly differ in their child rearing values, also strongly differ in their interaction with interviewers of different race. Moreover, in Chapter 8, the interviews confirm the results of the analyses on survey data: authoritarians and libertarians have very distinct characters. 'Their widely varying values, motives and capabilities shape everything from interpersonal behaviour towards strangers and different others, to understandings of what constitute and cause pressing social problems, and the designation of *appropriate political responses*' (p. 268).

Chapter 9 is dedicated to what extent authoritarians are racist and intolerant *per se*, or whether this depends on conditions of normative threat. Again, with interesting experiments in surveys, she shows some astonishing evidence of the latter dynamic. For example, Stenner shows that confronting authoritarian respondents with the information that NASA has verified the existence of alien life forms, reduces racial threat among those respondents (but not among libertarians). In this situation, authoritarians are even more tolerant than the libertarians. Evidence is clear that authoritarianism leads to intolerance under the condition of normative threat only. When classic fear is calmed, intolerant reactions of authoritarians fade as well. This ninth chapter also addresses questions on aversion to difference-ism. Stenner shows that authoritarian people are not only intolerant toward ethnic groups or other races but also show aversions to all perceived differences under the condition of threat.

In Chapter 10, Stenner concludes her book with interesting suggestions for future research and political implications. Politics provide the critical exogenous inputs that fundamentally alter the behaviour of citizens of varying dispositions. This final chapter offers enough discussion as well, what to think of the conclusion that 'nothing is more certain to provoke increased expression [of intolerance] than the like of "multicultural education", bilingual policies, and nonassimilation'.

Stenner has written a comprehensive book, with many facets of the authoritarian dynamic. All the data she collected or re-analysed convincingly provide evidence for her claims, even though the numbers of experiments presented make the contribution sometimes hard to read. Still, there is something dissatisfying. Why is a simple preference between sets of child rearing values such an important discriminator? Or why is a more simple



measurement of authoritarianism not preferred? Why not simply asking to what extent different child rearing values are considered important? Because all people think all values to be important? Then, what is the meaning of forcing respondents to choose the most important child rearing values? Stenner should also have addressed alternative measurements of authoritarianism; evaluating words without reflection of child rearing values apparently sufficed in a student population. I also wondered whether the preference for certain child rearing values is indeed independent on the phenomena to be explained. For the Netherlands, the cry for attention to norms and values did not show up accidentally after the discussion on the multicultural society. Perhaps people prefer authoritarian child rearing, because they feel society changes too strongly. Despite these questions, I am certainly triggered to include the measurement Stenner proposes in new questionnaires.

Stenner's most important message though, is the attention for the conditions under which people's authoritarian attitudes are activated to dislike differences (more strongly). With this study, she shows the dangers of the creation of those conditions, and the dangers of the politics of fear.

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