

Questioning Speculative Psychoanalysis of the Motives of Right-wing Authoritarians

Carl V. Rabstejnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

Publication in an academic journal does not guarantee that conclusions presented are valid. Limited and erroneous findings are not necessarily isolated cases, but may reflect beliefs shared by many in the academy. Questionable views may be reinforced by others with a congruent viewpoint. On the other hand, the field is sufficiently broad that there are often scholars that challenge findings and write critiques of published articles. The challenged is rarely convinced by the challenger, however, and often writes a response defending their “findings.” So, the reader needs to decide the merit of the claims and counterclaims. A particularly controversial debate in the literature is in the area of political psychology.

Motivated by the 1950 post-World War II book by Adorno, Frankel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford, titled [The Authoritarian Personality](#), 65 years of “scholars” have studied Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). As it is broadly acknowledged that the vast majority of college and university faculty are liberals, at least in the social sciences, there are many who claim that a bias toward left-wing beliefs results in less than flattering descriptions of believers in right-wing politics. With the imbalance in political leaning, it is no wonder that there are many more articles critical of RWA than LWA, or Left-Wing Authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, adversarial articles do get published and herein one of the many controversies will be considered. In 2007, James Crouse and Douglas Stalker wrote “Do Right-wing Authoritarian Beliefs Originate from Psychological Conflict?” for *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. Six years later (2013), Kenneth R. Thomas wrote a critique titled “Wild Analysis in Politics,” for *Political Psychology*. Thomas’ title was a take-off on a 1910 paper by Sigmund Freud, “‘Wild’ Analysis,” who criticized “another superficial misapplication of psychoanalytic theory.” The following year, in 2014, Crouse and Stalker wrote “Reply to Kenneth Thomas’s ‘Wild Analysis in Politics,’” for *Political Psychology*. Their psychoanalytic *speculation* is based upon the [Altemeyer’s 1998 version of his ‘Right Wing Authoritarian Survey.’](#)

Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Survey

Having a survey with a Likert-type scoring system provides numeric quantities that are compared. Quantified results lends an aura of “scientific” legitimacy to its usage. Fifteen questions on the survey are scored positive +1 to +4 on level of RWA and 15 are scored -1 to -4 on level of what I will dub Left-Wing Viewpoints (LWV). The questions are interspersed from #2 to #32. Questions #1: “The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things, while the radicals and protesters are usually just ‘loud mouths’ showing off their ignorance;” and #2: “Women should have to promise to obey their husbands when they get married.”

Crouse and Stalker say “Items 1 and 2 are ‘table-setters’ to help familiarize the respondent with the subject matter and the response format.” Scores of -4 to +4, with zero, are converted to 1 through 9, so RWA can be rated from 30 (30×1) to 270 (30×9), with neutrality scored as 150 (30×5).

Thomas challenged the validity of the survey and Crouse and Stalker defended its use. Regardless of its psychometric merit, I think clustering the questions, as provided on next page, indicating RWA vs LWV stereotypical narratives, is useful for personally evaluating Altemeyer’s RWA survey.

Recast of Altemeyer’s Survey as a Narrative

Crouse and Stalker divide the questions/narratives into three sub-categories: conservative attitudes toward authority, religion, and conventionality. These question groupings are elaborated in Box in the Table on next page. As stereotypical descriptors, the narratives can be judged by the reader as to their universalness of applicability. It seems to me that in the American political environment, partisans on each side of the aisle might recast attitudes toward authority when leader assessments underlined in table are substituted by George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama statements, each of whom was a controversial two-term President of the United States. A difference in scoring casts doubt on generality of the survey.

Special consideration might be paid to questions #17 and #26, from opposing Table columns, because pornography receives particular approbation from ardent liberal feminists.

Anti-positivism for Right-wing Authoritarianism

Adorno and his co-authors drew upon Erich Fromm’s contention that the German populace supported the Nazi regime. Belief in fascist underpinnings of conservatism and the religious right remains to this day. Crouse and Stalker describe this as “attitudes favoring submission to authority, aggression toward noncompliers to authority, and adherence to social conventions endorsed by established authority.” They “psychoanalytically” attribute their assumed beliefs to impulses of aggression, mastery, sex, and self-preservation.

Normally, speculations would be cast as hypotheses and research designed to empirically test the question. Crouse and Striker, however, take the following alternate approach: We do not try to evaluate the empirical adequacy of each interpretation we use, although from time to time we refer to empirical research that is consistent with the interpretations. The article therefore is almost entirely speculative, like many psychological explanations of topical matters.

The authors’ extensive defense to Thomas’ challenge was repeated assertions that their article said it was speculative.

Discussion Question

“Generally, Adorn et al. took an antipositivist position; **they did not believe their theories required external verification or falsification.**” Can we adopt this philosophy and still consider psychology to be a social *science*?

Scored Items on Altemeyer's (1998) Right-Wing Authoritarian (RWA) Survey Repositioned into Columns Providing Stereotypical Narratives

Left Wing

- 4 Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else.
- 6 Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly.
- 8 There is absolutely nothing wrong with nudist camps.
- 9 Our country *needs* free thinkers who will have the courage to defy traditional ways, even if this upsets many people.
- 11 Everyone should have their own life-style, religious beliefs, and sexual preferences, even if it makes them different from everyone else.
- 13 You have to admire those who challenged the law and the majority view by protesting for women's abortion rights, for animal rights, or to abolish school prayer.
- 15 Some of the best people in our country are those who are challenging our government, criticizing religion, and ignoring the "normal way things are suppose to be done."
- 18 There is nothing wrong with premarital sexual intercourse.
- 20 There is no "ONE right way" to live life; everybody has to create their own way.
- 21 Homosexuals and feminists should be praised for being brave enough to defy "traditional values."
- 24 People should pay less attention to the Bible and the other old forms of religious guidance, and instead develop their own standards of what is moral and immoral.
- 26 It's better to have trashy magazines and radical pamphlets in our communities than to let the government have the power to censor them.
- 29 The situation in our country is getting so serious, the strongest methods would be justified if they eliminated the troublemakers and got us back on our true path.
- 30 A "woman's place" should be wherever she wants to be. The days when women are submissive to their husbands and social conventions belong strictly in the past.
- 31 It is wonderful that young people today have greater freedom to protest against things they don't like, and to make their own "rules" to govern their behavior.

Right Wing

- 3 Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us.
- 5 It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds.
- 7 The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get back to our traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas.
- 10 Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs.
- 12 The "old-fashioned ways" and "old-fashioned values" still show the best ways to live.
- 14 What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.
- 16 God's laws about abortion, pornography, and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished.
- 17 It would be best for everyone if the proper authorities censored magazines so that people could not get their hands on trashy and disgusting material.
- 19 Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the "rotten apples" who are ruining everything.
- 22 This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group's traditional place in society.
- 23 There are many radical, immoral people in our country today, who are trying to ruin it for their own godless purposes, whom the authorities should put out of action.
- 25 What our country needs *most* is discipline, with everyone following our leaders in unity.
- 27 The facts on crime, sexual immorality, and the recent public disorders all show that we have to crack down harder on deviant groups and troublemakers if we are going to save our moral standards and preserve law and order.
- 28 A lot of our rules regarding modesty and sexual behavior are just customs which are not necessarily any better or holier than those which other people follow.
- 32 Once our government leaders give us the "go ahead," it will be the duty of every patriotic citizen to help stomp out the rot that is poisoning our country from within.

QUESTION GROUPINGS

Religion:	4, 5, 6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 23, 24, 30
Authority:	3, 5, 7, 14, 15, 17, 19, 25, 26, 32
Conventionality:	3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 20, 22, 27, 28, 29, 31