

**Icebreaker for UAA Book Club Discussion:**  
*The Authoritarians* (2006) by Prof. Bob Altemeyer

**Question:** Did Pres. Trump create his movement of supporters by the force of his personality or policies? Or did the movement already exist and he just "got lucky" that there was receptivity to his style? Is the movement based on economic grievances of the left-behind? Or is it an outbreak of white bigotry?

*The Authoritarians* seems relevant to these questions. It's written in a conversational style, so there's no difficulty in getting its points.

But first of all it's a book of psychological science and should be viewed as such. Let's give it a skeptical look.

### **The Book as Psychology**

I never took a single college course in psychology, but I think I understand that "personality" is a major field. The main approach (outside of brain science, about which I know nothing) seems to take language as representative of personality. Principal-component analysis of popular texts referring to personality apparently found, in the mid-1900s, something like 16 traits that were separate from one another, each one expressed by a set of words. The dominant representation that's taught now seems to be "The Big Five," which is the result of paring the 16 down (again, using principal components) to 5. Myers-Briggs analysis, which is the only psychological science that we USAID alumni probably have in common (but that has no academic prestige), is (roughly speaking) a 4-factor version of The Big Five that ignores the "neuroticism" trait (to make it congenial for organizations like USAID).

Relative to this overall field, the "authoritarian" personality, although a substantial area of study, seems to be a special interest. As Prof. Altemeyer says, Psych 1 textbooks don't present it.

But the rise of European fascism in the 1920s and 1930s created, as one can understand, substantial interest in the concept, and Prof. Altemeyer seems to be a respected practitioner, with a series of professional publications from 1981 to 2004. (For a 30-page study of this area of psychology, see Sibley & Duckitt, "Personality and Prejudice: A Meta-Analysis and Theoretical Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* Vol. 12 No. 3, August 2008, pp. 248-279.)

### **The Method**

The scientific method Prof. Altemeyer uses is construction of an "instrument" — a set of questions by which a respondent self-reports attitudes. The instrument generates a one-dimensional score whose average over large numbers of respondents reliably predicts the group's predominant attitudes in real-life situations.

(To me, it's like the World Bank creating a quick-and-dirty "Poverty Scorecard" that correlates highly at the household level with the results of a full Living Standards Measurement Survey, but at a tiny fraction of the cost.)

Prof. Altemeyer's instrument generates the RWA score, whose initials stand for "Right-Wing Authoritarian," where "authoritarian" is short for "authoritarian follower" and means that the psychologist is seeking an instrument that predicts who will follow a Hitler-type movement, and where "right-wing" refers to following traditional authorities rather than rebels against traditional authorities.

(Authoritarian followers of rebels against traditional authorities would be "left-wing authoritarians." However, according to Altemeyer's 1996 book, *The Authoritarian Specter*, page 229, LWA instruments have failed to elicit even a single self-report of a high LWA score among thousands of participants in several countries.)

Where scores range widely, Prof. Altemeyer takes the top and bottom 25% as "high" and "low" scores for purposes of binary contrasts. The context is North American.

The RWA method doesn't claim to explain where the attitudes of a young adult come from or how they will evolve, but Prof. Altemeyer reports his speculations. He notes that college students' scores correlate with their parents', and longitudinal studies show that individuals' scores relative to other individuals don't change much over decades.

An SDO instrument, for "Social Dominator," was developed later and by other researchers, as Prof. Altemeyer explains. High RWA followers and High SDO leaders are obviously complementary: they're both authoritarian, just coming at the relationship from the opposite ends.

Curiously, however, SDO and RWA traits are not entirely opposites. In particular, High SDOs can score relatively high on certain RWA traits also, making them "Double Highs" in Prof. Altemeyer's terms and exceptionally attractive to RWA authoritarian followers. On this, see pp. 177ff in chapter five.

## **The Results**

This is for you to read! Although the book is written in the perspective of the Bush-Cheney era, it's even more familiar-sounding now. The section titled "So What's Your Point?" starting on page 235 is still timely.

One thing I will note is that Chapter 4 steps pretty heavily on the toes of religion, or specifically of "fundamentalism." Its overall point is that there is little difference between a high score on the RWA instrument and a high score on a "Religious Fundamentalism" instrument, or between the behaviors that those scores predict.

Without presuming to either judge or defend religion, I would just note that a number of diverse things go by that name. "Spirituality" and "theology" are both religious, but they're far from the same thing and the people that one appeals to may have little taste for the other. I could name maybe four or five other separate aspects. The concept of "fundamentalism" that Prof. Altemeyer uses "is what it is" and, as he himself notes, there's a lot of religious space outside of it.