Authoritarianism

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The nature of people who were recognized as highly authoritarian was studied in the late 1940's after Hitler's totalitarian regime had caused such enormous global suffering. In the work of Adorno, Sanford and others, nine interrelated personality dispositions indicated an "authoritarian personality" (note, interestingly enough, this is *not* defined as a personality disorder in the DSM). These included: *Conventionalism* (a tendency to accept and obey social conventions and rules; *Submission* (an exaggerated emotional need to submit to authority); *Aggression* (aggression towards individuals or groups disliked by authorities, particularly those who threaten traditional values); *Destruction and Cynicism* (generalized hostility); *Power and Toughness* (identification with those in power); *Superstition and Stereotypy* (a tendency to shift responsibility to outside forces beyond one's control and a tendency to think in rigid categories); *Anti-intraception* (rejection of the subjective, imaginative and aesthetic); *Projectivity* (a tendency to transfer internal problems to the external world and to believe in the existence of evil); and *Sexualized concerns* (exaggerated concerns with respect to sexual activity) [1, 2].

Obedience to Authority

In his seminal experiments immediately after World War II, psychologist Stanley Milgram wanted to understand how so many otherwise reasonable people could have willingly participated in the Holocaust. What he found was startling and disturbing: the powerful influence of the group was found to be an important determinate of whether otherwise healthy people could be persuaded to become sadistic and abusive [3].

STANLEY MILGRAM

Milgram set up an experimental situation in which a subject (the 'teacher') on orders from an authority figure, flips a switch, apparently sending a 450-volt shock to an innocent victim (the 'learner'). Subjects were told they were participating in a study of the effects of punishment on learning. Every day the 'teacher' arrived at the laboratory with another person who would be the one receiving the shocks, (the 'learner') someone who was actually an accomplice in the experiment. They were instructed to administer the shocks whenever the "learner" – the actual accomplice – gave a wrong answer to a series of questions. The shocks began at low levels of 15 volts and progressed with every incorrect answer to 450 volts.

As the experiment proceeded, the 'teacher' could hear cries coming from the learner and they actually believed that they were inflicting serious injury to the 'learner'. Many became visibly upset and wanted to stop but when the authority figure told them to keep going, most of them did so, despite the tortured outcries from the victim. In fact, 65% of experimental subjects conformed to the demands of authority to the point at which they supposedly inflicted severe pain or possible death on another human being. This was the "I was only following orders" defense of the Nazi leaders. Milgram repeated the experiments many times, in different countries and the results were consistent – two-thirds of people were willing, under orders of an authority figure, to shock to the limit [4]. When assured by apparently legitimate authority that there was a good cause for the experiment, subjects overrode their own sensory impressions, empathic responses and ethical concerns and automatically obeyed authority without questioning the grounds on which this authority was based or the goals of established authority. In his conclusion, Milgram warned, *"A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority"*[3].

More recent experiments concerning dumping toxic waste or manufacturing defective automobiles has demonstrated that people perceive themselves as less responsible for such acts when the transgressors are conforming to company policy or obeying the orders of a superior then when they are acting alone [5]. It is also true that researchers have found that in small groups people sometimes collectively rebel against what they perceive as unjust authority [6].

The Lucifer Effect

Philip Zimbardo rose to fame in the early 1970s, when – influenced by Milgram's work - he conducted the Stanford Prison Experiment, one of the seminal studies into human nature and brutality. Student volunteers at Stanford University were subjected to what was supposed to be two weeks of false imprisonment to see how students some of whom played the role of "prisoners" and others as "prison guards" would react to the situation and to each other. The study had to be curtailed after only six days because of the remarkable and entirely disturbing impact the study situation had on these otherwise healthy, normal, male college students. In less than a week, pacifist students were behaving sadistically toward their peers when they played the role of guards, and normal kids were breaking down emotionally playing the role of prisoners.
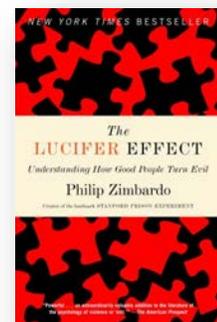
During the 6-day simulation, the experimenters found that the guards began--and quickly escalated-- harassing and degrading the prisoners "*even after most prisoners had ceased resisting and prisoner deterioration had become visibly obvious to them"* (p. 92), and appeared to experience this sense of power as "*exhilarating*" (p. 94) [7]. Zimbardo concluded that the effect of power over others can become so intoxicating that (1) power became an end in itself, (2) the power-holder developed an

exalted sense of self-worth, (3) power was used increasingly for personal rather than organizational purposes, and (4) the power-holder devalued the worth of others [8].

In reviewing his own experiments and those of other social psychologists, as well as immersing himself in the study of the Abu Ghraib scandal and other wartime phenomena, Zimbardo concluded that it is dehumanization that is at the core of much human cruelty. *"Dehumanization occurs whenever some human beings consider other human beings to be excluded from the moral order of being a human person. The objects of this psychological process lose their human status in the eyes of their dehumanizers. By identifying certain individuals or groups as being outside the sphere of humanity, dehumanizing agents suspend the morality that might typically govern reasoned actions toward their fellows"* (P.307) [9].

When A Crisis Occurs

When a crisis occurs, centralization of control is significantly increased with leaders tightening reins, concentrating power at the top, and minimizing participatory decision making [10]. Even where there are strong beliefs in the "democratic way of life", there is always a tendency in institutions, and in the larger containing society, to regress to simple, hierarchical models of authority as a way of preserving a sense of security and stability. This is not just a phenomenon of leadership – in times of great uncertainty, everyone in the institution colludes to collectively bring into being authoritarian organizations as a time-honored method for providing at least the illusion of greater certainty and therefore a diminution of anxiety [11].

From an evolutionary standpoint, this makes a great deal of sense. Terror Management Theory has experimentally shown that reminding people of their own mortality enhances and strengthens their existing world view, religious beliefs, group identifications, and their tendency to cling to a charismatic leader [12]. When danger is real and present, effective leaders take charge and give commands that are obeyed by obedient followers, thus harnessing and directing the combined power of many individuals in service of group survival. Fear-provoking circumstances within an organization are contagious. Within a group, emotional contagion occurs almost instantly and predictable group responses are likely to emerge automatically [13]. Threatened groups tend to increase intra-group attachment bonds with each other, and are more likely to be drawn to leaders who appear confident, take control and are willing to tell other people what to do. Longstanding interpersonal conflicts seem to evaporate and everyone pulls together toward the common goal of group survival producing an exhilarating and even intoxicating state of unity, oneness and a willingness to sacrifice one's own well-being for the sake of the group. This is a survival strategy ensuring that in a state of crisis decisions can be made quickly and efficiently thus better ensuring survival of the group, even while individuals may be sacrificed.

Under crisis conditions, the strong exercise of authority by leaders coupled with obedience to authority by followers may be life-saving. In a group confronted by new, unique and dangerous conditions, if someone in a position of authority - or someone with the confidence to assume authority - gives orders that may help us to survive, we are likely to automatically and obediently respond. But, when a state of

crisis is prolonged, repetitive, or chronic there is a price to be paid. The tendency to develop increasingly authoritarian structures over time is particularly troublesome for organizations.

Chronic Crisis

Chronic crisis results in organizational climates that promote authoritarian behavior and this behavior serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and create new ones. Under stress, leaders are likely to feel less comfortable in delegating responsibility to others and in trusting their subordinates with tough assignments when there is a great deal at stake. Instead, they are likely to make more decisions for people and become central to more approvals; this in turn builds a more expensive hierarchy and bureaucracy [14]. Communication exchanges change and become more formalized and top-down. Command hierarchies becomes less flexible, power becomes more centralized, people below stop communicating openly and as a result, important information is lost from the system. "*It is the increased salience of formal structure that transforms open communication among equals into stylized communications between unequals. Communication dominated by hierarchy activates a different mindset regarding what is and is not communicated and different dynamics regarding who initiates on whom. In situations where there is a clear hierarchy, it is likely that attempts to create interaction among equals is more complex, less well learned, and dropped more quickly in favor of hierarchical communication when stress increases*", p. 138 [15].

The centralization of authority means that those at the top of the hierarchy will be far more influential than those at the bottom, and yet better solutions to the existing problems may actually lie in the hands of those with less authority. "*There is a tendency to centralize control during a crisis period, to manage with tighter reins and more power concentrated at the top. The need for fast decisions may preclude participative processes. But this is risky. Centralization may transfer control to inappropriate people; if top managers had the ability to take corrective action, there might have been no crisis in the first place*", p. 243 [10]. In this way, "*the same process that produces the error in the first place, also shapes the context so that the error will fan out with unpredictable consequences*", p. 140 [15]. Lipman-Blumen has studied the dynamics of leadership and has recognized that "*Crises can create circumstances that prompt some leaders, even in democratic societies, to move beyond merely strong leadership to unwarranted authoritarianism. In tumultuous times, toxic leaders' predilection for authoritarianism fits neatly with their anxious followers' heightened insecurity….. Set adrift in threatening and unfamiliar seas, most of us willingly surrender our freedom to any authoritarian captain*"(p.99-100)[16].
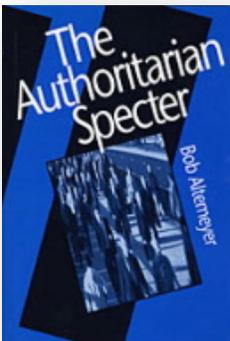
Building on the work of Adorno, Milgram, Erich Fromm and others, Dr. Robert Altemeyer has been studying authoritarian behavior – particularly right-wing-authoritarian behavior - for the last twenty-five years and his work illuminates the central cognitive problems in authoritarian behavior that pose significant challenges when people high in these traits become employed in the mental health and social service systems [17]. Altemeyer has reduced the nine personality dispositions to three fundamental and

interrelated characteristics: *Authoritarian submission* described as a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives; *Authoritarian aggression* which is a general aggressiveness, directed against various persons, that is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities; and *Conventionalism* determined by a high degree of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities.

People who are high in authoritarian submission generally accept the statements and actions of established authorities and believe that those authorities should be trusted and deserve both obedience and respect, by virtue of their positions. They place narrow limits on other people's rights to criticize authority figures and tend to assume that critics of those authority figures are always wrong. Criticism of established authority is viewed as divisive and even destructive and motivated by little except a desire to cause trouble. For such people, when authority figures break the law, they have an inherent right to do so, even if the rest of us cannot.

Those who are high in authoritarian aggression are predisposed to control other people through the use of punishment and they advocate for physical punishment in childhood and beyond. They deplore any form of leniency toward people who diverge from established authority and advocate capital punishment. Unconventional people and anyone considered to be socially deviant are believed to pose a threat to the social order and therefore aggression toward them is justified, particularly when condoned by authority figures.

Conventionalism indicates a strong acceptance of and commitment to the traditional social norms of one's society. Anything that is based on long-standing tradition and custom and that maintains the beliefs, teachings, and services in their traditional form is preferred. Such people reject the idea that people should derive their own moral beliefs to meet the needs of today because moral standards have already been established by authority figures of the past and should be obeyed without question. This requires endorsing traditional family structure within which women are subservient to men and "keep their place" and the only proper marriages are between men and women. Other ways of doing things are simply wrong and potentially dangerous.

But for all the social problems connected to extreme authoritarian behavior, it is the impact on mental functioning and the behavior that follows associated with authoritarianism that has the most bearing on the functioning of the mental health system. In investigating the cognitive behavior of authoritarianism, Altemeyer found that authoritarians do not spend much time examining evidence, thinking critically, reaching independent conclusions, or seeing whether their conclusions mesh with other things they believe. They largely accept what authority figures have told them is true and have difficulty identifying falsehoods on their own. They copy other people's opinions without critically evaluating them if those opinions come from someone with established authority. As a result they end up believing a number of contradictory things without even being able to see the contradiction. They do not mentally reverse situations and put themselves in "the other person's shoes". They examine ideas less than other people and tend to surround themselves with people who agree with them and do not contradict them. They show a "hefty double standard" when testing whether something is true or not: if evidence supports

what they believe they accept it unquestioningly as truth; if evidence fails to support what they believe, they tend to throw out the evidence. Since they tend not to be able to think independently, they are vulnerable to mistaken judgments and can be astonishingly gullible when an insincere communicator bears the trappings of authority [17].

The inability to think critically, synthetically, and diversely is an enormous handicap in trying to assist those with complex physical, psychological, social and moral difficulties secondary to exposure to repetitive stress, trauma, and violence. If authoritarian leaders assume key administrative positions within human service organizations the result is likely to be highly detrimental to true trauma-informed change because they will be unwilling to shift away from what are now "fundamentalist" explanations of emotional problems embodied in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. There are strong links between authoritarianism and fundamentalist belief systems meaning any literal-minded philosophy with pretense of being the sole source of objective truth forever, in all places, at all times – religious and otherwise. Fundamentalism always requires people to reject information that is or may be inconsistent with established dogma and this is extremely dangerous position to take when it comes to dealing with the complexity associated with trying to help complex and diverse human beings to heal in a changing world [18].

Leaders who are high in authoritarian traits are likely to insist on a centralized and traditional hierarchy, discourage true staff participation, be unable to facilitate team treatment, punish dissent, and surround themselves with people who will agree with their view of the world. Authoritarian leadership then encourages the same leadership style throughout the organization. As a result, the organizational norms for all staff are likely to endorse punitive behavior, empathic failure, and traditional methods for managing difficult situations. It is hard to imagine a situation more detrimental to long-lasting, positive change in the lives of trauma survivors. As for the staff, when authoritarian behavior comes to dominate a situation, the result can also be devastating. Unchecked authoritarians can become bullies at any organizational level but when they are given power, they can become "petty tyrants".

Under what is arguably the worst conditions, an organizational leader, predisposed to authoritarian behavior and acquiring power, may evolve into what has been described as a "petty tyrant" [19]. A petty tyrant is someone who arbitrarily and in a small-minded way, exercises absolute power oppressively or brutally. Petty tyrants believe certain things about their employees, a set of beliefs that have been termed Theory X - that the average person dislikes work, lacks ambition, avoids responsibility, prefers direction, and is resistant to change [20]. They do this in definable ways. They use their authority in ways that are unfair and that reinforce their own position or provide personal gain. They play favorites. They belittle subordinates and humiliate them in front of others. They lack consideration and tend to be aloof, cold, and unapproachable. They force their own point of view on others and demand that things be done their way. They discourage participation of others and discourage initiative. They are likely to be critical and punitive toward subordinates for no apparent reason.

Although few organizations openly condone arbitrary and abusive use of authority, the organizational norms may facilitate the emergence of petty tyranny, particularly in "total institutions" such as prisons, residential schools, or mental hospitals. In one well-known study, Zimbardo and his colleagues simulated

a prison environment and randomly assigned subjects to the role of either guard or prisoner. During the 6-day simulation, the experimenters found that the guards began--and quickly escalated--harassing and degrading the prisoners "*even after most prisoners had ceased resisting and prisoner deterioration had become visibly obvious to them*" (p. 92), and appeared to experience this sense of power as "*exhilarating*" (p. 94) [7]. The effect of power over others can become so intoxicating that (1) power becomes an end in itself, (2) the power-holder develops an exalted sense of self-worth, (3) power is used increasingly for personal rather than organizational purposes, and (4) the power-holder devalues the worth of others. This change in the otherwise normal students who had agreed to participate in the experiment was so dramatic and rapid in onset that the experimenters had to prematurely terminate the study [8]
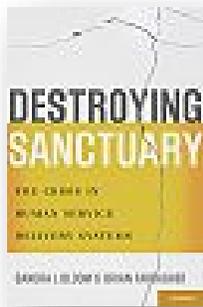
"This powerful, disturbing and highly readable new book shows, with poignant examples, that toxic stress affects not only individuals but also impairs the function of organizations, including those that are supposed to provide sanctuary for traumatized children and adults."
-Bruce McEwen, PhD, The Rockefeller University

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