

The Security of Obedience: Evidence that Mortality Salience Promotes Conformity to Authority Among Individuals Raised by Authoritarian Parents

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Today the world scarcely remembers the mechanized persecution and extermination of millions of human beings only a short span of years away in what was once regarded as the citadel of Western civilization. Yet the conscience of many men was aroused. How could it be, they asked each other, that in a culture of law, order, and reason, there should have survived the irrational remnants of ancient racial and religious hatreds? How could they explain the willingness of great masses of people to tolerate the mass extermination of their fellow citizens? What tissues in the life of our modern society remain cancerous, and despite our assumed enlightenment show the incongruous atavism of ancient peoples? And what within the individual organism responds to certain stimuli in our culture with attitudes and acts of destructive aggression? —Horkheimer & Flowerman (in foreword to Adorno, et al.)

Until September 11, 2002, the atrocities committed in the Second World War seemed distant and removed from our present day lives. For many, the events of this fateful day brought back the traumatic realization that Western culture is not as monolithic and unwavering as its contributors had once assumed. People were forced to question their belief systems for the first time since the World War II era. How could people despise our society so much, that they are willing to sacrifice their lives in an attempt to destroy it? How could these same people live amongst us for so long and still want to reap destruction and terror upon us? The events of September 11, 2002 have sparked a renewed interest in explaining our propensity of committing malicious violence upon one another.

In the wake of World War II many sought an answer to these questions (Adorno et al., Altemeyer), but it is the works of Milgram that provided us with the most shocking revelation of our own capability for evil. The present research

revisits past works on authoritarianism and obedience while integrating contemporary research that has arisen from the ideas of Ernest Becker (Birth and Death of Meaning, Denial of Death) and the proponents of terror management theory (Greenberg et al. "Causes and Consequences").

Overview of Terror Management Theory

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Terror management theory posits that as humans, we are similar to other animals in our instinctive drive for self-preservation but unique in our cognitive abilities, which enable us to reflect upon ourselves and project ourselves into the future. Because we possess the ability for self-awareness and temporal thought, we inevitably become aware of our own impending death. This knowledge creates potentially paralyzing terror that we must deal with by means of a cultural anxiety buffer. The cultural anxiety buffer consists of our cultural worldview and self-esteem. The cultural worldview is an individual's belief system, which imposes meaning, order and permanence upon our subjective reality. The standards and values embedded in our cultural worldview dictate how we achieve a sense of personal value and thus attain a promise of literal or symbolic immortality if we live up to these standards and values. Self-esteem is acquired through the belief that one is living up to the standards of value prescribed by their cultural worldview. Because of the overwhelming terror that arises from our existential awareness of our own death, much of our social behavior is motivated by our attempts to bolster our cultural anxiety buffer. Two hypotheses emerge from this model, the mortality salience hypothesis and the anxiety-buffer hypothesis.

The mortality salience hypothesis states that, if cultural worldviews and self-esteem provide protection from existential fear, then reminding people of the root of that fear should increase their need for faith in their cultural worldview and self-esteem. In support of this hypothesis it has been found that making mortality salient among individuals causes them to respond positively toward those who uphold cultural values and negatively to those who violate cultural values (Rosenblatt, et al.), enhances stereotypic thinking and preferences (Schimel, et al. "Stereotypes and Terror Management"), and increases intergroup bias between minimal groups (Harmon-Jones, et al). The anxiety-buffer hypothesis states that self-esteem acts as an anxiety buffer and thus serves to insulate us from death

anxiety. For example, previous research indicates that an increase in self-esteem, reduced individual's anxiety towards a subsequent threat of shock (Greenberg, et al. "Why do People Need Self-Esteem") and denial of susceptibility to a short life expectancy (Greenberg, et al. "Effects of Self-Esteem"). To date over 130 studies conducted in the United States, Canada, Japan, Israel, the Netherlands and Germany support variants of these hypotheses. Although several studies support the central tenets of terror management theory, no research has examined hypotheses derived from the developmental analysis of the theory, that is, how self-esteem comes to serve as an anxiety buffer

Terror Management Theory's Developmental Analysis

The distinctive cognitive abilities of our species are not without a price. Unlike many other animals, which are suitably adapted at birth to deal with a hostile and threatening environment, human newborns are rather pathetic specimens at birth. Without fur, teeth, claws or even the ability to sit-upright our survival is entirely dependent upon the love and protection provided by our parents. Although we are instinctually programmed at birth, like other animals, we rely to a much greater extent upon our ability to learn in order to ensure our survival. The condition of the human newborn is initially a hindrance to our survival, but eventually enables us a great plasticity and freedom from instinctual control in adapting to our surrounding environments. As infants, our preparation for an ever-changing and competitive social world provides us with a unique set of tools, which distinguish us from all other primates and animals. This process of maturation is an integral part of our development as self-conscious and social beings.

Despite the diversity of the humanist and post-Freudian personality theorists, Karen Horney, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, Otto Rank, Carl Rogers, Harry Stack-Sullivan, Heinz Kohut and Ernest Becker converge on the notion that much of human motivation emanates from a need for safety and security because of the precarious situation that all humans are thrust into from birth. In the context of progressively adapting to our environment, the primary way we, as children, learn to overcome a basic sense of helplessness and vulnerability is by fostering the belief that we are valued by our parents or primary caregivers. To the extent that they value us, they will continue to provide us with much needed safety and

protection from the dangers of the outside world. According to this analysis, self-esteem grows out of the socialization process in which children learn to live and act according to parental and societal standards. Children eventually learn the contingency: being good and meeting standards = safety and protection, whereas being bad and breaking standards = vulnerability and anxiety.

Thus the paradoxical nature of the human condition becomes evident early on in our lives. As creatures with self-conscious awareness we have a high degree of freedom from instinctual control, however, we must eventually give up some of this freedom for safety by living in accordance with the highly restrictive worlds of parental authority and culture. As we move through adolescence and into adulthood, this relationship changes and we begin to individuate ourselves from our parents and start forming our own unique beliefs and worldviews. However, what remains is the abstract contingency of obedience to those who symbolize power and authority, which provides us with safety and security.

Overview of Research

Although the original research upon authoritarianism (Adorno et al.) has provided us with a considerable depth of knowledge regarding the authoritarian personality, more contemporary research (Altemeyer) has challenged the psychometric properties of the measurement of implicit antidemocratic trends using the Facism (F) scale. The Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer) is a more contemporary measure of authoritarianism and is divided into three attitudinal clusters. These clusters are defined as, authoritarian submission - 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 - a general aggressiveness, directed against various persons, which is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities; and conventionalism—a high degree of adherence to the social conventions which are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities.

Although Adorno et al. favour a psychoanalytic interpretation of the development of the authoritarian personality, Altemeyer offers a more parsimonious explanation. According to Altemeyer, a child, through the process of social learning (Bandura), is imbued with many of the attitudes and behaviours

espoused by their parental figures in a both conscious and unconscious transmission of values. The more pronounced that these behavioural contingencies are, the more likely that the child will rely them for security and reinforcement. Undoubtedly the child's peers in adolescence also play an important role in the development of the attitudes and beliefs of an individual, but as Altemeyer argues, it is probable that an individual will continue to develop a perspective that is consistent with their initial beliefs because of their past history of reinforcement contingencies.

Based on this analysis, we hypothesized that individuals who were raised in an authoritarian environment, in which obedience to authority is stressed as a means of feeling secure, would be most likely to conform to authority when reminded of the root of their existential fear. Specifically, we postulated that contemplating one's own mortality would cause individuals who were raised in an authoritarian environment to adhere most strongly to examples set by high status authority figures.

Method

Participants

The participants were 251 University of Alberta undergraduates who received partial credit towards a course requirement. Sixteen participants were excluded due to suspicion and 1 participant was excluded for non-compliance to the instructions, leaving a total of 234 participants (83 male and 151 female). All participants had previously taken part in a mass testing session in which they completed a modified version of the RWA (Altemeyer) scale. The scale was modified such that participants were asked to indicate how they thought the head of their household would respond to the items. The selected participants were then categorized as high or low in parental authoritarianism based on a median split. The median score (89.5) was based on the entire sample of students (N = 2020) who participated in the mass testing session.¹ High and low parental

¹ 24 participants received an unaltered version of the RWA scale during mass testing and the parent directed authoritarian scale during the experimental session. This was done in order to create a condition that could be used to check for differing effects of the two

authoritarian participants were randomly assigned to the mortality salience (death vs. dental pain) and authority figure status (high vs. low) conditions, yielding a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design of parental authoritarianism X mortality salience X authority figure status.

Procedure and Materials

Participants were run in groups of up to 15 by a single experimenter. Upon arrival to the laboratory, participants were greeted and told that they would complete two questionnaire packets that had been assembled by various psychologists who were conducting research at the university. Participants were told that the packets were designed to measure certain attitudes and personality characteristics, and investigate their impressions of life situations. Participants were also told that they would be asked to read a self-disclosure vignette and then make an evaluation of the individual depicted in the self-disclosure vignette. In order to maintain the cover story, participants were told that the purpose of the second questionnaire packet was to assess how individuals evaluate others based on selected information. After assurance that all responses would be kept anonymous and completely confidential, participants were given the questionnaire packets to complete. Contained in the first packet was the original, unmodified version of the RWA (Altemeyer) scale, an emotional empathy scale (Mehrabian & Epstein), a mortality salience induction, and the positive and negative affect schedule expanded form (PANAS-X) scale (Watson & Clark). The mortality salience treatment was identical to treatments used in previous terror management research, (e.g., Jonas, et al.) and consisted of two open ended questions, "Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are dead." Participants in the control condition were asked parallel questions about experiencing dental pain. Participants then completed the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark), which served as a delay before completion of the dependent measure. It has been shown in previous research that mortality salience

versions of the scale, however, insufficient numbers were collected to allow for a significant statistical analysis.

effects are most potent after a brief delay (Greenberg, et al. "Role of Consciousness").

Upon completion of the first questionnaire packet, participants proceeded to answer the second questionnaire packet. Included in the second packet was a self-disclosure vignette of a moral transgressor, an example social judgement form that was ostensibly completed by a previous participant, and the actual social judgment task, which served as the dependant variable. The self-disclosure form included in the packet was patterned after that used by Schimel, Greenberg and Martens (in press) and provided the details of an 18-year-old female who, on several occasions, bought music CDs, copied them, and then returned them for refunds. At the bottom of the self-disclosure form was the target person's signature (blotted out in black ink) and the date authorizing researchers to use the person's disclosure in future research.

Before participants started the second questionnaire packet, the experimenter told participants that in previous trials of the experiment, participants had not been completing their evaluation forms correctly. The experimenter further explained that, in order to correct for this problem, an evaluation form that had been correctly completed by someone who evaluated the same self-disclosure that they would be was included in their questionnaire packet. Participants were then instructed to examine the example before completing their own evaluations. After reading the self-disclosure vignette, participants then encountered the example social judgment form, which served to provide either a high or low status authority figure's judgment of the moral transgressor depicted in the vignette. The demographic information of the example form served as the authority figure status manipulation. The individual in the example indicated that he was a male, Canadian citizen, and married for 4 years. In the low status condition, the person indicated that he had some high school education but no diploma. In the high status condition the person indicated that he had a doctorate degree and was a professor of chemistry. The instructions for both forms read as follows,

In a case such as this one, if the individual were to be charged and convicted for his/her defense, the judge would determine the severity of the punishment to be given to the individual. For crimes of this nature,

community service is usually given. Take the role of the judge and assess the severity of the punishment the individual depicted in the self-disclosure form should receive.

Below the instructions was the severity of punishment scale, which consisted of a horizontal line (10cm long) that was anchored at both ends with “Very lenient, 5 hours community service” and “Very severe, 50 hours community service”. The example participant’s punishment recommendation was indicated by a small vertical line, which intersected the horizontal line at either 2.5cm (lenient recommendation) or 7.5cm (severe recommendation). The harshness of the example person’s recommendation was counterbalanced across the conditions of the study. After perusing the example, participants completed the dependent measure which was a blank copy of the social judgment form they had just finished inspecting.

After completing the critical dependent measure, participants completed a questionnaire that contained our manipulation check items. A page with four questions and instructions was given to the participants to complete. The instructions read as follows: “Please answer the following questions according to what you thought about the persons represented in the example form you were given. *Not the person who completed the self-disclosure form.*” The first item was open-ended and asked the participants “What was the occupation of the individual who completed the example form?” they had inspected. The remaining items were anchored on 9-point scales with 1 indicating the least amount and 9 indicating the greatest amount of agreement with the item. The items read as follows, “Rate the status of the individual who completed the example form”, “To what extent is the individual in the example form knowledgeable about judging moral behavior?” and “To what extent is the person in the example form an expert on criminal behavior?” After the participants completed the manipulation check questions, the experimenter instructed the participants to record their overall impressions of the study and their impressions of what was being measured on the back of the questionnaire sheet. Participants were then also verbally probed for suspicion, debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

We performed three one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) of authority figure status (high vs. low) on participants' ratings of the extent to which they thought the individual in the example form was of high status, knowledgeable about judging moral behavior, and an expert in judging criminal behavior. We found a main effect of authority figure status on participants' ratings of the extent to which they found the person in the example form of high status, $F(1, 234) = 53.09$, $p < .001$. Participants judged the person in the high status example form as having significantly more status ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 1.48$) than the individual in the low status example form ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.48$). None of the other manipulation check items approached significance, $F(1,234) < 1$. These results show that although participants perceived the high status authority figure as having more status than the low status authority figure, they did not judge the high status figure as being more knowledgeable in judging moral behavior or as being more of an expert in evaluating criminal behavior than the low status authority figure. Thus, as we had hoped, our authority figure status manipulation was effective in altering the authority figure's status without altering the perceived credibility of the individual in evaluating the behavior of others.

Conformity Analysis

In order to assess conformity to the authority figure, we created a composite measure of conformity to the judgment of the person depicted in the example form. To create this composite, we measured the absolute distance (in millimeters) that the participants' punishment recommendation for the moral transgressor differed from the punishment that was recommended by the person in the example form. Thus, lower scores indicated more conformity to the person in the example. Tests revealed that the conformity measure did not meet the assumption of homogeneity of variance required for the use of an ANOVA. We therefore performed a double square-root transformation upon the conformity measure.

A 2 (parental authoritarianism: high vs. low) X 2 (mortality salience: death vs. dental pain) X 2 (authority figure status: high vs. low) X 2 (punishment: harsh vs. lenient) ANOVA revealed, as predicted, a significant three-way interaction of parental authoritarianism X mortality salience X authority figure status $F(1, 170) = 4.44, p < .05$. A significant main effect of punishment $F(1,170) = 26.99, p < .001$, and a two way interaction of authority figure status X punishment $F(1,170) = 5.35, p < .05$ were also detected but were qualified by the predicted three-way interaction. The untransformed mean scores for each condition are represented in Table 1. The absence of a four-way interaction indicates that the obtained results are not influenced by the severity of the punishment recommended by the authority figure.

To unpack the three-way interaction, we performed separate two-way (mortality salience X authority figure status) ANOVA's on the conformity measure for participants who perceived the environment they were raised in as either high or low in parental authoritarianism. The 2 (status) X 2 (mortality salience) ANOVA of participants who were raised in an environment that they perceived as being low in parental authoritarianism yielded no significant results $F(1,77) = 1.19, p > .2$. However, a 2 (status) X 2 (mortality salience) ANOVA of participants who were raised in an environment that they perceived as being high in parental authoritarianism revealed a significant status X mortality salience interaction $F(1,93) = 3.65, p < .06$. Post-hoc pair-wise comparisons revealed several significant differences. Participants who received both the death and high status authority figure conditions but perceived themselves to have been raised in a low authoritarian environment displayed less conformity than those who received parallel conditions but perceived themselves to have been raised in a high authoritarian environment $t(51) = 1.97, p < .06$. Participants who were raised in an environment that they perceived as being high in parental authoritarianism, and were exposed to the death condition were more likely to conform to the judgments of a high-status authority figure than a low status authority figure $t(53) = 2.38, p < .05$. Finally, a significant difference was found among those participants who perceived themselves to have been raised in a high authoritarian environment, who saw the judgments of the high status authority figure and received the death condition versus those who received the dental pain condition $t(54) = 2.25, p < .05$.

In order to ensure that these results were not due to general attitudinal

regression, we performed a four factor, 2 (self authoritarianism: high vs. low) X 2 (mortality salience: death vs. dental pain) X 2 (authority figure status: high vs. low) X 2 (punishment: harsh vs. lenient) ANOVA, using the RWA (Altemeyer, 1981) scores of the participants, which were collected during a mass testing session earlier in the semester. No three or four way interactions were significant, $p > .05$. A main effect for punishment $F(1, 205) = 29.45$, $p < .001$, and a two-way interaction $F(1, 205)$, $p < .05$, of status X punishment was significant.

Discussion

The results of the four-way (self authoritarianism X mortality salience X authority figure status X punishment) ANOVA indicate that making death salient does not promote general attitude regression among participants. The main effect of punishment in this analysis is most likely driven by basement effects that caused participants to evaluate the relatively benign nature of the moral transgression as deserving a very lenient punishment recommendation. The means for the absolute punishment scores (the amount of punishment participants assigned for the moral transgression) illustrates this general trend of lenience for the crime committed. The highest mean, which was in the death, high parental authoritarianism, high status, severe punishment condition was 42.69 (SD = 32.23) and lowest in the dental pain, low parental authoritarianism, low status, lenient punishment condition at $M = 16.89$ (SD = 15.67). If a more serious crime was depicted, a basement effect would have been unlikely and thus a main effect of punishment would have been improbable.

The post-hoc comparisons from the four factor ANOVA that included the scores of the participant's impressions of their parent's responses to the items on the RWA (Altemeyer) scale, clearly support our initial hypotheses. The comparison between participants who both received the death and high status authority figure conditions and perceived themselves as having been raised in an authoritarian environment displayed more conformity than those who perceived themselves to have been raised a non-authoritarian environment. In this condition, although participants who perceived themselves to have been raised in a non-authoritarian environment would have felt an increased need to buffer themselves from death anxiety, they did not seek security in the same manner as those who

perceived themselves to have been raised in a high authoritarian environment, presumably because of their lack of exposure to behavioral contingencies in which obedience to authority was rewarded.

Another significant difference was that participants who perceived themselves to have been raised in a high authoritarian environment, received the death condition and saw the high status authority figure displayed more conformity than those who received the low status authority figure example form. These results are also consistent with our prediction that individuals who were raised in a high authoritarian environment would be sensitive to cues of obedience and therefore show a behavioral differentiation between high and low status authority figures, particularly when asked to contemplate their own death. The non-significant reversal of this pattern in the high authoritarian, control condition is likely due to the non-threatening nature of the control condition, which does not create a need for increased security and thereby a need bolster one's anxiety buffer. Individuals who were raised in a high authoritarian environment will be hypersensitive to cues of obedience and authority because of the behavioral contingencies that are stressed as a means of feeling secure in authoritarian environments. When individuals who grew up in an authoritarian environment are forced to contemplate death, they will blanket themselves from the subsequent death anxiety by immediately seeking security in a way that is familiar, through blind adherence to authority. Conversely, if these individuals are not threatened by death, they will presumably have less need to invest themselves in the security of authority, and because of their sensitivity towards cues of authority, may be more critical towards authority figures. Consistent with this, Altemeyer suggests that authoritarian submission to authority figures is generally found for members of government, military and police forces. In this case, the authority of a Chemistry professor may not be evaluated as being legitimate compared to an individual in a more traditional position of power. The significant difference between participants raised in a high authoritarian environment that saw the high status authority figure and received the death condition versus those who received same conditions but received the dental pain instead of death, lends further support to this interpretation.

Overall these results support our initial hypothesis that people raised in an authoritarian environment would display increased conformity to a high status

authority figure. We will seek to address several issues in our follow-up studies. One alternative way of accounting for these results is that individuals are simply regressing to the attitudes imbued upon them by their parents, rather than seeking security by conforming to authority. This seems unlikely because mortality salience did not increase conformity among participants raised in a low authoritarian environment, however, future research should further investigate this possibility. Additionally we will seek to investigate this phenomenon in non-Western samples, to determine the robustness of these effects. Our results may prove even more robust in collective cultures where obedience to authority and conformity are more prominent as social norms than in our sample. Finally, we hope to determine if this phenomenon is specific to young adults who are in a transitional phase of ego development, or if individuals of all ages seek security in the manner they learned as children.

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TABLE 1

Conformity to authority as a function of perceived parental authoritarianism, mortality salience, and authority figure status.

<u>Authority Figure</u>	<u>High Perceived Parental</u>		<u>Low Perceived Parental</u>	
	<u>Authoritarianism</u>		<u>Authoritarianism</u>	
	Death	Dental Pain	Death	Dental Pain
High Status	21.05	31.88	27.08	24.37
Low Status	30.89	29.62	28.80	31.79

Dependent Variable: Deviation, in millimeters, from the punishment recommendation of the authority figure.

Note: Lower numbers indicate increased conformity; dependent measure shown is untransformed.