

Chapter 1

Who Are the Authoritarian Followers?

Because this book is called *The Authoritarians*, you may have thought it dealt with autocrats and despots, the kind of people who would rule their country, or department, or football team like a dictator. That is one meaning of the word, and yes, we shall talk about such people eventually in this book. But we shall begin with a second kind of authoritarian: someone who, because of his personality, *submits* by leaps and bows to his authorities. It may seem strange, but this is the authoritarian personality that psychology has studied the most.

We shall probably always have individuals lurking among us who yearn to play tyrant. Some of them will be dumber than *two* bags of broken hammers, and some will be very bright. Many will start so far down in society that they have little chance of amassing power; others will have easy access to money and influence all their lives. On the national scene some will be frustrated by prosperity, internal tranquility, and international peace--all of which significantly dim the prospects for a demagogue -in-waiting. Others will benefit from historical crises that automatically drop increased power into a leader's lap. But ultimately, in a democracy, a wannabe tyrant is just a comical figure on a soapbox unless a huge wave of supporters lifts him to high office. That's how Adolf Hitler destroyed the Weimar Republic and became the Fuhrer. So we need to understand the people out there doing the wave. Ultimately the problem lay in the followers.

In this chapter we'll consider the way I measure people's tendency to be authoritarian followers and whether this approach has any merit. And if after that you find yourself thinking, "More, more, I still want more. I simply love reading books on a monitor!" I'll tell you the story of what happened at my university on the night of October 19, 1994, When Authoritarians Ruled The Earth.

Right-Wing and Left-Wing Authoritarian Followers

Authoritarian followers usually support the established authorities in their society, such as government officials and traditional religious leaders. Such people have historically been the “proper” authorities in life, the time-honored, entitled, customary leaders, and that means a lot to most authoritarians. Psychologically these followers have *personalities* featuring:

- 1) a high degree of submission to the established, legitimate authorities in their society;
- 2) high levels of aggression in the name of their authorities; and
- 3) a high level of conventionalism.

Because the submission occurs to traditional authority, I call these followers *right-wing* authoritarians. I’m using the word “right” in one of its earliest meanings, for in Old English “riht”(pronounced “writ”) as an adjective meant lawful, proper, correct, doing what the authorities said. (And when someone did the lawful thing back then, maybe the authorities said, with a John Wayne drawl, “You got that riht, pilgrim!”)

¹ [\(Click on a note’s number to have it appear.\)](#)

In North America people who submit to the established authorities to extraordinary degrees often *turn out* to be political conservatives,² so you can call them “right-wingers” both in my new-fangled psychological sense and in the usual political sense as well. But someone who lived in a country long ruled by Communists and who ardently supported the Communist Party would also be one of my *psychological right-wing* authoritarians even though we would also say he was a political left-winger. So a right-wing authoritarian follower doesn’t necessarily have conservative political views. Instead he’s someone who readily submits to the established authorities in society, attacks others in their name, and is highly conventional. It’s an aspect of his personality, not a description of his politics. Right-wing authoritarianism is a personality trait, like being characteristically bashful or happy or grumpy or dopey.

You could have left-wing authoritarian followers as well, who support a revolutionary leader who wants to overthrow the establishment. I knew a few in the 1970s, Marxist university students who constantly spouted *their* chosen authorities, Lenin or Trotsky or Chairman Mao. Happily they spent most of their time fighting with each other, as lampooned in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* where the People's Front of Judea devotes most of its energy to battling, not the Romans, but the Judean People's Front. But the left-wing authoritarians on my campus disappeared long ago. Similarly in America "the Weathermen" blew away in the wind. I'm sure one can find left-wing authoritarians here and there, but they hardly exist in sufficient numbers now to threaten democracy in North America. However I have found bucketfuls of right-wing authoritarians in nearly every sample I have drawn in Canada and the United States for the past three decades. So when I speak of "authoritarian followers" in this book I mean right-wing authoritarian followers, as identified by the RWA scale.

The RWA Scale

The what? The Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale. Get out a pencil. I'm going to take you into the inner sanctum of a personality test. Just don't be **FRIGHTENED!**

Below is the latest version of the RWA scale. Read the instructions carefully, and then write down your response to each statement on a sheet of paper numbered 1-22.

This survey is part of an investigation of general public opinion concerning a variety of social issues. You will probably find that you agree with some of the statements, and disagree with others, to varying extents. Please indicate your reaction to each statement on the line to the left of each item according to the following scale:

Write down a -4 if you very strongly disagree with the statement.

Write down a -3 if you strongly disagree with the statement.

Write down a -2 if you moderately disagree with the statement.

Write down a -1 if you slightly disagree with the statement.

Write down a +1 if you slightly agree with the statement.

Write down a +2 if you moderately agree with the statement.

Write down a +3 if you strongly agree with the statement.

Write down a +4 if you very strongly agree with the statement.

If you feel exactly and precisely neutral about an item, write down a "0."

("Dr. Bob" to reader: We'll probably stay friends longer if you read this paragraph.) Important: You may find that you sometimes have different reactions to different parts of a statement. For example, you might very strongly disagree ("-4") with one idea in a statement, but slightly agree ("+1") with another idea in the same item. When this happens, please combine your reactions, and write down how you feel on balance (a "-3" in this case).

- ___ 1. The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things, while the radicals and protestors are usually just "loud mouths" showing off their ignorance.
- ___ 2. Women should have to promise to obey their husbands when they get married.
- ___ 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.
- ___ 4. Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else.
- ___ 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
- ___ 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.
- ___ 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.

- ___ 8. There is absolutely nothing wrong with nudist camps.
- ___ 9. Our country needs free thinkers who have the courage to defy traditional ways, even if this upsets many people.
- ___ 10. Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs.
- ___ 11. Everyone should have their own lifestyle, religious beliefs, and sexual preferences, even if it makes them different from everyone else.
- ___ 12. The “old-fashioned ways” and the “old-fashioned values” still show the best way to live.
- ___ 13. You have to admire those who challenged the law and the majority’s view by protesting for women’s abortion rights, for animal rights, or to abolish school prayer.
- ___ 14. What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.
- ___ 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 supposed to be done.”
- ___ 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. 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.
- ___ 18. 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.
- ___ 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.
- ___ 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 family values.
- ___ 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.

Done them all, as best you could? Then let's score your answers, and get an idea of whether you're cut out to be an authoritarian follower. First, you can skip your answers to the first two statements. They don't count. I put those items on the test to give people some experience with the -4 to +4 response system. They're just "warm-ups." Start therefore with No. 3.

If you wrote down a "-4" that's scored as a 1.

If you wrote down a "-3" that's scored as a 2.

If you wrote down a "-2" that's scored as a 3.

If you wrote down a "-1" that's scored as a 4.

If you wrote down a "0" or left the item unanswered, that's scored as a 5.

If you wrote down a "+1" that's scored as a 6.

If you wrote down a "+2" that's scored as a 7.

If you wrote down a "+3" that's scored as an 8.

If you wrote down a "+4" that's scored as a 9.

Your answers to Items 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19 and 22 are scored the same way.

Now we'll do the rest of your answers, starting with No. 4.

If you wrote down a "-4" that's scored as a 9.

If you wrote down a "-3" that's scored as an 8.

If you wrote down a "-2" that's scored as a 7.

If you wrote down a "-1" that's scored as a 6.

If you wrote down a "0" or left the item unanswered, that's scored as a 5.

If you wrote down a "+1" that's scored as a 4.

If you wrote down a "+2" that's scored as a 3.

If you wrote down a "+3" that's scored as a 2.

If you wrote down a "+4" that's scored as a 1.

Now simply add up your twenty scores. The lowest total possible would be 20, and the highest, 180, but real scores are almost never that extreme. Introductory psychology students at my Canadian university average about 75. Their parents average about 90. Both scores are below the mid-point of the scale, which is 100, so most people in these groups are not authoritarian followers in absolute terms. Neither are most Americans, it seems. Mick McWilliams and Jeremy Keil administered the RWA scale to a reasonably representative sample of 1000 Americans in 2005 for the Libertarian Party and discovered an average score of 90.^{3,4} Thus the Manitoba parent samples seem similar in overall authoritarianism to a representative American adult sample.⁵ My Manitoba students score about the same on the RWA scale as most American university students do too.

Let me give you three compelling reasons why you should treat your personal score with a grain of salt. First, psychological tests make mistakes about *individuals*, which is what you happen to be, I'll bet. Even the best instruments, such as the best IQ tests, get it wrong sometimes--as I think most people know. Thus the RWA scale can't give sure-thing diagnoses of individuals. (But it can reliably identify levels of authoritarianism in *groups*, because too-high errors and too-low errors tend to even out in big samples. So we'll do the group grope in this book, and not go on the individual counseling trip.⁶)

Second, how you responded to the items depended a lot on how you interpreted them. You may have writhed in agony wondering, "What does he *mean* by _____?" as you answered. If I failed often to get the gist of what I was saying over to you, your score will certainly be misleading.⁷

Third, you knew what the items were trying to measure, didn't you, you rascal! The RWA scale is a personality test disguised as an attitude survey, but I'll bet you saw right through it.⁸ In fact, you could probably take each statement apart and see how I was trying to slyly tap the various components of the RWA personality trait.

Take that first-scored item, No. 3: “Our country desperately needs a mighty leader (authoritarian submission) who will do what has to be done to destroy (authoritarian aggression) the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us” (conventionalism). Well if you’re smart enough to do that, you’re smart enough to realize how easily you might have slanted your answers to look good.⁹

So I didn’t ask you to answer the RWA scale to see if you’d find true happiness and fulfillment as a stormtrooper in some dictator’s army. It’s not a vocational test. Instead, I wanted you to experience for yourself the instrument used to identify and study authoritarian followers. Most of what I have uncovered about authoritarianism, I have dug up with this tool, and now you know what it is and how it works.¹⁰

Is the RWA Scale Valid?

According to the High Laws of Science (you do *not* have to genuflect here), ideas must be repeatedly tested to see if they fail. So the next (and extremely important) question is, does the RWA scale really measure what it says it measures? Are the test scores valid? If they are, we should find that high scorers submit to established authority more than most people do, aggress more in the name of such authority, and are much more conventional. What’s the evidence?

Authoritarian Submission. Everybody submits to authority to some degree. Imagine a world in which people ignored traffic laws and sped through red lights. The cost of auto insurance would shoot through the roof (although the line-ups to buy it would become much shorter). But some people go way beyond the norm and submit to authority even when it is dishonest, corrupt, unfair and evil. We would expect authoritarian followers especially to submit to corrupt authorities in their lives: to believe them when there is little reason to do so, to trust them when huge grounds for suspicion exist, and to hold them blameless when they do something wrong. We don’t expect absolutes here; people are much too complicated to completely, always, blindly

submit, no matter what. But IF the RWA scale truly measures the tendency to be an authoritarian follower, those who score highly on it should tend to do these things, right? So do they?

Well, they will tell you that people *should* submit to authority in virtually all circumstances. If you give them moral dilemmas (e.g. should one steal an absurdly expensive drug to save a life?) they're more likely to say, "The law is the law and must be obeyed" than most people are. High RWAs also say they would *bow* more to show respect for their fathers, the president of companies where they worked, and so on, than most people indicate. (An astronomer suggested I ask about the bowing, which I thought was silly, but he was right. "Social scientists are such blockheads!")

High RWAs trusted President Nixon longer and stronger than most people did during the Watergate crisis.¹¹ Some of them still believed Nixon was innocent of criminal acts even after he accepted a pardon for them.¹² (Similarly the Allies found many Germans in 1945 refused to believe that Hitler, one of the most evil men in history, had ordered the murder of millions of Jews and others. "He was busy running the war," Hitler's apologists said. "The concentration camps were built and run by subordinates without his knowing it.") To pick a more current example, authoritarian followers believed, more than most people did, President George W. Bush's false claims that Saddam Hussein had extensive links to al-Qaida, and that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. And they supported the invasion of Iraq, whereas less authoritarian Americans tended to doubt the wisdom of that war from the start.¹³

Caution No. 1. On the other hand, right-wing authoritarians did *not* support President Clinton during his impeachment and trial over the Monica Lewinsky scandal. So as I said, the support is not automatic and reflexive, but can be trumped by other concerns. In Clinton's case his administration not only had advocated for groups anathema to authoritarians, such as homosexuals and feminists, his sexual misdeeds in the White House deeply offended many high RWAs.

Shifting our focus a bit, please give your reaction to the story below:

It has been reported in the press that the FBI has maintained illegal wiretaps of the telephones of about 60 persons in the United States who were suspected of being sympathetic toward radical political organizations. The FBI is reported to be taking no chances that these persons might become active in their support of these groups. Under current legislation such wiretaps are legally permissible only if a judge has signed a court order authorizing them. The FBI reportedly has never sought court approval of these wiretaps because they believed their case was too weak and the courts would deny them. The FBI has denied the wiretaps exist, and described the report as a “complete fabrication.”

If the story is true, how serious a matter would you say the illegal wiretaps are?

0 = Not serious at all; they clearly are justified by the circumstances.

1 = Mildly serious

2 = Somewhat serious

3 = Pretty serious

4 = Extremely serious; such acts strike at the foundation of a free society.

What would you say? You can put me down for a “4.” What’s the point of having laws protecting privacy if the law enforcers can decide to ignore them whenever they wish, and then get away with it?

The issue may remind you of the Bush administration’s policy of authorizing the National Security Agency to engage in electronic spying, without warrants, on Americans suspected of supporting terrorism--which simply ignored the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act that required prior court approval of such surveillance. And indeed, David Winter at the University of Michigan discovered that high RWAs felt Bush’s policy was “both necessary and appropriate” because of terrorism. But the wiretaps case presented above comes from a study I did over thirty years ago, in the autumn of 1974, using students from five scattered American universities. I found that persons who scored highly on the RWA scale tended to answer with 0's, 1's and 2's, while those who scored low in RWA used 3's and 4's much more often. (The overall

average in those months immediately following Watergate equaled 3.0.)

And this is just the beginning. Over the years I have found that authoritarian followers blissfully tolerated many illegal and unjust government actions that occurred in the United States and Canada, such as:

- a police burglary of a newspaper office to get confidential information.
- drug raids carried out without search warrants because judges wouldn't give them.
- denial of right to assemble to peacefully protest government actions.
- "dirty tricks" played by a governing party on the opposition during an election.
- immigration office discrimination against radical speakers.
- placing *agents provocateurs* in organizations to create dissension and bad press relations.
- burning down the meeting place of a radical organization.
- unauthorized mail openings.

Authoritarian followers seem to have a "Daddy and mommy know best" attitude toward the government. They do not see laws as social standards that apply to all. Instead, they appear to think that authorities are above the law, and can decide which laws apply to them and which do not--just as parents can when one is young. But in a democracy no one is supposed to be above the law. Still, authoritarians quite easily put that aside. They also believe that only criminals and terrorists would object to having their phones tapped, their mail opened, and their lives put under surveillance. They have bought their tickets and are standing in line waiting for *1984*, *The Real Thing*. There might as well not be a Fourth Amendment to the Constitution. And when the Military Commissions Act of 2006 is used to deny people the right of *habeas corpus*--one of the oldest rights in western law--it is unlikely that right-wing authoritarians will object to the loss of this constitutional guarantee either.

In fact, who even needs the whole Bill of Rights? Here is a (fake) letter-to-the-editor I asked some San Francisco State University students to respond to in 1990.

If a person stops to think about it, most of the problems we are having can be traced to the Bill of Rights--or more precisely, to the way it has been interpreted by the Supreme Court. "Freedom of speech" has been twisted to mean that pornographers can sell their filth, and that anybody can say whatever he wants, whether it's good for society or not. And "freedom of religion" has been twisted to mean children can't pray in public schools any more. And the "right to happiness" has been twisted to mean women can have abortion after abortion if they're "unhappy" being pregnant. And think how many drug pushers and criminals have gotten off scot-free because their "rights" were supposedly violated after they had robbed or killed somebody.

A lot of people hoped the new Supreme Court, rid of the "Liberal Majority" which had made all these terrible rulings, would overturn them. But it's clear now that they won't. No Supreme Court can reverse the ruling of an earlier Supreme Court, so we are stuck with these interpretations as long as there is a Bill of Rights. And we will soon be destroyed as a nation because of them. So the only thing we can do, to make America the free, pure, safe Christian nation that the founding fathers intended it to be, is to repeal the Bill of Rights.

If you like, you can count up how many ignorant, inaccurate, misleading and just plain stupid things there are in this letter. I knew it was ridiculous when I composed it. But I got the material from various people I've heard speak on the subject. If you haven't heard them, tune in to "talk radio" some night.

I asked the students how sensible they thought the letter was, and whether they thought the Bill of Rights should be repealed. High RWAs found the letter pretty sensible, don't you know, and they favored repealing the Bill of Rights more than anyone else did. Which sprinkles a dash of irony into this stew. The founding fathers added the Bill of Rights to the Constitution to prevent tyranny *by the government*. I wonder if they realized that democracy could be undermined from "below" as well as crushed by tyranny from "above" by people who didn't want the freedoms?¹⁴

The last string of studies I want to lay before you regarding authoritarian submission concerns authoritarians' willingness to hold officials accountable for their misdeeds. Or rather, their lack of willingness--which catches your eye because high RWAs generally favor punishing the bejabbers out of misdoers. But they proved less likely than most people to punish a police officer who beat up a handcuffed demonstrator, or a chief of detectives who assaulted an accused child molester being held in jail, or--paralleling the trial of Lt. William Calley--an Air Force officer convicted of murder after leading unauthorized raids on Vietnamese villages.

The "Milgram experiment," which we shall discuss at the end of this book, offers another example of authoritarian followers "going easy" on authorities. In his famous study Stanley Milgram maneuvered subjects into a situation in which they were ordered by an Experimenter to inflict painful, and possibly lethal, electric shocks on another person (who in fact was not hurt at all). The subjects clearly did not want to deliver the shocks, but the Experimenter told them they had to. The Experimenter even said, if pressed, that he would accept responsibility for whatever happened. Yet Tom Blass of the University of Maryland at Baltimore found that high RWA students tended to blame the Experimenter *less* for what happened to the victim than most students did.¹⁵ Whom did they blame instead? I found, when I replicated the study, they blamed the poor devil who was ordered to deliver the shocks, and the *victim*, more than most others did.

If some day George W. Bush is indicted for authorizing torture, you can bet your bottom dollar the high RWAs will howl to the heavens in protest. It won't matter how extensive the torture was, how cruel and sickening it was, how many years it went on, how many prisoners died, how devious Bush was in trying to evade America's laws and traditional stand against torture, or how many treaties the U.S. broke. Such an indictment would grind right up against the core of authoritarian followers, and they won't have it. Maybe they'll even say, "The president was busy running the war. He didn't really know. It was all done by Rumsfeld and others."¹⁶

Authoritarian Aggression. When I say authoritarian followers are aggressive I don't mean they stride into bars and start fights. First of all, high RWAs go to church enormously more often than they go to bars. Secondly, they usually avoid anything approaching a fair fight. Instead they aggress when they believe right and might are on their side. "Right" for them means, more than anything else, that their hostility is (in their minds) endorsed by established authority, or supports such authority. "Might" means they have a huge physical advantage over their target, in weaponry say, or in numbers, as in a lynch mob. It's striking how often authoritarian aggression happens in dark and cowardly ways, in the dark, by cowards who later will do everything they possibly can to avoid responsibility for what they did. Women, children, and others unable to defend themselves are typical victims. Even more striking, the attackers typically feel morally superior to the people they are assaulting in an unfair fight. We shall see research evidence in the next chapter that this self-righteousness plays a huge role in high RWAs' hostility.

Believe it or not, researchers are not allowed to organize murderous mobs to study hostility. So we have to study authoritarian aggression in subtler ways. For example:

You are a judge presiding at the trial of "The People vs. Robert Smith." Evidence introduced in court indicates that on the evening of May 23rd, a Mr. Matthew Burns (a 47-year-old, Caucasian accountant) was walking to his car in a hotel parking lot when he was stopped by a man who produced a pistol and demanded Mr. Burns' wallet. Mr. Burns complied, but as the robber ran from the scene Mr. Burns ducked into a doorway and began shouting "Stop that man!"

These cries were heard by a policeman cruising nearby in a patrol car who after a short chase apprehended a Mr. Robert Smith, (a 28-year-old Caucasian of no fixed address or occupation). The police officer saw Mr. Smith throw what proved to be Mr. Burns' wallet down a sewer as he was being pursued. Smith matched the general description Mr. Burns gave of his assailant, but Mr. Burns was unable to identify Smith "with absolute certainty" because it was dark in the parking lot at the time of the robbery.

Smith told the court he saw *another* man running from the parking lot, and then he found the wallet. He began to run after picking up the wallet because he heard the police siren and realized how incriminating the circumstances were. That was also, according to Smith, the reason he threw the wallet down the sewer.

Smith has a record of two previous “mugging” arrests and one prior conviction. He was found guilty of robbing Mr. Burns by the jury, and it is your duty now to declare sentence. A second conviction of armed robbery of this sort is punishable by up to ten years imprisonment, with parole possible after 1/3 of the sentence has been served.

When asked if he had anything to say before being sentenced, Smith said again that he was innocent. What sentence would you give?

Many factors would undoubtedly shape someone’s decision in this matter, even if s/he were just filling out a booklet of surveys and was suddenly asked to imagine being a judge. But such role-playing does create a situation in which someone can imagine punishing someone else in the name of established authority. I’d give Smith about four or five years of further experience with the penitentiary system, and overall, subjects answering my survey would impose an average sentence of about 3.5 years. But right-wing authoritarians would send Robert Smith to the slammer for a significantly longer time than most people would.

In fact they’d send just about anyone to jail for a longer time than most people would, from those who spit on the sidewalk to rapists. However, as noted earlier, authoritarian followers usually would go *easy* on authorities who commit crimes, and they similarly make allowances for someone who attacks a victim the authoritarian is prejudiced against. (If you were a district attorney prosecuting a lynching case, you would NOT rejoice at a jury filled with high RWAs.) But in general they would sentence most criminals to longer terms than the average Joe would. They also tend to strongly endorse capital punishment.

Why are high RWAs extra-punitive against law-breakers? For one thing, they think the crimes involved are more serious than most people do, and they believe more in the beneficial effects of punishment. But they also find “common criminals” highly repulsive and disgusting, and they admit it feels personally good, it makes them glad, to be *able* to punish a perpetrator. They get off smiting the sinner; they relish being “the arm of the Lord.” Similarly, high RWA university students say that classmates in high school who misbehaved and got into trouble, experienced “bad trips” on drugs, became pregnant, and so on “got exactly what they deserved” and that they felt a secret pleasure when they found out about the others’ misfortune.¹⁷

Which suggests authoritarian followers have a little volcano of hostility bubbling away inside them looking for a (safe, approved) way to erupt. This was supported by an experiment I ran in which subjects were (supposedly) allowed to deliver electric shocks to someone trying to master a list of nonsense syllables. The subject/teacher could choose the level of shock for each mistake the learner made. Since the punishment was sanctioned by the experimenter, this opened the door for the authoritarian. The higher the subject’s RWA scale score, the stronger the shocks delivered.

Here are some items from another scale. How would you respond to them on a -4 to +4 basis?

1. There are entirely too many people from the wrong sorts of places being admitted into our country now.
2. Black people are, by their nature, more violent and “primitive” than others.
3. Jews cannot be trusted as much as other people can.
4. As a group, aboriginal people are naturally lazy, dishonest and lawless.
5. Arabs are too emotional, and they don’t fit in well in our country.
6. We have much to fear from the Japanese, who are as cruel as they are ambitious.

I'll bet you have figured out that I use these to measure prejudice. You may be taken aback however to discover that these prejudices usually show up bundled together in a person. But social psychologists found long ago that people who are prejudiced against one group are usually prejudiced against a whole lot more as well. Prejudice has little to do with the groups it targets, and a lot to do with the personality of the holder. Want to guess who has such wide-ranging prejudices? Authoritarian followers dislike so many kinds of people, I have called them "equal opportunity bigots." They will not win the gold medal in the Prejudice Olympics (we'll find out who does in a later chapter), but high RWAs will definitely be on the podium.¹⁸

Here's another one of my measures, which I call "Posse," that you may find so ridiculous that you'd say no one would ever buy into it. Humor me, gentle reader.

Suppose the federal government, some time in the future, passed a law outlawing various religious cults. Government officials then stated that the law would only be effective if it were vigorously enforced at the local level and appealed to everyone to aid in the fight against these cults.

Please respond to the following statements according to the following scale:

-4 indicates the statement is extremely untrue of you.

-3 indicates the statement is very untrue of you.

etc. to:

+4 indicates the statement is extremely true of you.

1. I would tell my friends and neighbors it was a good law.
2. I would tell the police about any religious cults I knew.
3. If asked by the police, I would help hunt down and arrest members of religious cults.
4. I would participate in attacks on religious cult meeting places if organized by the proper authorities.
5. I would support the use of physical force to make cult members reveal the identity of other cult members.
6. I would support the execution of religious cult leaders if the government insisted it was necessary to protect the country.

I'll assume, because I know what a fine person you are, that you would respond to each of these statements with a -4 or a -3. Most people do. But not authoritarian followers. They typically answer with -2s and -1s, and sometimes even say, "Yes I would." If that shocks you, remember that the premise behind "Posse" runs right down Main Street in the authoritarian aggression mind-set. When the authorities say, "Go get 'em," the high RWAs saddle up.

Who can 'em be? Nearly everybody, it turns out. I started with a proposition to outlaw Communists and found authoritarian followers would be relatively likely to join that posse. Ditto for persecuting homosexuals, and ditto for religious cults, "radicals" and journalists the government did not like. So I tried to organize a posse that liberals would join, to go after the Ku Klux Klan. But high RWAs crowded out everyone else for that job too. Then I offered as targets the very right-wing Canadian Social Credit Party, the Confederation of Regions Party, and the mainstream Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. These were the parties of choice for most authoritarian followers at the time, yet high RWAs proved more willing to persecute even the movements they *liked* than did others.

Finally, just to take this to its ludicrous extreme, I asked for reactions to a "law to eliminate right-wing authoritarians." (I told the subjects that right-wing authoritarians are people who are so submissive to authority, so aggressive in the name of authority, and so conventional that they may pose a threat to democratic rule.) RWA scale scores did not connect as solidly with joining this posse as they had in the other cases. Surely some of the high RWAs realized that if they supported this law, they were being the very people whom the law would persecute, and the posse should therefore put itself in jail. But not all of them realized this, for authoritarian followers still favored, more than others did, a law to persecute *themselves*. You can almost hear the circuits clanking shut in their brains: "If the government says these people are dangerous, then they've got to be stopped."

One more thing. Remember when I was talking about putting President Bush on trial for authorizing torture? Look back at Items 5 and 6 in my list of acts an ardent authoritarian follower might do in support of a malevolent government. It's been clear in my studies for several decades that lots of people, with no persuading by the authorities at all, were already close to endorsing the torture and execution *of their fellow citizens* if the government simply said it was necessary. So it would be no surprise at all if they supported President Bush's insistence that America be allowed to torture suspected foreign terrorists.

High RWAs tend to feel more endangered in a *potentially* threatening situation than most people do, and often respond aggressively. In 1987 my colleague Gerry Sande and I had five-man teams of male introductory psychology students role-play NATO in an "international simulation" involving (they thought) another team of students playing as the Warsaw Pact. Some of the NATO teams were composed entirely of low RWA students, and other NATO teams were stocked entirely with highs. (We experimenters secretly played the Warsaw Pact.) The simulation began with a couple of ambiguous moves by the Warsaw Pact, such as holding military exercises earlier than anticipated, and withdrawing divisions to rear areas (*possibly* for rest, or --as Dr. Strangelove might argue--possibly for redeployment for an attack). The NATO teams could respond with nonthreatening or threatening moves of varying magnitudes. But if they made threats, the Warsaw pact responded with twice as much threat in return, and the NATO team would reap what it had sown as an escalation of aggressive moves would likely result.

The low RWA teams did not interpret the ambiguous moves at the beginning of the game as serious threats and thus seldom made threatening moves. The high RWAs on the other hand usually reacted to the opening Warsaw Pact moves aggressively, and sowed a whirlwind. Over the course of the simulation, the high RWA teams made *ten times* as much threat as the low teams did, and usually brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.¹⁹

Caution No. 2. Can we conclude from all these findings that authoritarian followers always aggress when they think the “proper authorities” approve? No, no more than they always submit to established authority. “Always” is a lot, and such generalizations ignore the complexity of human motivation. Fear of counter-aggression can freeze the authoritarian’s hand, or belief that the hostility is unlawful and will be punished. Nevertheless, one can easily find settings in which high RWAs’ aggressive inclinations comes bubbling to the surface.

Conventionalism. By conventionalism, the third defining element of the right-wing authoritarian, I don’t just mean do you put your socks on before your shoes, and I don’t just mean following the norms and customs that you like. I mean believing that *everybody* should have to follow the norms and customs that your authorities have decreed. Authoritarians get a lot of their ideas about how people ought to act from their religion, and as we’ll see in chapter 4 they tend to belong to fundamentalist religions that make it crystal clear what they consider correct and what they consider wrong. For example these churches strongly advocate a traditional family structure of father-as-head, mother as subservient to her husband and caretaker of the husband’s begotten, and kids as subservient, period. The authoritarian followers who fill a lot of the pews in these churches strongly agree. *And* they want everybody’s family to be like that. (A word of advice, guys: check with your wives first.)

Thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev (Thanks so much, Mikhail!) I can show you how thoroughly some high RWAs sop up the teachings of another set of authorities, their government. As soon as Gorbachev lifted the restraints on doing psychological research in the Soviet Union an acquaintance of mine, Andre Kamenshikov, administered a survey to students at Moscow State University with the same freedom that western researchers take for granted. The students answered the RWA scale and as well a series of questions about who was the “good guy” and who was the “bad guy” in the Cold War. For example, did the USSR start the arms race, or the USA? Would the United States launch a sneak nuclear attack on the Soviet Union if it knew

it could do so without retaliation? Would the USSR do that to the United States? Does the Soviet Union have the right to invade a neighbor who looks like it might become allied with the United States? Does the USA have that right when one of its neighbors starts cozying up to the USSR? At the same time Andre was doing his study, I asked the same questions at three different American universities.

We found that in *both* countries the high RWAs believed their government's version of the Cold War more than most people did. Their officials wore the white hats, the authoritarian followers believed, and the other guys were dirty rotten warmongers. And that's most interesting, because it means the most cock-sure belligerents in the populations on each side of the Cold War, the ones who hated and blamed each other the most, were in fact the same people, psychologically. If they had grown up on the other side of the Iron Curtain, they probably would have believed the leaders they presently despised, and despised the leaders they now trusted. They'd have been certain the side they presently thought was in the right was in the wrong, and instead embraced the beliefs they currently held in contempt.^{20, 21}

Gidi Rubinstein similarly found that high RWAs among both Jewish and Palestinian students in Israel tended to be the most orthodox members of their religion, who tend to be among those most resistant to a peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict.²² If their authorities endorse hostility, you can bet most authoritarian followers will be combative. A lot of high RWAs apparently do not think that the peacemakers will be blessed.

You can also gauge the conventionalism of authoritarian followers through my "feedback-conformity experiments." I simply tell a group who earlier had filled out a scale for me what the average response had been to each item, in the sample as a whole. For example, I would tell them that the average answer to Item 1 of the RWA scale was a "+1," the average answer to Item 2 was a "-2," and so on. Then I ask the sample to answer the scale again, with the average-answers-from-before staring them

right in the face. The point, as you have no doubt surmised, is to see which extreme moves more toward the norm, the lows or the highs. High RWAs shift their answers toward the middle about twice as much as lows do. This even works on hard-core authoritarian beliefs such as their answers about homosexuals and religious fundamentalism.

Which explains another peculiar finding. If I tell a group of former subjects most of what I've told you in this chapter--which I think raise some questions about how "Blessed are the authoritarians"--and then ask the sample what they personally would like their own RWA scale score to be, what do you think happens? The low RWAs say they'd like to be low RWAs. So do the middles. But the highs usually say they want to be *middles*, not lows. I thought this happened because highs often dislike the people who would score low on the RWA scale, and that may be part of the explanation.. But I also discovered that if you ask subjects to rank the importance of various values in life, authoritarian followers place "being normal" substantially higher than most people do. It's almost as though they want to disappear as individuals into the vast vat of Ordinaries.

Caution No. 3. Once again, however, I should temper our natural tendency to overgeneralize. High RWAs would like to be rich as much as the next person would, they'd like to be smarter than average, and so on. It's "good" to be different in some ways, it seems. And I found they would not change their opinions about abortion an inch by showing them how different they were from most others. They are quite capable of adhering to the beliefs emphasized by their in-groups when these conflict with what is held by society as a whole. Nevertheless, they *do* get tugged by what they think everybody else is saying and doing. For example, their attitudes toward homosexuals have become markedly more positive recently, just as the rest of society's attitudes have changed. And thirty years ago the solid majority of high RWA students in my samples said premarital sexual intercourse was flat-out immoral. Now most say it is moral if the couple plans to get married.

Unauthoritarians and Authoritarians: Worlds of Difference

By now you must be developing a feel for what high RWAs think and do, and also an impression of low RWAs.²³ Do you think you know each group well enough to predict what they'd do if they ran the world? One night in October, 1994 I let a group of low RWA university students determine the future of the planet (you didn't know humble researchers could do this, did you!). Then the next night I gave high RWAs their kick at the can.

The setting involved a rather sophisticated simulation of the earth's future called the Global Change Game, which is played on a big map of the world by 50-70 participants who have been split into various regions such as North America, Africa, India and China. The players are divided up according to current populations, so a lot more students hunker down in India than in North America. The game was designed to raise environmental awareness,²⁴ and before the exercise begins players study up on their region's resources, prospects, and environmental issues.

Then the facilitators who service the simulation call for some member, any member of each region, to assume the role of team leader by simply standing up. Once the "Elites" in the world have risen to the task they are taken aside and given control of their region's bank account. They can use this to buy factories, hospitals, armies, and so on from the game bank, and they can travel the world making deals with other Elites. They also discover they can discretely put some of their region's wealth into their own pockets, to vie for a prize to be given out at the end of the simulation to the World's Richest Person. Then the game begins, and the world goes wherever the players take it for the next forty years which, because time flies in a simulation, takes about two and a half hours.

The Low RWA Game

By carefully organizing sign-up booklets, I was able to get 67 low RWA students to play the game together on October 18th. (They had no idea they had been funneled into this run of the experiment according to their RWA scale scores; indeed they had probably never heard of right-wing authoritarianism.) Seven men and three women made themselves Elites. As soon as the simulation began, the Pacific Rim Elite called for a summit on the “Island Paradise of Tasmania.” All the Elites attended and agreed to meet there again whenever big issues arose. A world-wide organization was thus immediately created by mutual consent.

Regions set to work on their individual problems. Swords were converted to ploughshares as the number of armies in the world dropped. No wars or threats of wars occurred during the simulation. [At one point the North American Elite suggested starting a war to his fellow region-aies (two women and one guy), but they told him to go fly a kite--or words to that effect.]

An hour into the game the facilitators announced a (scheduled) crisis in the earth's ozone layer. All the Elites met in Tasmania and contributed enough money to buy new technology to replenish the ozone layer.

Other examples of international cooperation occurred, but the problems of the Third World mounted in Africa and India. Europe gave some aid but North America refused to help. Africa eventually lost 300 million people to starvation and disease, and India 100 million.

Populations had grown and by the time forty years had passed the earth held 8.7 billion people, but the players were able to provide food, health facilities, and jobs for almost all of them. They did so by demilitarizing, by making a lot of trades that benefited both parties, by developing sustainable economic programs, and because the

Elites diverted only small amounts of the treasury into their own pockets. (The North American Elite hoarded the most.)

One cannot blow off four hundred million deaths, but this was actually a highly successful run of the game, compared to most. No doubt the homogeneity of the players, in terms of their RWA scores and related attitudes, played a role. Low RWAs do not typically see the world as “Us versus Them.” They are more interested in cooperation than most people are, and they are often genuinely concerned about the environment. Within their regional groups, and in the interactions of the Elites, these first-year students would have usually found themselves “on the same page”--and writ large on that page was, “Let’s Work Together and Clean Up This Mess.” The game’s facilitators said they had never seen as much international cooperation in previous runs of the simulation. With the exception of the richest region, North America, the lows saw themselves as interdependent and all riding on the same merry-go-round.

The High RWA Game

The next night 68 high RWAs showed up for their ride, just as ignorant of how they had been funneled into this run of the experiment as the low RWA students had been the night before. The game proceeded as usual. Background material was read, Elites (all males) nominated themselves, and the Elites were briefed. Then the “wedgies” started. As soon as the game began, the Elite from the Middle East announced the price of oil had just doubled. A little later the former Soviet Union (known as the Confederation of Independent States in 1994) bought a lot of armies and invaded North America. The latter had insufficient conventional forces to defend itself, and so retaliated with nuclear weapons. A nuclear holocaust ensued which killed everyone on earth--7.4 billion people--and almost all other forms of life which had the misfortune of co-habiting the same planet as a species with nukes.

When this happens in the Global Change Game, the facilitators turn out all the lights and explain what a nuclear war would produce. Then the players are given a second chance to determine the future, turning back the clock to two years before the hounds of war were loosed. The former Soviet Union however rebuilt its armies and invaded China this time, killing 400 million people. The Middle East Elite then called for a “United Nations” meeting to discuss handling future crises, but no agreements were reached.

At this point the ozone-layer crisis occurred but--perhaps because of the recent failure of the United Nations meeting--no one called for a summit. Only Europe took steps to reduce its harmful gas emissions, so the crisis got worse. Poverty was spreading unchecked in the underdeveloped regions, which could not control their population growth. Instead of dealing with the social and economic problems “back home,” Elites began jockeying among themselves for power and protection, forming military alliances to confront other budding alliances. Threats raced around the room and the Confederation of Independent States warned it was ready to start another nuclear war. Partly because their Elites had used their meager resources to buy into alliances, Africa and Asia were on the point of collapse. An Elite called for a United Nations meeting to deal with the crises--take your pick--and nobody came.

By the time forty years had passed the world was divided into armed camps threatening each other with another nuclear destruction. One billion, seven hundred thousand people had died of starvation and disease. Throw in the 400 million who died in the Soviet-China war and casualties reached 2.1 billion. Throw in the 7.4 billion who died in the nuclear holocaust, and the high RWAs managed to kill 9.5 billion people in their world--although we, like some battlefield news releases, are counting some of the corpses twice.

The authoritarian world ended in disaster for many reasons. One was likely the character of their Elites, who put more than twice as much money in their own pockets

as the low RWA Elites had. (The Middle East Elite ended up the World's Richest Man; part of his wealth came from money he had conned from Third World Elites as payment for joining his alliance.) But more importantly, the high RWAs proved incredibly ethnocentric. There they were, in a big room full of people *just like themselves*, and they all turned their backs on each other and paid attention only to their own group. They too were all reading from the same page, but writ large on their page was, "Care About Your Own; We Are NOT All In This Together."

The high RWAs also suffered because, while they say on surveys that they care about the environment, when push comes to shove they usually push and shove for the bucks. That is, they didn't care much about the long-term environmental consequences of their economic acts. For example a facilitator told Latin America that converting much of the region's forests to a single species of tree would make the ecosystem vulnerable. But the players decided to do it anyway because the tree's lumber was very profitable just then. And the highs proved quite inflexible when it came to birth control. Advised that "just letting things go" would cause the populations in underdeveloped areas to explode, the authoritarians just let things go.

Now the Global Change Game is not the world stage, university students are not world leaders, and starting a nuclear holocaust in a gymnasium is not the same thing as launching real missiles from Siberia and North Dakota. So the students' behavior on those two successive nights in 1994 provides little basis for drawing conclusions about the future of the planet. But some of what happened in this experiment rang true to me. I especially thought, "I've seen this show before" as I sat on the sidelines and watched the high RWAs create their very own October crisis.

Summary

You have trudged your way through (I suspect) the most boring chapter in this book, and are entitled to some sort of reward. I hope you consider this worthy

payment: You now know that the RWA scale is a reliable, a valid, and (as these things go) a rather powerful instrument for identifying the authoritarian follower personality. That's worth knowing because most of what follows in the later chapters depends on it. The social sciences are awash with attitude scales, opinion surveys, and personality tests, and frankly most of them are not very good imho. But this one appears to be the real deal. A goodly amount of evidence has piled up showing that scores on the RWA scale really do measure tendencies toward authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. We can therefore use it to try to understand the people who seem, so unwittingly, ready to cash in democracy, and perhaps the world.

In the next chapter we'll try to figure out why high RWAs are so aggressive. Then we'll try to understand how nice, ordinary people--like some of your neighbors, some of your co-workers, and perhaps even some of your relatives--became right-wing authoritarians.

Chapter 2, "The Roots of Authoritarian Aggression, and Authoritarianism Itself," will be released on this website on January 22.

Notes

¹ John Dean, who loves words the way I love pizza, pointed out this early meaning of "right" after pinning me to the wall on how come I called this personality trait right-wing authoritarianism. [Back to chapter](#)

² When writing for a general audience, I bandy about terms such as "conservative" and "right-wing" with the same exquisite freedom that journalists, columnists and politicians do. It's actually very hard to define these phrases rigorously, partly because they have been used over the ages to describe such very different people and movements. But we're all friends here, so let's pretend I know what I am talking about when I use these words. [Back to chapter](#)

³ If you've heard of an inconvenient truth, I just laid a convenient *untruth* on you so we can compare apples with apples. People who answered McWilliams and Keil's survey answered each RWA scale item on a -3 to +3, seven-point basis; thus scores on the test could go from 20 to 140. The average (mean) was 72.5. When you *map* that onto the 20 to 180 scale that results from the -4 to +4, nine-point format I use, you get 90. (No, not 93.2; it's not a proportion thing because the scales don't start at 0, but at 20. However, you get an "A" in word-problems; give yourself a hug.)

Next, as we touch the statistical bases, the RWA scale had an "alpha" coefficient of .90 in McWilliams and Keil's sample. Does that mean it was the boss coefficient, the way an "alpha animal" is the leader of the pack? No. When you're talking about a personality test, you care a lot about how well the items all measure the same underlying trait, even though on the surface they seem to be talking about lots of different things. That cohesiveness is called the *internal consistency* of the test, and strong item-to-item cohesiveness makes for a good test. The "alpha" coefficient, which can go from .00 to 1.00, reflects a test's internal consistency. If a 20-item test has an alpha of .90, it is very boss, just like 90% is a pretty good grade on a test. (Or is it, these days?) (In my day, 90% was an "A" in college. And we wrote our essays on the back of a coal shovel. And our college was located in an alligator-infested swamp twenty miles away in which we died every day. And....)

Finally you should know, if you are a social scientist on the prowl for scales to throw into the pot for your next project, that I have made a pact with the devil. Hell will be the final destination of any researcher who decides to use *only part* of the RWA scale, or any of my tests, in a study. Some investigators assume they have a right to chop up somebody else's carefully developed instrument as they wish and claim they are still measuring the same thing. I have yet to see one of these fly-by-night versions that measures the "thing" as reliably, or as validly, as the scale they pillaged, and of course these "scales" all tap somewhat different things depending on which items were dropped. Some of these hare-brained modifications aren't even

balanced against response sets. All this short-weighting introduces unnecessary confusion and error in the literature.

Physicists, astronomers, chemists, and so on learned long ago that it is essential to the scientific quest to standardize measurements, but many social scientists can't seem to understand that.

Beelzebub has even agreed to my request that these people be forced to listen to badly played banjo music 24/7/365/Eternity while in hell. There will be another room nearby featuring novice bagpipe players, for editors who accept articles that used a mangled version of one of my scales. [Back to chapter](#)

⁴ The Libertarian Party poll also solicited opinions on a variety of social issues and economic attitudes. RWA scale scores correlated highest with attitudes *against* same-sex marriage, abortion, drugs, pornography, women's equality, unconventional behavior and free speech, and *with* support for the Patriot Act and America's "right" to spread democracy by military force. In contrast, the relationships with economic issues (taxation, minimum wage, the public versus private sector, free trade) proved much weaker. The data thus indicate, as do a lot of other findings, that high RWAs are "social conservatives" to a much greater extent that they are "economic conservatives." [Back to chapter](#)

⁵ If I were you, I'd be wondering how well my results, which are based mainly on my local Canadian samples, apply to the United States. I wondered that too, so I made a determined effort when I started out to repeat my studies with American samples. I almost always found the same things in Alabama and Pennsylvania and Texas and Indiana and New York and Wyoming and California that I had found in Manitoba. Once American researchers began using my measures, I could simply loll by my hearth and read what others turned up in Massachusetts and Kentucky and Michigan and Nebraska and Washington and so on. The bottom line: A strong record of replication has accumulated over time.

Still, sometimes weird things happen. For example, a Colorado Ph.D. student recently told me she found no correlation between college students' RWA scale scores, and those of their parents--whereas correlations in the .40s to .50s have appeared quite routinely in the past. And naturally other researchers do not get *exactly* the same results I do in my studies. A relationship of .45 in my study might come in at .30 in an American one, or .60. But if I have found authoritarianism correlates significantly with something in a Manitoba-based study, then a significant correlation has appeared at least 90% of the time in American-based studies that tested the same thing. (That ain't bad in the social sciences, and I think it's mainly due to experienced researchers using good measures and careful methodologies.) [Back to chapter](#)

⁶The Weschler Adult Intelligence Survey, probably the most widely used IQ test, has a *reliability* of about .90. So also does the RWA scale, and nearly all the other tests I have developed that are mentioned in this book. (The alpha coefficient, described in note 3, is often used as an index of reliability.) What does that ".90" mean? It tells you that the "signal to noise" performance of your test equals 9 to 1. Most of what you are getting is useful "signal," and only 10% of it is meaningless, confusing "noise" or static. In these days of high definition television you would be all over your cable company if your TV picture was 10% "snow." But the reliability of most psychological tests falls well short of .90, you'll be disheartened to learn--especially after you're denied a job because of your score on one. You can easily find journal articles that say .70 is "adequate" reliability.

P.S. We're going to have a lot of technical notes at the beginning of this chapter as I try to anticipate the questions that you might bring up--if you are the careful, critical reader everyone says you are. Eventually the sailing will get smoother. But you don't have to read these notes, which you see can be rather tedious. They won't be on the exam. [Back to chapter](#)

⁷This isn't as big a problem with the RWA scale as it might be. Believe it or not, most people don't writh over the meaning of its statements. The items had to show they

basically meant the same thing to most people to get on the test in the first place. If a statement is terrifically ambiguous, the answers it draws will be all over the lot, connect to nothing else reliably, and explain zilcho. I know because I've written lots of crummy items over the years.

But I stubbornly plodded along until I got enough good ones. It took eight studies, run over three years, involving over 3000 subjects and 300 items to get the first version of the RWA scale in 1973. Then the scale was continually revised as better (less ambiguous, more pertinent) statements replaced weaker ones. Only two of the items you answered (Nos. 6 and 18) survive from the first version. The internal consistency of responses to the test is so high, producing its high alpha and reliability, because items that were too ambiguous fouled out of the game during all this testing. So the years spent developing the test paid off. Let's hear it for fixation. (And can you see why I get so p.o.'d when some researchers chop up my scales?).

But still, to any individual person, any item can mean something quite different from what I intend. And some people will consistently have "unusual" interpretations of the items. And the test, which was designed to measure right-wing authoritarianism in North America, will probably fall apart in markedly different cultures.

While we're on the subject of what the items on the RWA scale measure, people sometimes say "Of course conservatives (or religious conservatives) score highly on it; it's full of conservative ideas." I think this does a disservice to "conservative ideas" and to being "religious." Take Item 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." Knowing what you do about the *concept* of right-wing authoritarianism, you can pretty easily see the authoritarian submission ("God's laws...must be strictly followed"), the authoritarian aggression ("must be strongly punished"), and the run-away conventionalism in the underlying sentiment that everyone should be made to act the way someone's interpretation of

God's laws dictates. The item appears on the RWA scale *because* responses to it correlate strongly with responses to all the other items on the scale, which together tap these three defining elements of right-wing authoritarianism.

On the other hand the item, "Abortion, pornography and divorce are sins"--which you may agree reflects a *conservative* and *religious* point of view--would *not* make the cut for inclusion on the RWA scale because it does not ring the bells that identify a high RWA loudly enough. You could in fact sensibly agree with this statement and still *reject* Item 16, could you not? Item 16 isn't just about being conservative and religious. It goes way beyond that.

(My God! You're still reading this!) To put it another way, an empirical way: if you look at how responses to Item 16 correlate with the other items on the RWA scale, and then also look at how it correlates with some measure of traditional religious belief, such as the Christian Orthodoxy scale that measures acceptance of the Nicene Creed (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1982, 21, pp. 317-326), you'll find the former correlations are much stronger. Item 16 does not measure time-honored, customary religious sentiment so much as it measures right-wing authoritarianism dressed up in sanctimonious clothes. The same is true of all the other religion items on the RWA scale--most of which came onto the RWA scale relatively recently as authoritarianism in North America increasingly became expressed in religious terms. Furthermore, these items all individually correlate with the authoritarian behaviors we shall be discussing in this chapter.

Unless you think that *conservatives* (as opposed to authoritarians) are inclined to follow leaders no matter what, pitch out the Constitution, attack whomever a government targets, and so on--which I do *not* think--this too indicates that the items are not revealing conservatism, but authoritarianism. [Back to chapter](#)

⁸ The RWA scale is well-disguised. Personality tests are usually phrased in the first person (e.g., "I have strange thoughts while in the bathtub") whereas attitude surveys

typically are not (e.g., “Bath tubs should keep to ‘their place’ in a house”). So it is easy to pass off the RWA scale, a personality test, as yet another opinion survey. Most respondents think that it seeks “opinions about society” or has “something to do with morals.” [Back to chapter](#)

⁹ For the same good reasons, it’s out of bounds to give the RWA scale to your loved ones, and unloved ones, to show them how “authoritarian they are.”

By the way, chances are you have relatively *unauthoritarian* attitudes. You see, authoritarian followers are not likely to be reading this book in the first place, especially if their leaders told them it was full of evil lies, or schluffed it off as “scientific jibberish.” (This is not exactly a book that an authoritarian leader would want his followers to read. Don’t expect it to be featured as a prime selection by the Authoritarian Book of the Month Club.) Still, the real test of how authoritarian or unauthoritarian we are comes from how we act in various situations. And that, we shall see at the end of this book, is a whole different ball game than answering a personality test.

I am, incidentally, taking a minor chance by letting you score your own personality test in this book. I conceivably could get kicked out of the American or Canadian Psychological Associations--if I belonged to them. And for good reason: people have a long history of *over-valuing* psychological test results--which I have tried to warn you about. A good example of this popped up on the internet right after John Dean’s book, *Conservatives Without Conscience*, was published. Almost immediately a thread was begun on the Daily KOS site by someone who had Googled “authoritarianism” and found (s/he *thought*) the research program summarized in Dean’s book. S/he described the theory and also placed the personality test at the heart of this program right in the posting. Tons of people immediately jumped in, talking about how low they had scored on the test, how relieved they were that they weren’t an authoritarian, and how the theory and the attitudes mentioned on the test seemed so amazingly true and reminded them of “definite authoritarians” they knew.

Trouble was, they got the wrong research program and the wrong test. People were basing their analysis on a theory and scale developed during the 1940s, which has long been discredited and abandoned by almost all of the researchers in the field. So (1) Don't pay much attention to your score on the RWA scale, and (2) Realize how easy it is to *perceive* connections that aren't really there. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁰ One thing we haven't discussed is why half of the statements on the RWA scale (and any good personality test) are worded in sort of the "opposite way" such that you have to *disagree* with them to look authoritarian. The answer, it turns out, is quite important if you care about doing meaningful research with surveys or if you want to be a critical consumer of surveys. People tend to say "Yes" or "Agree" when they (1) don't understand a statement, (2) don't have an opinion, or (3) (Horror!) don't care about your survey. It's similar to what happens to me when I'm walking down the street, and an acquaintance on the other side yells something at me. If I didn't hear clearly what he said (an increasingly likely event, I confess) I'll often just smile and nod and continue on my way. Now this may prove idiotic. Maybe the person yelled, "Bob, you're walking on wet cement!" But I didn't know what he said; I assumed it was just a greeting, so I smiled and nodded and moved on. Well sometimes people just smile and nod and move on when they're answering surveys.

Political party pollsters know this, and that's why they word their surveys so that agreement will make their side look good, as in, "Do you think the governor is doing a good job?" If 50 percent of the public truly thinks so, the poll may well show 65 percent like the gov. But the trouble is, on some personality tests you can get so much smiling and nodding that people who are normal but indifferent will score abnormally high, invalidating the results. So it's wise to balance a scale so that a person has to *disagree* half the time to get a high score. Balancing doesn't stop the nodding and noodling, but meaningless agreement with the negatives cancels out the meaningless agreement with the positives and keeps the total score in the middle of the scale, where it can't do much harm.

(Beware: the last paragraph was the “fun part” of this note, so you can imagine what the rest is going to be like!) “Smiling and nodding” was at the heart of the hairy mess that early research on authoritarianism got itself into. All of the items on the first “big” authoritarian follower measure, something called the F (for Fascism) scale which came out of that 1940s research program mentioned in the previous note, were worded such that the authoritarian answer was to agree. So its scores could have been seriously affected by “yea-saying.” But other researchers said, “Maybe ‘yea-saying’ is itself part of being a compliant authoritarian follower. Let’s get some authoritarian followers and find out.” “Uh, how are we going to get them?” “Let’s use the F scale to identify them!” “But that’s what we’re trying to decide about!”

Many researchers were swamped by this dog-chases-its-own-tail whirlpool of reasoning until the mess was eventually straightened out by a carefully *balanced* version of the F scale. It showed that the original version *was* massively contaminated by response sets. These studies led to the development of the RWA scale, which was built from the ground up to control yea-saying, and studies with the RWA scale have made it clear that authoritarian followers *do* tend to agree more, in general, with statements on surveys than most people do. It is part of their generally compliant nature. It only took me about twenty years to get all this untangled, and would you believe it, some people still think fixated researchers have no fun! [Back to chapter](#)

¹¹ What is a “high RWA”? When I am writing a *scientific* report of my research I call the 25% of a sample who scored highest on the RWA scale “High RWAs” with a capital-H. Similarly I call the 25% who scored lowest “Low RWAs,” and my computer runs wondrous statistical tests comparing Highs with Lows. But in this book where I’m *describing* results, not documenting them, I’ll use “high RWAs” more loosely to simply mean the people in a study who score relatively highly on the RWA scale, and “low RWAs” will mean those who score relatively low on the test.

If I’ve made myself at all clear here, you’ll know that I am comparing *relative* differences in a sample. I am not talking about *types* of individuals, the way you might

say Aunt Barbara is *an* extrovert while Uncle Jim is *an* introvert. High and low RWAs are different from one another but not opposites. It's a matter of degree, not a hard cut, "100% versus 0%" distinction. [Back to chapter](#)

¹² (As always, reading this note is purely voluntary and in this particular case may even be a sign of madness.) We need to talk about generalizations, don't we. All of the findings I shall be presenting in this book are generalizations-with-exceptions, which means that whatever the issue, *some* high RWAs acted the way low RWAs typically did, and *some* lows acted like highs usually did. That's the stuff that the social sciences crank out, journal article after journal article: general truths, but hardly perfect ones.

Some generalizations have so many exceptions that you wonder why they're worth the bother; a lot of gender differences, for example, turn out to be miniscule. Other generalizations have so few exceptions you can almost take them to the bank; I'll show you a connection in Chapter 6 between RWA scale scores and political party affiliation *among politicians* that will knock your socks off--if you're a social scientist (wearing socks).

If you really want to know more about this (and you certainly don't have to; this is going to take a while), let's look at the fact that tall people tend to be heavier than short people. You compute *correlations* to get a fix on how well two things, like height and weight, go together. A correlation can go from 0.00 (no connection at all) to 1.00 (a perfect association). The correlation between height and weight among North American adults comes in at about .50, which means the two are "middlin'" connected. That's important if you're wondering how big to make the jackets for tall men. So the generalization is valid, and useful, but we all know some tall, skinny people and my wife knows a "Mr. Short and Dumpy" very well.

As a generalization about generalizations, the RWA scale correlations I present in this book usually run between .40 and .60. Thus they're about as solid as the

connection between height and weight. But how good is that in absolute terms? [*Warning: the next sentence will take you back to your high school algebra class, which may trigger unconscious memories of bizarre hair-dos and “meat loaf” in the cafeteria every Thursday. Proceed at your own risk.*] Social scientists commonly *square* a correlation to get an idea of how much of the “Mystery of Thing X” you can explain by Clue Y. So if weight and height correlate .50, ($.50 \times .50 = .25$, or) 25 percent of the difference in people’s weight can be explained by taking into account how tall they are. That’s rather good in this business, because our weight is affected by so many other things, by so many other things, such as how many Big Macs you stuff into yourself, and whether you jog or crawl to the fridge to get more Haagen- Dazs. (Some psychologists, I must confess, say you don’t have to square the correlation to see how much you have explained. Instead, the simple correlation itself tells you that. Bet you wish you were reading a book written by one of them, huh?)

(Have you ever had so much fun in one note? It gets even worse.) Most relationships reported in psychology research journals can only explain about 5--10 percent of why people acted the way they did. I call those “weak”. If one thing can explain 10 to 20 percent of another’s variability (the statistical phrase is “they share 10 to 20 percent of their variance”), I call that a “moderate” connection. I call 20 to 30 percent a “sturdy” relationship, and 30 to 40 percent gets the designation “strong” in my book. Above 40% equals “very strong,” and you could call above 50% “almost unheard of” in the behavioral sciences.

This may seem quite under-achieving to you, but it’s tough figuring people out and, as Yogi Berra might put it, everybody already knows all the things that everybody already knows. Social scientists are slaving away out on the frontiers of knowledge hoping to find big connections that nobody (not even your mother) ever realized before, and that’s practically impossible. Ask your mom.

In terms of precise correlation coefficients, a correlation less than .316 is weak, .316 to .417 is moderate, .418 to .548 is sturdy, .549 to .632 is strong, .633 to .707 is very strong, and over .707 is almost unheard of. These are my own designations, and they are probably set the bar higher than most behavioral scientists do. You can easily

find researchers who call .30 “a strong correlation,” whereas I think it is weak. (I could have used labels like “hefty,” “stout,” and “a great big fat one!” But for some reason I don’t like these designations.) [Back to chapter](#)

¹³ David Winters of the University of Michigan found in 2005 that the high RWAs in a large sample of university students believed the invasion of Iraq constituted a just war. They thought the danger posed by Iraq was so great, the United States had no other choice. They thought the invasion occurred only as a last resort, after all peaceful alternatives had been exhausted, and that the war would bring about more good than evil. They rejected the notion that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction showed the “pre-emptive” attack had not been necessary for self-defense. They also rejected the suggestion that the war was conducted to control oil supplies and extend American power, or as an act of revenge. And they still believed that Saddam had been involved in the 9/11 attacks.

If you want a star-spangled example of authoritarian submission by an ordinary citizen, it would be hard to beat the sentiment of Clydeen Tomanio of Chickamauga, Georgia, who was quoted on a CNN.com report dated September 7, 2006 as saying, “There are some people, and I’m one of them, that believe George Bush was placed where he is by the Lord. I don’t care how he governs, I will support him.”

In turn, you won’t find a better example of authoritarian submission in government than that displayed by Steven Bradbury, the Acting Assistant Attorney General in the Justice Department, on July 11, 2006. At the end of June the Supreme Court ruled that the Pentagon’s use of special military commissions to try suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay violated the Geneva Conventions and the United States Uniform Code of Military Justice. Bradbury appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee to explain what the administration was therefore going to do instead. Pressed by Senator Leahy of Vermont to say whether President Bush was right in his assessment of the situation, Bradbury replied, “The president is always right.”

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¹⁴ Lest I seem to be Yank-bashing, when some of my best friends are Americans (including I), let me add that I have obtained the same results many times in Canadian samples regarding Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And Sam McFarland, Vladimir Ageyev and Marina Abalakina (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1992, 63, 1004--1010) discovered "very strong" to "almost unheard of" correlations (see the end of note 12) between RWA scale scores and dislike of dissidents, rejection of a free press, and opposition to democracy in a representative poll of Soviet adults during the last days of the USSR. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁵ Blass, T. (1992) "Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Role as Predictors of Attributions about Obedience to Authority." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Boston. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁶ This is the third time I have referred to George W. Bush, his administration, or his supporters, and we're only half-way through chapter 1. I am running a risk, in a book I hope will have some lasting value, by anchoring it so much in the here-and-now. I'm doing so partly because the here-and-now naturally appeals to contemporary readers. But mainly I am doing it because the past six years have provided so many examples of authoritarian behavior in American government. There has never been a more obvious, appropriate, and pressing time for this discussion. The threat that authoritarians poses to American democracy has probably never been clearer. It is just a coincidence, but human affairs have provided the foremost example of how badly right-wing authoritarianism can damage the United States at the same time my work has come to an end and I am telling everyone what I've found. George W. Bush has been the most authoritarian president in my lifetime, as well as the worst. And that's *not* a coincidence. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁷ High RWAs are also *slightly* more likely to "blame the victim" for misfortunes suffered. This is especially so when the victim has done something the authoritarian disapproves of (e.g., a young woman who is raped after going to a party sexily

dressed, a young man who gets beaten after leaving a bar, a woman who is killed by her husband when she leaves him, seeks a divorce and starts dating another man). But it even shows up in some situations in which the victim was utterly blameless (e.g., a family that was standing on a grate on a downtown sidewalk when an electrical transformer underneath them exploded).

Social psychologists generally think that people blame victims because it maintains belief in a just world. You see, if tragedies happen to the virtuous, and you think you are virtuous, then bad things could happen to you. It's more comforting to believe bad things usually happen to bad people--so you are safe. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁸ Right-wing authoritarians are prejudiced *compared to other people*. That does not mean they think that Jews can't be trusted at all, that all Black people are naturally violent, or that every Japanese is cruel. High RWAs may, as a group, even disagree with these blatantly racist statements. However they don't disagree very much, while most people strongly or very strongly disagree. So authoritarian followers are *relatively* prejudiced, which means it would presumably take less persuasion or social pressure to get them to discriminate than it would most people. [Back to chapter](#)

¹⁹ Of course, what would have happened if the Warsaw Pact had been preparing an attack on NATO? Wouldn't the low RWA teams have been caught unprepared? Probably not, because the ambiguous opening moves by the Communist Bloc were not that immediately serious. But many people perceive "liberals" as being "weak on defense," too trusting of their enemies, and proven fools when dealing with potentially dangerous situations. So in 1996 I asked students to pretend they were the leader of Israel. Israel wanted to be recognized by its Arab neighbors and live in peace. But it also feared that Arab nations would destroy it if they had the chance. So Israel had the strongest armed forces in the region. One thing Israel could do, the subjects were told, that *might* open the door to peace would be to return the strategic Golan Heights to Syria. Suppose the chances of this bringing a lasting peace were only one in four. Would the subject do it? Suppose it had a 50-50 chance of working, other subjects

were asked. Would they take the chance? Suppose, a third group was told, the odds were three-to-one that Syria would prove trustworthy and a lasting peace would result. Would you surrender the Heights?

What did the low RWAs do in these various conditions? Only 37 percent said they would take the chance against 3-1 odds, but most of the lows (61 percent) facing the 50-50 situation would have given back the Golan Heights. With 3-1 odds in favor of a lasting peace, 73 percent of those lows would have made the move. Whether you think all of these foolishly high, or foolishly low, they do follow the logic of being more willing to take the chance as the odds of success increase.

What did the high RWAs say? Nothing very logical, I'm afraid. Nearly half (48 percent) said they'd return the Golan Heights if the odds for peace were 3-1 *against*. Increasing the odds for a successful outcome to 50-50 made highs *less* willing (41 percent) to make the gesture. When the odds got to 3-1 in favor of peace, 60 percent said "Go for it." The authoritarian followers thus didn't seem to pay much attention to the odds for success, and *they* proved to be the ones who'd take a foolish chance for peace in this situation. So who's the peacenik?

I ran the experiment again with a sample of parents in 1997, using just the first and third conditions. The low RWAs again showed sensitivity to the chances for success, with 37 percent willing to return the Heights if the odds for peace were 3-1 against, but 57 percent saying they would do so if the odds were 3-1 in favor. The high RWAs again proved unfathomable and bigger risk takers, with 62 percent and 63 percent returning the Heights in the two respective conditions.

Maybe high RWAs don't like Israel. But I doubt they like Syria more. Or maybe this has something to do with religious fundamentalists wanting a big war in the middle east so the End of the World can gloriously occur. But just as the data from the NATO simulation indicate high RWAs tend to make an ambiguous situation

dangerous, the Golan Heights experiment indicates that high RWAs are likely to turn a secure situation into a dangerous one. Their thinking simply baffles one at times--a topic we'll take up in chapter 3. [Back to chapter](#)

²⁰ I'm not saying that the United States was the bad guy in the Cold War and the Soviet Union was the good guy. The people of Russia and other Communist-controlled European countries made it clear how evil they thought the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist dictatorships were. But in the context of this study, I think you can point out instances in which both sides invaded neighbors to control their international allegiance, lied to their own people and to the world, made disarmament proposals for public relations purposes on the world stage, and so on. And when their government did such things, the authoritarian followers in *both* countries tended to believe and support them more than others did. [Back to chapter](#)

²¹ This and a study by McFarland, Ageyev and Abalakina-Papp (see note 14) confirmed--you will please notice because it means a lot to me--what I said about *right-wing* authoritarianism at the beginning of this chapter. High RWAs in the USSR turned out to be mainly members of the Communist Party. So *psychologically* they were right-wing authoritarian followers, even though we would say they were, as Communists, extreme political and economic left wingers. [Back to chapter](#)

²² See Gidi Rubinstein, "Two Peoples in One Land: A Validation Study of Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale in the Palestinian and Jewish Societies in Israel," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 1996, 27, 216-230.

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²³ People often ask me two questions when they know as much about right-wing authoritarians as I've told you so far. 1) Who scores higher, men or women? and 2) Have scores on the scale gone up or down over the decades? Virtually every study I know of has found men and women score about the same, on the average. Men probably tend to be more aggressive than women, but women are supposed to be more conventional, so it seems to even out. As for changes over time, that's rather

interesting because as I have kept on giving the test to students entering my university year after year, the successive 18 year olds' answers have seemed to reflect the mood of their times. So in the early 1970s, when the test was invented, scores were pretty low. They've never been as low since. Instead they slowly climbed up and up, peaking in the mid 1980s. Then they started dropping and have remained about half-way between the low and high extremes since 1998. By age 18 university students appear to be "carriers" of their times. [Back to chapter](#)

²⁴ I knew about the Global Change Game because one of our sons, Rob, helped develop it. It has been used from coast to coast to coast in Canada, and elsewhere, in high schools and universities, to raise environmental awareness. Rob had certainly heard of authoritarianism. (Had he experienced it in his upbringing? Never say it!) He (and other) facilitators might have guessed the independent variable I was manipulating in this experiment, especially from the conservative dress and religious emblems worn by the highly authoritarian students at their game. But the facilitators have little to do with the decisions made by each region in the Global Change Game, and certainly they had no hand in causing the blood-bath that ensued on high RWA night. [Back to chapter](#)