



# Understanding Authoritarianism

This presentation explores the psychological and sociological dimensions of authoritarianism, from individual personality traits to large-scale cultural movements. We'll examine the foundational research on authoritarian personalities, measurement tools like the F-Scale, and the concept of right-wing authoritarianism.

We'll also analyze key empirical studies connecting authoritarian traits to obedience, and conclude with a case study of one of history's most significant authoritarian movements: the Cultural Revolution in China.



**by Stephen Renwick**

# The Authoritarian Personality

The concept of the authoritarian personality emerged from research by Theodor Adorno and colleagues in the aftermath of World War II. They sought to understand the psychological factors that made individuals susceptible to fascist ideology and willing to submit to authoritarian leadership.

This personality type is characterised by rigid adherence to conventional values, uncritical submission to authority figures, and aggression toward those who violate social norms. Individuals with authoritarian personalities typically display black-and-white thinking, intolerance of ambiguity, and a tendency to categorise people as either in-group or out-group members.



## **Rigid Adherence to Convention**

Strong preference for traditional values and resistance to change in social structures.



## **Uncritical Submission to Authority**

Tendency to obey authority figures without questioning their legitimacy or decisions.



## **Aggression Toward Outgroups**

Hostility directed at those perceived as different or threatening to established norms.

# The F-Scale: Measuring Authoritarian Tendencies

The F-Scale (Fascism Scale) was developed by Adorno and colleagues as a psychometric instrument to measure implicit authoritarian personality characteristics. The "F" refers to its original purpose of identifying fascist tendencies without directly asking about political beliefs.

This 30-item questionnaire assesses nine traits: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and exaggerated sexual concerns.

## Sample F-Scale Items:

- Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn
- What this country needs most is discipline and unity
- People can be divided into two distinct classes: the weak and the strong

## Methodological Limitations:

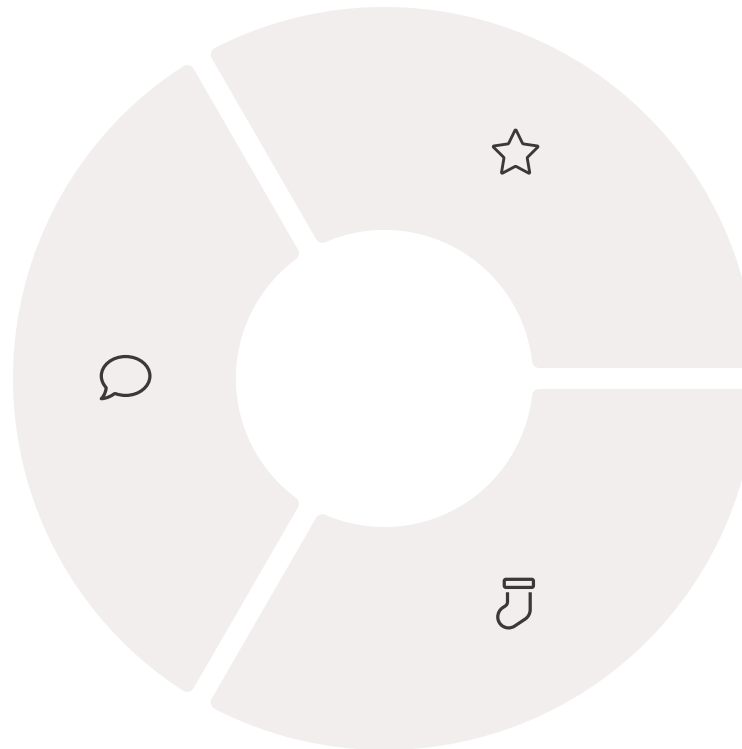
- Acquiescence bias (all items scored in same direction)
- Cultural and historical specificity
- Potential political bias in item construction

# Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) represents Robert Altemeyer's refinement of the authoritarian personality concept. Despite its name, RWA is not inherently tied to right-wing politics but rather describes a psychological tendency that can manifest across the political spectrum.

Altemeyer's research identified three core components that cluster together: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. His RWA scale improved upon the F-Scale by addressing methodological concerns and providing a more reliable measurement tool.

**Authoritarian Submission**  
High degree of submission to established  
authorities in society



## **Authoritarian Aggression**

General aggressiveness directed against various persons, sanctioned by established authorities

## **Conventionalism**

Strong adherence to social conventions endorsed by society and established authorities

# Key Study: Elms and Milgram (1966)

In 1966, Alan Elms and Stanley Milgram conducted a pivotal follow-up study to Milgram's famous obedience experiments. They sought to determine whether participants who showed high obedience in the original shock experiments displayed authoritarian personality characteristics.

The researchers administered personality measures, including the F-Scale, to subjects from Milgram's earlier studies. Their findings revealed a significant correlation between authoritarian personality traits and obedient behavior in the experimental setting.

## Original Milgram Study

Participants instructed to administer increasingly severe "shocks" to learners when they made errors

## Follow-up Assessment

Elms and Milgram administered F-Scale and other personality measures to original participants

## Key Finding

Obedient subjects scored significantly higher on measures of authoritarianism than disobedient subjects

# The Cultural Revolution: Background

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a sociopolitical movement in China launched by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. Ostensibly aimed at preserving Chinese communism by purging capitalist and traditional elements from society, it represents one of history's most significant manifestations of authoritarian control.

Mao mobilised China's youth as Red Guards to enforce his vision, targeting intellectuals, officials, and anyone deemed counter-revolutionary. The movement provides a compelling case study of how authoritarian principles can be implemented on a massive scale, affecting millions of lives.

## Key Objectives:

- Eliminate "bourgeois" influences from society
- Re-impose Maoist thought as dominant ideology
- Remove political opponents within the Communist Party
- Create a new generation of revolutionary youth







# The Cultural Revolution: Authoritarian Mechanisms

The Cultural Revolution exemplified authoritarian principles through several key mechanisms. Public criticism sessions, known as "struggle sessions," forced individuals to confess supposed ideological crimes before hostile crowds. The cult of personality surrounding Mao reached unprecedented heights, with his Little Red Book becoming required reading.

The movement relied heavily on authoritarian submission (absolute loyalty to Mao), authoritarian aggression (violence against "class enemies"), and rigid conventionalism (strict adherence to Maoist thought). These mechanisms directly parallel the core components of authoritarian personality theory.



## **Ideological Indoctrination**

Mass distribution of Mao's writings and mandatory political study sessions



## **Public Humiliation**

Struggle sessions where "enemies" were forced to confess ideological crimes



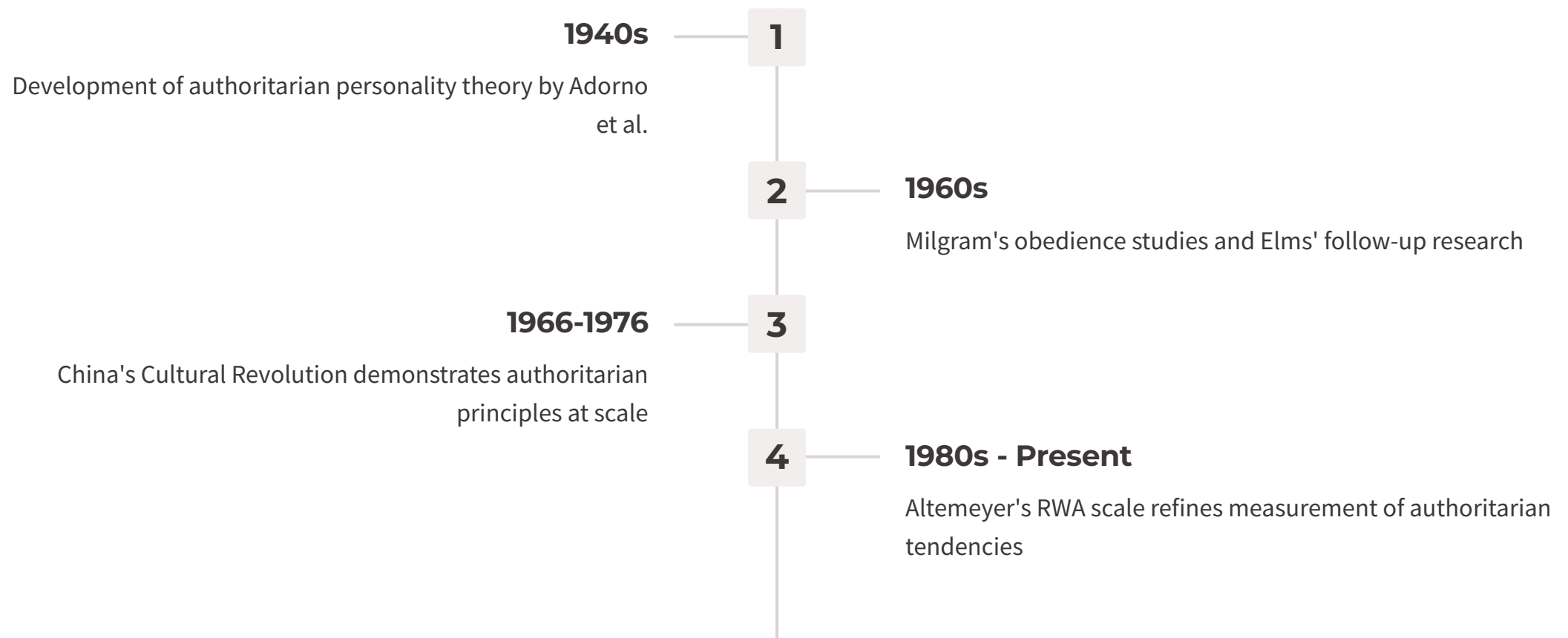
## **Violent Enforcement**

Red Guards empowered to attack those deemed insufficiently revolutionary

# Connecting Theory to Historical Reality

The theories of authoritarian personality, the F-Scale, and right-wing authoritarianism provide valuable frameworks for understanding historical events like the Cultural Revolution. These psychological constructs help explain how ordinary individuals can participate in extraordinary acts of obedience and aggression when embedded in authoritarian systems.

The Cultural Revolution demonstrates how authoritarian tendencies can manifest at societal scale, while studies like Elms and Milgram's research connect these tendencies to individual behaviour in controlled settings. Together, they illustrate the continuum from personality traits to mass movements.





# Evaluation/Discussion



## Authoritarianism

Previous research into authoritarianism has been criticised for internal validity.

Dambrun and Vatine (2010) used a virtual environment, where subjects were told the shocks and reactions were not real. Subjects still responded as if they were real and a clear relationship was found between the subjects' RWA scores and the maximum voltage shock. Subjects who displayed RWA obeyed the most, supporting the link between obedience and authoritarianism.



## Authoritarian or Obedience?

Researchers asked subjects about their upbringing, and most of the obedient subjects reported having good relationships with their parents, suggesting they didn't have a strict upbringing (which is linked to an authoritarian personality).

Research suggests that it is unlikely all the subjects in Milgram's original research had a strict upbringing. This suggests that any link between the two is not sufficient.



## Left-Wing

The formulation of the Authoritarian Personality being 'right-wing' suggests that people who define themselves more on the 'right' are more likely to obey authority. This would suggest that those on the 'left' are less authoritarian.

Bague et al. (2014) conducted research using a 'fake' game show where subjects had to administer (fake) shocks to other contestants. After completing the 'World Value Survey Questionnaire', the results highlighted how those on the left gave lower shocks to other contestants.



# Questions

1. Explain what is meant by the authoritarian personality. (2)
2. Outline and discuss research into the authoritarian personality. (8)
3. Define right-wing authoritarianism. (2)
4. Discuss the authoritarian personality as a way of explaining obedience to authority. (12)