

Chapter 2

The Roots of Authoritarian Aggression, and Authoritarianism Itself

I said in the Introduction that we would dig up the roots of authoritarian aggression. We're going to do that now for authoritarian *followers* (and we'll take up the hostility that roars so relentlessly from their leaders in a later chapter). After we have exposed the psychological causes of the followers' aggression here, we'll wrestle with the issue of how they became authoritarian followers in the first place.

Since followers do virtually all of the assaulting and killing in authoritarian systems--the leaders see to this most carefully--we are dealing with very serious matters here. Anyone who follows orders can become a murderer for an authoritarian regime. But authoritarian followers find it easier to bully, harass, punish, maim, torture, "eliminate," "liquidate," and "exterminate" their victims than most people do. We saw in chapter 1 that high RWAs are more likely to inflict strong electric shocks in a fake learning experiment in which they choose the punishment level, are more likely to sentence common criminals to long jail sentences, are more likely to be prejudiced, are more willing to join "posses" organized by authorities to hunt down and persecute almost any group you can think of, are more mean-spirited, and are more likely to blame victims of misfortune for the calamities that befall them. So while on the surface high RWAs can be pleasant, sociable, and friendly, they seemingly have a lot of hostility boiling away inside them that their authorities can easily unleash. Indeed, this authoritarian aggression is one of the three defining elements of authoritarianism. What causes it?

A Psychoanalytic Explanation

Several theories have tried to explain authoritarian aggression, and the Freudian one has long been the best known. I was quite seduced by its ingenuity and drama when I first heard of it. Let's see if it can seduce you.

Supposedly the future authoritarian follower was severely punished as a child by his cold, distant parents for any signs of independence or rebellion. So such urges were repressed. Instead, through a reaction-formation the child became obedient, loyal, even adoring of his parents. But deep down inside he hated them. However the Freudian “deep down inside” doesn’t have a shredder or burn-basket, so ultimately the repressed hostility had to come out some way. Thus the authoritarian follower projected his hostility onto safe targets, such as groups whom the parents disliked or people who couldn’t fight back, and decided they were out to get him. That projection provided the rationalization for attacking them and, voila, you have authoritarian aggression--thanks to just about all the ego defense mechanisms in Freud’s book.

Seduced? Resistance is futile? Ready to be assimilated into the Freudian bloc? You’ll find it lonely there. You may have heard that Freud no longer rules the roost in psychology, and this explanation of authoritarian aggression reveals a big reason why. It’s basically untestable. You have no way of discovering whether it is right or wrong, because it supposedly involves deeply unconscious defense mechanisms which the defending mechanic knows nothing about, and so will quite honestly deny.

If you try instead to study the “leaks” from the Freudian unconscious, such as dreams or fantasies, you get a mishmash that can be interpreted however you wish. Suppose you did a study of dreams and concluded that authoritarians greatly love their parents. “Ah ha,” the theory would say with goose bumps breaking out, “there’s that reaction-formation I told you about.” Suppose you found, on the other hand, that authoritarians seemed to hate their parents. “Ah ha,” the Freudians would remark, “Just as we said; their unconscious mind is so filled with dislike for dad and mom, it can’t be held back any more.” Suppose you found that authoritarians dream both good things and bad things about their parents. “Ah ha,” goes the explanation. “You see both repression and the true feelings are at work.”

One gets nowhere with a theory that can “predict” whatever happened, *after* it happens. Having an answer for everything may make one a great used car salesman, but it rings the death knell for a theory in science. In science, the best explanations are nailed-down-testable.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory of Aggression

A more testable explanation of aggression in general has been provided by Albert Bandura of Stanford University. Bandura says that aggression occurs after two switches are thrown. First some bad feeling like anger or envy stirs up hostility. But that by itself won’t lead to aggression. An angry individual who wants to attack someone may anticipate getting punched in return, or ending up in jail. Or he may have moral restraints against hurting others. So the second stage involves overcoming these restraints, setting aside these inhibitions, letting the aggression erupt and flow.

The Instigator. What sort of bad feelings are likely to be burning away inside high RWAs that would create an urge to attack? I looked at a lot of possibilities. Do they feel guilty about sins they have committed, and attack “sinners” to distance themselves from Satan? Do they secretly envy the jolly good times that sinners seem to be having, and attack them out of jealousy? Are they unsure God will punish the sinners--remembering the parable of the laborers in the vineyard--and so get in a few whacks in the here-and-now just to make sure sinners pay something?

Well, maybe. But please have a look at the statements below.

1. Any day now, chaos and anarchy could erupt around us. All the signs are pointing to it.
2. Our society is **not** full of immoral and degenerate groups who viciously attack decent people.
News reports of such cases are often sensationalized and misleading.
3. If our society keeps degenerating the way it has been lately, it’s liable to collapse like a rotten log and everything will be chaos.
4. If our society continues to sink into wickedness and corruption, God will destroy us someday as

surely as he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

5. We do **not** live in an increasingly dangerous world headed for anarchy.
6. Law and order still prevail in our society. The rule of reason has **not** been replaced by the law of the jungle

These items and others like them comprise the Dangerous World scale. Items 1, 3, and 4 are worded such that agreement means the person believes society is about to collapse from depravity and decadence. For Items 2, 5, and 6, *disagreement* means you think The End Is Near.

Authoritarian followers score highly on the Dangerous World scale, and it's not just because some of the items have a religious context. High RWAs are, in general, more afraid than most people are. They got a "2 for 1 Special Deal" on fear somehow. Maybe they've inherited genes that incline them to fret and tremble. Maybe not. But we do know that they were raised by their parents to be afraid of others, because both the parents and their children tell us so.

Sometimes it's all rather predictable: authoritarians' parents taught fear of homosexuals, radicals, atheists and pornographers. But they also warned their children, more than most parents did, about kidnappers, reckless drivers, bullies and drunks--bad guys who would seem to threaten everyone's children. So authoritarian followers, when growing up, probably lived in a scarier world than most kids do, with a lot more boogeymen hiding in dark places, and they're still scared as adults. For them, gay marriage is not just unthinkable on religious grounds, and unnerving because it means making the "abnormal" acceptable. It's yet one more sign that perversion is corrupting society from the inside-out, leading to total chaos. Many things, from stem cell research to right-to-die legislation, say to them, "This is the last straw; soon we'll be plunged into the abyss." So probably did, in earlier times, women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, sex education and Sunday shopping.

Thus it turns out in experiments that a person's fear of a dangerous world predicts various kinds of authoritarian aggression better than any other unpleasant feeling I have looked at. As my mentor, Brewster Smith of the University of California at Santa Cruz, said when I told him that fear set off authoritarian aggression more than anything else, "We do have to fear fear itself." And of course fear rose in the United States after 9/11. As Dave Barry put it in a column in November 2004, "Attorney General John Ashcroft has issued one of those vague, yet at the same time, unhelpful federal terrorism warnings that boil down to: 'Be afraid! Be very afraid!'"

Events like the attacks of 9/11 can drive large parts of a population to being as frightened as authoritarian followers are day after day. In calm, peaceful times as well as in genuinely dangerous ones, high RWAs feel threatened. They have agreed on the RWA scale, year after year since the 1970s, that sinfulness has brought us to the point of ruin. There's always a national crisis looming ahead. All times are troubled times that require drastic action.

Things are so bad that many high RWAs believe the world will end soon. As the year 2000 drew near, I found many authoritarian followers agreed with the statement, "The 'end times' predicted in the Bible are going to begin at the start of 2000," and "Floods, famines, wars and other disasters are occurring so often now, the world is going to end in 2000." As you know, it did not end. But I suspect this failed prediction has not changed authoritarians' beliefs one bit, and this year's floods, famines, and other disasters will clearly signal (to them) the end of this dangerous, wicked world. As the leader of a disappointed doomsday group says in the closing lines of the British review *Beyond the Fringe*, "Never mind lads. Same time tomorrow. We must get a winner someday."

The Releaser. What *releases* the aggressive impulse that comes from fear? What slides off the safety on the gun? This, it turns out, is a no-brainer.

How good, how moral are you, compared to other people? (You get to say what is “good” and “moral.”) As I mentioned in chapter 1, if you’re an average human being, you’ll think you’re a better than average human being. Almost everybody thinks she’s more moral than most. But high RWAs typically think they’re way, way better. They are the Holy Ones. They are the Chosen. They are the Righteous. They somehow got a *three-for-one* special on self-righteousness. And self-righteousness appears to release authoritarian aggression more than anything else.

Chronically frightened authoritarian followers, looking for someone to attack because fighting is one of the things people do when they are afraid, are particularly likely to do so when they can find a moral justification for their hostility. Despite all the things in scriptures about loving others, forgiving others, leaving punishment to God, and so on, authoritarian followers feel empowered to isolate and segregate, to humiliate, to persecute, to beat, and to kill in the middle of the night, because in their heads they can almost hear the loudspeakers announcing, “Now batting for God’s team, his designated hitter, (their name).”

Thus in the experiments done on this subject, if you know how highly people scored on the Dangerous World scale, and if you know how self-righteous they are, you can explain rather well the homophobia of authoritarian followers, their heavy-handedness in sentencing criminals, their prejudices against racial and ethnic minorities, why they are so mean-spirited toward those who have erred and suffered, and their readiness to join posses to ride down Communists, radicals, or whomever.

Why is this better than the Freudian explanation? Because you can’t predict anything with that. But once we have those fear and self-righteousness scores, we can predict rather well who, in a sample of people, will show authoritarian aggression. So we *do* have to try to control fear, not pump it up, and also appreciate the cruel contradiction that the people who feel holiest are likely to do very unholy things precisely *because* they feel holiest.

Before leaving this topic, we should also realize that fear can increase submission as well as aggression. This was illustrated by a series of studies in which I asked people to answer the RWA scale while imagining their country was undergoing some internal crisis. A violent left-wing threat featuring a general strike and urban guerrilla warfare understandably caused RWA scale scores to soar. But *also* did violent right-wing threats, such as a military-aided coup in the halls of power, or “brownshirt” violence in the streets. Most people seem spring-loaded to become more right-wing authoritarian during crises. The only situation I found in which a crisis lowered RWA scores involved a repressive government that assaulted nonviolent protestors (which I have termed “the Gandhi trap”). Otherwise, when there’s trouble, people generally look to the authorities to fix things. And some authorities will gladly amass greater power in times of peril, whether they have any intention of fixing the problem or not.

The Personal Origins of Right-Wing Authoritarianism

If we line up the usual suspects for explaining anything we do, *viz.*, our genes and our experiences, we have to wonder, “Do some people get *born* authoritarian followers?” Maybe they do. Much of the social interaction within animal species is shaped by who submits to whom, and we know from breeding experiments that one can turn out increasingly dominant, or increasingly submissive offspring by controlling who mates with whom. That’s where pit bulls came from, on the one hand, and gentle laboratory rats, on the other. For some reason, psychology students will not let us run such experiments on them. (“Uh, Patricia Knowles, you will reproduce with James Riley.”) But studies of identical and fraternal twins have produced some evidence that authoritarianism has hereditary roots.¹

The more obvious expectation that our level of authoritarianism is shaped by our experiences and environment has more support, but it still may not work the way you’d suppose. We might expect parents to be the chief determiners of their children’s

attitudes. My fellow Missourian, Mark Twain, called this the “corn-pone” theory, which he got from a young slave who said, “You tell me where a man gets his corn pone, and I’ll tell you what his ‘pinions is.” And there’s no doubt most parents want their children to have the same attitudes they do, right down to answers to the RWA scale. But even though parents supply the genes and the corn pone, and have the first crack at their children’s learning, they seldom turn out carbon copies of themselves in their offspring. Are you a clone of your mother or father, attitude-wise? Well why not? What nudged you off their selected path? What will nudge (has nudged) your children, the stinkers, off *yours*? Nudge, nudge?²

If you think it’s that mortal enemy of good parenting, other people’s children, that’s a great idea but one also basically unsupported by research. University students show much greater sensitivity to their peers’ dress style (55 percent of the students in my classes now expose their belly buttons) than to the issues raised on the RWA scale. So where do young people get their notions?

Here are some items from a scale I developed to answer this question. Feel free to answer them. Only this time I am *not* looking for your opinions; instead I want to know if you have had the *experiences* described.

1. It has been my experience that things work best when fathers are the head of their families. (Do you know families where fathers are *not* the head of the family? Do things work badly in such families?)
2. The homosexuals I have known seemed to be normal, decent people, just like everybody else except for their sexual orientation. (If you don’t know any homosexuals, don’t answer. But if you do, are they like everybody else except for their sexual orientation?)
3. The people I have known who are unpatriotic and disrespectful toward authority have seemed to me to be ignorant troublemakers.
4. My parents have always known what was right for me.
5. I have found that breaking the rules can be exciting and fun at times.
6. Most of the young people I know who have taken advantage of today’s greater freedom have messed up their lives.

7. It has been my experience that physical punishment is an effective way to make people behave.
8. I have learned from my contact with lots of different kinds of people that no one group has “the truth” or knows “the right way” to live.

If a group of first-year university students tells me of their experiences in life thus far, in terms of these and other questions, I can make pretty sharp predictions of how they will score on the RWA scale.³

Why then aren't we clones of our parents? Because life has taught us many lessons besides theirs (and our parents may have taught us some they didn't intend). Some of us found authorities were wise, honest and fair. Others, like my children on occasions, found the Old Man didn't have a clue as to how to handle a “situation.” Some students have seen vice-principals abuse their power, and national leaders lie through their teeth, and read about TV evangelists who got caught in cat houses. In my own life I have met some protestors who were total jerks; but I have also met dissenters who knew far more about the issues than anyone I had met before. Maybe you broke the rules and had such a good time you broke them over and over again. But maybe you broke the rules, totaled the car, and were filled with shame and guilt.

A General Model. If you take the entering freshman class at some big North American public university, you can develop an explanation of the differences among them in right-wing authoritarianism by again using Bandura's social learning theory. By and large the students were probably pretty authoritarian as children, submitting to authority, learning whom to fear and dislike, and usually doing what they were supposed to do. But when adolescence struck with all its hormones, urges, and desires for autonomy, *some* of them began to have new experiences that could have shaken up their early learnings. If the experiences reinforced the parents', teachers', and clergies' teachings (e.g. that wrecked car), authoritarian attitudes would likely remain high. But if the experiences indicated the teachings were wrong (e.g. “Sex isn't bad. It's great!”), the teen is likely to become less authoritarian. (Of course, if the wrecked

car and one's first sexual encounter occur at the same moment, the lesson will be mixed. But doubtless memorable.) It's naturally easier for children from authoritarian homes to remain authoritarian, and it's easier for kids with unauthoritarian parents to become decidedly unauthoritarian. But ultimately the experiences do most of the shaping.

I have discovered in my investigations that, by and large, high RWA students had simply missed many of the experiences that might have lowered their authoritarianism. Take that first item on page 59 about fathers being the head of the family. Authoritarian followers often said they didn't know any other kind of families. And they hadn't known any unpatriotic people, nor had they broken many rules. They simply had not met many different kinds of people or done their share of wild and crazy things. Instead they had grown up in an enclosed, rather homogeneous environment--with their friends, their schools, their readings, their amusements all controlled to keep them out of harm's way and Satan's evil clutches. They had contentedly traveled around on short leashes in relatively small, tight, safe circles all their lives.

Interestingly enough, authoritarian followers show a remarkable capacity for change IF they have some of the important experiences. For example, they are far less likely to have known a homosexual (or realized an acquaintance was homosexual) than most people. But if you look at the high RWAs who do know someone gay or lesbian, they are much less hostile toward homosexuals in general than most authoritarians are. Getting to know a homosexual usually makes one more accepting of homosexuals as a group. Personal experiences can make a lot of difference, which is a truly hopeful discovery. The problem is, most right-wing authoritarians won't willingly exit their small world and try to meet a gay. They're too afraid. And "coming out" to a high RWA acquaintance might have long-term beneficial effects on him, but it would likely carry some risks for the outgoing person.⁴

A Tale of Two High School Seniors

Let's put some faces to these general findings by talking about two extremely different cases, and then work our way to the "ordinary people" in the middle. Imagine you're standing in a hallway at your local high school just as classes are about to begin for the day. Hugh, a senior, is standing in front of his locker. Your intuition might tell you, from his clothes and quiet demeanor, that he grew up in a very "straight," traditional family that featured parental dominance and made obedience of authority a high virtue. His folks were not brutes, Freudians notwithstanding, but they taught him in hundreds of ways to be "mindful" and "respectful" of authorities, including themselves, and "dutiful" within narrow tolerances. If he stepped over the line he was punished in one way or another, and received occasional spankings when he was young.⁵ Some kids specialize in not getting caught for breaking the rules. Hugh learned instead not to step over the line. He has become what his parents always wanted him to be--a lot like them.

Hugh's idea of what is right and wrong has been profoundly shaped by the family religion, which is Protestant and fundamentalist. His family all go to church at least once a week, usually more, and he and his friends regularly attend the church's youth group. He has heard from the earliest age, week after week in Sunday school and summer after summer in Bible camp, that the Holy Book is the revealed word of God. The people Hugh knows best say the Bible is completely true, completely without error. He dutifully reads the parts he is assigned to read, along with other sections, and finds it very meaningful. He understands that almighty God is talking *to him* then, which thrills him. He similarly feels blessed and enriched when participating in church services with his community of fellow-believers, and is deeply moved by his belief when he is praying that God is listening *to him* then.

Hugh has thus believed for most of his life that the Truth is already known, and it was not his job to discover it, but to read it, even memorize it. He had a tough time

in his biology course two years ago because it was based on the theory of evolution, which his religion says is wrong and sinful. He learned what he had to learn to get a good grade, but he refused to believe a lot of it, although he could not tell you in any detail what was wrong with it except “it simply can’t be true.” His family and friends praised Hugh for being strong and resisting a lot of “scientific fiddle-faddle.”

Hugh was taught that the world is a dangerous place, full of people who will hurt him or lead him astray. Powerful evil forces could lie in ambush anywhere. But he would be safe if he stuck with his own kind. He identifies strongly with his family, his religion, and America, which his parents often say is the greatest nation in the world. His parents may at the same time find a lot wrong with the way America is changing day by day, but they believe everyone should obey the government and honor its leaders in almost all circumstances.⁶

Hugh has taken a pass on nearly all the activities that might create some distance between himself and his folks. His clothes, his friends, the books and magazines he reads, his hobbies, the TV shows he watches, the movies he attends are all monitored by his parents, even though he is nearly 18 now. But “issues” seldom arise between them because Hugh would not ordinarily want to do something his parents said was wrong. Although he takes a certain amount of teasing from other students at his high school, he does not mind the short leash but rather feels reassured when he leans away a bit and feels its tug. He knows that trustworthy authority, safety and righteousness lie within his tight circle, while danger, devils, and damnation stalk without.

Hugh has seen classmates surrender to Satan, and he has learned from their experiences. That’s not going to happen to him. Still, he had some adolescent sexual adventures with one of the girls in his church group last summer, about which he feels both incredibly guilty and incredibly excited. But Hugh is a virgin and intends to remain so until he gets married, to another virgin. He may well succeed.

Lou. Banging her locker shut down the hall is another senior, Lou, who is one of the people Hugh believes has surrendered to Satan and who, from the way she just slammed her locker door, is going to give her teachers a hard time today. Lou comes from a family that is much more egalitarian than most. Her father has never been the absolute authority in the family castle, and her parents' goal in child rearing was not to supply copies of themselves to the next generation, but competent, independent adults who would make up their own minds about things.

Lou had to obey when she was younger. Her parents did not let her toddle into the street to play. So she too was punished, with spankings when necessary, when she crossed the line. But her parents did not view mild "rebelliousness" as a threat to their authority. Instead they understood and even felt gratified when Lou showed some spirit and independence. They basically tried to guide her with advice as she grew older, but often said, "It's up to you"--and then stood by to pick up the pieces.

Lou's parents did not teach her that authority was always right. Precious little "rendering unto Caesar" occurred around her dinner table, as her parents openly criticized the government and its leaders. By now Lou has witnessed authorities being clearly unjust. She quickly spots incompetence in teachers, unfairness in employers, and dishonesty in politicians, and she'll let you know about it. Nor does she think her parents are always right, although she loves them as much as Hugh loves his. In her own way, she has turned out to be what her parents wanted--just as Hugh did.

Rather than accept dominance and competition as givens in life, Lou was taught to value equality and cooperation. Lou's parents belong to a liberal Protestant denomination, but seldom darken a church door. The family Bible is used for recording births and deaths. Lou went to Sunday school when she was young, but she came home one day asking why God got so mad at Cain for sacrificing vegetables to him, since that's what Cain grew. And whom did Cain marry? While some parents would have scolded their child for asking such "impertinent" questions, Lou's father

told her it was good to wonder about these things, and maybe the whole story was a fairy tale. When she was 12 she began reading the Book of Revelation because a classmate told her it “proved” the world was going to end soon. She found it so absurd she couldn’t make herself finish it. At 18 she resists going on her family’s token excursions to church on Christmas and Easter. She does not believe in God, and says that the more she talks to believers, the more she thinks one should be an atheist.

Lou was not raised with well-defined in-groups, nor was she taught that “different” people were probably dangerous and evil. In fact her mother got Lou involved in various inner-city activities as a young teen so she could see how unfair life is to some. Lou has a diverse set of friends now, some of whom are almost “opposites” from one another; but she likes them all. She knows a much wider range of people than Hugh does, and sometimes, with her heart in her throat, she does new and different things just to see what they are like. She chooses her own clothes and she changes her “look” when she wants. The idea of a curfew has evaporated and her parents lie awake in a very still bed at 2 AM afraid the phone is going to ring. Lou’s virginity disappeared when she was 16, and intercourse is a regular part of her relationship with her boyfriend. She is on the pill, and her parents know it.

Unlike Hugh, Lou did not learn from her parents that Truth was in the bag, but that she’d have to figure it out for herself. If Hugh were to abandon his parents’ faith, he might be cast out from the family forever. So even if he somehow came to believe the family religion was wrong, he would likely keep his doubts strictly to himself as long as they were alive--and probably longer. If Lou were to become very different from her parents in religion--say she became a Protestant fundamentalist--her parents would definitely not like it. But they would recognize that Lou is entitled to make up her own mind, that in fact they raised her that way, so it serves them right.

If Hugh and Lou go to university next year, take intro psych, and answer the RWA scale, Hugh is likely going to score very highly on it, and Lou quite low.

The “Middles”

People can end up with extreme scores on the RWA scale in other ways. Cataclysmic events, for example, can undo everything you have learned before and throw you up on a far-away beach. But most people who end up on one extreme or the other land there because most of the influences in their life got in line and pushed in the same direction, as happened to Hugh and Lou.

Then where do the masses of moderates come from? From the masses of more moderate moms and dads, for one thing. Most parents, for example, are not as restrictive as Hugh’s but also are not as white-knuckled permissive as Lou’s. In-groups are identified, but less emphatically than they were in Hugh’s family. On the other hand few parents deliberately jack up their children’s social consciousness as Lou’s did. Unconventional behaviors and strange friends from different backgrounds are accepted but not gushingly welcomed. The family religion has some importance, but it hardly dominates daily life. And so on.

On balance, the Moderates’ experiences in adolescence made them less authoritarian than they had been earlier. They got into disputes with their parents, teachers, the police, and often came away feeling wronged. They spotted hypocrisy in the pews, and found that a literal interpretation of Genesis made no sense at all. They jumped with joy over the independence a driver’s licence brought. They met some different people and were “broadened.”

But not everything pushed them toward Lou’s end of the RWA scale. For one thing, they might have had one high RWA parent and one low. They may have played on a team run by a strict disciplinarian coach and kicked-ass up and down their schedule. They may have smoked a little of this and tried a little of that and drunk a whole lot of something else--and then smashed, crashed and burned. They may have met “someone different” who robbed them, or left them holding the bag when the cops

broke up the party. In short, their experiences generally took them away from Hugh's domain, but were not nearly as uniform as Lou's. So they ended up more in the middle, with most other people.

Then There's The Rest of Life

What will happen to Hugh and Lou's high school classmates as they go through life? What will they be like when their high school holds their Five-Year Reunion?

That will depend some on if, and where, they continue their educations. Those who go to a fundamentalist Bible college featuring a church-related curriculum, taught by a church-selected faculty to a mainly High RWA student body that lives in men's dorms and women's dorms separated by a moat with alligators in it, will probably graduate about as authoritarian as they were when they went in. If, however, they go to a different kind of school, their education may well lower their authoritarianism.

I teach at the "big state university" in my province, and over the four years of an undergraduate program at the University of Manitoba students' RWA scale scores drop about 10%. Liberal arts majors drop more than that, "applied" majors such as business and nursing drop less. But the students who drop the most, 15-20%, no matter what they major in, are those who laid down high RWA scale scores when they first came in the door. If Hugh goes to a big university like the one that has graciously deposited money into my bank account over the past forty years, he's likely to come out changed. Not overhauled, not spun about, but still, different.

High RWA parents may anticipate this and try to send their kids to "safe" colleges. They may also blame the faculty at the public university for "messing up the Jones kid so badly." But as much as some of the profs might like to take credit for it, I think the faculty usually has little to do with the 10% drop. Instead, I think when High RWA students get to a big university whose catchment area is the world, and

especially if it's located some distance from mom and dad, they simply begin to meet all kinds of new people and begin to have some of the experiences that most of their classmates had some years earlier. The drop does not come from reading Marx in Political Science or from the philosophy prof who wears his atheism as a badge. These attempts at influence can be easily dismissed by the well-inoculated high RWA student. It probably comes more from the late night bull-sessions, where you have to defend your ideas, not just silently reject the prof's, and *other* activities that take place in the dorms, I'll bet.

Three longitudinal studies. What happens after graduation *from university*? Over the years I have collected RWA scale scores from three different groups of Manitoba alumni. One group answered 12 years after they had first completed the scale as introductory psychology students; the second set responded 18 years after they were freshmen; and the third had to wait 27 years to repeat the thrill. What do you think I found?

If you swear by Freud, there should be only minimal change over all these intervals because Freud thought our personalities were pretty much set in stone by age six. If you believe the man on the street instead, you'll think RWA scale scores rose after college because "everybody knows people get more conservative as they get older." But if you believe the data from these three studies, you'll pay less attention to both Freud and the man in the street from now on. Many alumni did stay more or less the same; but others (usually folks, as I said above, who had been highly authoritarian as freshmen) changed substantially.⁷ And overall RWA scale scores showed a *decrease* in all of the studies: 5% over 12 years, 9% over 18 years, and 11% over 27 years.

"But wait a minute," I hear you thinking. "Something's peculiar here, isn't it? We believe a four-year undergraduate education lowers RWA scores about 10%, and many of these alumni had gone on to graduate school. Shouldn't the final drop be something like 15%?" Yes, it *should*. You're right! So the effects of higher education

seem to have worn off some, the scores appear to have bounced back up somewhat, and the man in the street may be partly right.

What would have caused this rebound? Just getting older and wiser? Career advancement? Having a mortgage to pay off? Nope, the data say. But what about having kids? In all three studies, alumni who were parents showed much smaller drops in authoritarianism (i.e. they showed noticeable rebounds) than did those who were childless. Just getting older doesn't make you more authoritarian. The *non*-parents in the longest study showed almost a 20% drop in RWA at the age of 45, compared to what they had been at 18. But their classmates who were now raising a family and saying-all-the-things-their-mothers-and-fathers-said-which-they-SWORE-they-would-never-say-to-their-own-children were only 10% below their entering freshman level--essentially where they probably had been when they got their bachelor's degrees.⁸ But, miracle of miracles, the parents *still* were less authoritarian, as a group, than they once had been, even though they now had (shudder) teen-aged children themselves! Who'd have thunk? Higher education matters, and its effect lasts a long, long time.

Finally, if you want to know what happens to authoritarianism after middle age, I don't think anybody knows yet. But you do seem to spend less time talking with your friends about kids and careers than you used to, and more time talking about medical procedures, good doctors, and prescription drugs.

Notes

¹ Support for genetic origins of things like right-wing authoritarianism increased recently when Jack and Jeanne Block of the University of California at Berkeley reported some results of a longitudinal study they ran. They found that females who became liberals as adults had shown some distinctive characteristics while in *nursery school*, compared with little girls who grew up to become conservatives. The future liberals had been talkative and dominating, expressed negative feelings openly, teased other children rather than got teased, were verbally fluent, sought to be independent, were self-assertive, attempted to transfer blame onto others, were aggressive and set high standards for themselves. Little girls who grew up to be conservatives, in turn, had been indecisive and vacillating, were easily victimized by other children, were inhibited and constricted, kept their thoughts and feelings to themselves, were shy and reserved, were anxious in an unpredictable environment, tended to yield and give in to others, were obedient, and compliant, and were immobilized by stress.

The liberal versus conservative men showed far fewer differences as children than the women had. But future liberals were resourceful, independent and proud of their accomplishments, while tomorrow's conservative men at nursery school were visibly deviant from their peers, appeared to feel unworthy, had a readiness to feel guilty, were anxious in an unpredictable environment, and tended to be suspicious and distrustful of others.

By the time children get to nursery school they bring with them not only the genes that created them but also several years of experiences at home. But a study that shows connections between such early childhood behaviors and adult attitudes--even weak ones, which were the rule in the data--has to lend weight to the genetic possibility. [Back to Chapter](#)

² See Circus, M. P. F., 1969, “How to Recognise Different Trees from Quite a Long Way Away.” [Back to Chapter](#)

³ If you want some numbers, students’ RWA scale scores correlate in the .40s to the .50s with their parents’ RWA scale scores (a “moderate” to “strong” connection), and over .70 (an “almost unheard of” relationship) with their answers to the Experiences scale. [Back to Chapter](#)

⁴ This is backed up by an experiment I did with my own introductory psychology classes one year. I told one class I was gay (which I am not), and another class served as a control group and received no such information. Then they both evaluated (1) me as a person, and (2) gays as a group. Compared to the control group, the class that thought I was a homosexual lowered their opinions of me a touch, but raised their opinions of gays in general. (This study came to the attention of a *New York Times* columnist who misunderstood that I actually was gay. He wrote a piece about my “coming out” to my class, and it gave my father-in-law quite a jolt the next day.)

[Back to Chapter](#)

⁵ The well-known cognitive scientist George Lakoff proposed in *Moral Politics* (1996, U. of Chicago Press) that conservatives and liberals think differently because they use different moral systems based upon different ideal family types. He also states (p. 110) that conservatives actually tend to come from one of these family backgrounds, and liberals from the other. Because authority plays such a pivotal role in the development of *conservative* thought in Lakoff’s analysis, one can easily imagine it might also explain right-wing authoritarians.

Conservatives, it is proposed, grew up in a family featuring “strict father morality.” Fundamentally, life was seen as difficult and the world as dangerous. Typically the father had primary “responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as authority to set overall family policy. He taught children right from wrong by setting strict rules for their behavior and enforcing them through punishment.

The punishment was mildly to moderately painful, commonly being corporal punishment administered with a belt or a stick. He also gained their cooperation by showing love and appreciation when they followed the rules” (p. 65).

Liberals, on the other hand, seemingly came from a “nurturant parent” family background, which featured “being cared for and cared about, having one’s desires for loving interactions met, living as happily as possible, and deriving meaning from mutual interaction and care” (p. 108). Supposedly liberals had more secure and loving attachments to their parents, which leads them to develop nurturing, empathetic social consciences.

This briefest of summaries does not do justice to Lakoff’s conceptualizations, but I am happy to report that some of what he proposes is supported by my own findings. For example the statement, “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues that children should learn” appeared on the RWA scale for many years and goes back to the first attempt to measure authoritarianism during the 1940s. Similarly the reader knows from this chapter that parents of high RWA students, and high RWA students themselves tend to believe the world is a dangerous place. The story of Hugh and Lou, which is based on my own research with the RWA scale and which first appeared in my 1988 book *Enemies of Freedom*, resonates with Lakoff’s model in many places, as I’m sure you noticed.

I would point out some differences, however. First, the early childhood explanations of adult authoritarianism have always been way ahead of the data--and in some cases were trotted out in spite of the data. (See pp. 33-49 of my 1981 book, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* for a critique of some of this literature). It now appears that adult *authoritarianism* begins to coalesce as an organized set of attitudes during adolescence, where (to be sure) it sometimes follows the furrow plowed by the parents. But it also can take off in quite a different direction depending on the child’s experiences in life.

In particular, the connection between receiving corporal punishment in childhood and becoming an authoritarian has always been a wandering stereotype searching for evidence. I have looked several times for an association between students' RWA scale scores and their accounts, or their parents' accounts, of how often they were struck when growing up. The correlations usually turned up, but were always weak. (less than .20; see pages 260-265 of *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*). In 2000 and 2001 I revisited the issue asking nearly 1000 students how they had been punished when younger. Virtually all of them (92%) reported having been struck at least once, with the average being five times. Again high RWAs tended to have received more spankings than the rest of the sample, but only modestly so. I don't know of anyone who has found even a moderate connection between childhood physical punishment and adult RWA scores. (I also would not bet the farm on a big reliable difference emerging in how securely liberals versus conservatives were attached to their parents.)

Second, some of Lakoff's explanation appears to apply (as we shall see later in this book) much more to authoritarian leaders than to authoritarian followers. His stress upon competition's being a crucial ingredient (p. 68) in the conservative outlook well describes the leaders, but authoritarian followers seldom endorse this point of view.

Third, I believe the process of becoming a high RWA, or a low one, is more complicated than Lakoff's model allows. Religion's ability to sometimes independently pump up right-wing sentiments, and higher education's ability to lower them get little play in *Moral Politics*, and the genetic possibilities are barely touched upon (pp. 134-135). Instead the focus remains on parental practice. But if you look at pages 73-74 of my 1996 book, *The Authoritarian Specter* (go ahead; I'll wait) you'll find that the correlation on the RWA scale between members of 299 pairs of same-sexed fraternal twins averaged .50. While this constitutes a sturdy relationship, far bigger than the things social scientists usually discover, it still leaves most of the individuals' personal level of authoritarianism *unexplained*. And these pairs of people were born at the same time, raised at the same time by the same parents, went to the

same schools and churches, had the same peer group, probably watched lots of TV together, and so on. (Identical twins raised together [N = 418 pairs] understandably correlated a hunkier .65 with each other.) Thus the origins of right-wing authoritarianism appear much more complicated than those advanced by the dichotomous, one-factor typology one might project from Lakoff's model.

[Back to Chapter](#)

⁶ See if you can top this one. My local newspaper recently carried a story about a woman in a nearby city who wrote a letter to the editor criticizing the mayor and city council. She said the present council lacked initiative and acted too often in the interest of "boys with money and toys." A few days later the pastor of the Pentecostal church she attends wrote her, saying her letter was an embarrassment because good Christians do not publicly criticize their leaders. He told her to find another church if she was not going to change her ways. (" 'Bad sheep' raises ire of pastor," *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 22, 2006, P. A6.) [Back to Chapter](#)

⁷ The correlations between the first and second set of answers to the RWA scale were .62 over 12 years, .59 over 18 years, and .57 over 27 years. Since the RWA scale sports quite a high test-retest reliability, these numbers indicate the considerable extent to which these people changed after their 18th birthday. Roll over, Sigmund.

[Back to Chapter](#)

⁸ Here are two analgesics that parents can take for their aching psyches. When your kids start giving you action about what a tyrant you are, tell them you didn't believe so much in submitting to authority until they came along. And when you do something dumb and your kids find out, you can at least wrap yourself in the warm blanket of realizing you have probably made your kids less authoritarian by displaying your incompetence. I know I did. [Back to Chapter](#)