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Having few positive emotions, or too many negative feelings? Emotions as moderating variables of authoritarianism effects on racism

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Abstract

The present investigation tests in a Polish student ($N = 175$) and adult sample ($N = 197$) the relationship between submissive authoritarianism (Right-Wing Authoritarianism; RWA) and dominant authoritarianism (Social Dominance Orientation; SDO), and measures of positive and negative affect (i.e., chronic accessibility, intensity, and expression). Two results were especially noteworthy. First, it was revealed that RWA was strongly and negatively related to positive emotions, whereas SDO was related to poor expression of both negative and positive emotions. Second, various moderator effects between authoritarianism and measures of negative and positive emotions emerged. Unlike previous theorizing, it is concluded that not only negative emotions shape authoritarianism-based prejudice, but that (a lack of) positive emotions are equally worth investigating.

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1. Introduction

Although Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) stressed the importance of emotional factors that give rise to the authoritarianism syndrome, empirical tests of the relationship between authoritarianism and emotions generally generated conflicting results. Most of these studies focused on negative emotions. Moreover, these investigations generally used indirect indicators of emotions such as self-esteem and Neuroticism, which were assumed to reflect the presence of negative emotions.

The aim of the present research is twofold. Firstly, we wanted to test whether individual differences in positive and negative emotions are related to authoritarian submission and dominance. Secondly, we wanted to test the interaction effect of authoritarianism and emotions on racism. In particular, we hypothesized that submissive authoritarians who generally experience negative emotions as well as dominant authoritarians who generally experience low levels of positive emotions should exhibit the highest levels of racism. In order to test these expectations, we administered various direct indicators of negative and positive emotions.

1.1. The relationship between authoritarianism and emotions

According to Adorno et al. (1950), high-scoring individuals on ethnocentrism “... usually displayed very little awareness of their own feelings and psychological problems ... and ... they tended to resist psychological explanations and to suppress emotions” (p. 963). The authors also assert that high scoring individuals “... complained of irritability, anxiety or hyperventilation symptoms; many also had temper outbursts or attacks of trembling, screaming, or fainting (probably equivalents of attacks of rage) ...” (p. 964; parentheses in original). Throughout their monumental work on the authoritarian personality, Adorno et al. (1950) repeatedly describe the authoritarian’s emotional life in terms of aggression, anxiety, fear, shame, and hostility. Regrettably, these authors did not present conclusive data to support their theoretical accounts. Subsequent research also largely neglected to study the authoritarian’s emotional correlates, and the few studies that did investigate this issue predominantly tried to show the presence of negative emotions among authoritarians, largely neglecting the potential role of (a lack) of positive emotions.

Taken as a whole, these attempts to obtain a relationship between an authoritarian right-wing orientation and indicators of affect were not entirely successful. Some of these studies used direct emotion measures. For example, whereas Singer and Feshbach (1959) and O’Grady and Janda (1978) reported a significant, positive relationship between authoritarianism and anxiety, Hong and Withers (1982), Ray (1976) and Sinha and Sinha (1976) failed to find the hypothesized relationship. However, most studies assessed measures of global mental health, such as self-esteem and Neuroticism, which can be considered indirect indicators of the individual’s emotional life. The studies on self-esteem were not very successful (for an overview, see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Wylie, 1979), and research on the relationship between Neuroticism and ideology also yielded inconclusive results (for an overview, see Van Hiel, Mervielde, & De Fruyt, 2004).

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