

What Happens When Authoritarians Inherit the Earth? A Simulation

Bob Altemeyer*

University of Manitoba

Two runs of a futuristic simulation involving introductory psychology students were held on successive nights. On one night, “Earth” was populated entirely by right-wing authoritarian followers; on the second night, a small number of dominating authoritarians were included among a second group of authoritarian followers. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., nuclear war did not break out), the future evolved as anticipated on the two evenings. In general, authoritarians produced dismal futures, beset by unemployment, famine, and disease.

The world’s a stage for billions of wonderfully unique people. But what would it be like if everyone had similar levels of some personality trait? If all the actors scored relatively high in right-wing authoritarianism, what kind of future would unfold?

High RWAs

High “RWAs” are authoritarian followers who have submissive attitudes toward established authorities, show a general aggressiveness toward persons “targeted” by those authorities, and adhere tightly to social conventions. Research on such folks goes back to *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950), and by now we know quite a bit about them—which my publishers hope you will want to learn. Assessed by reactions to statements on the RWA scale such as “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,” and “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,” high RWAs have proven to

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Bob Altemeyer, Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada R3T 2N2 [e-mail: altemey@cc.umanitoba.ca].

be relatively submissive to government injustices, unsupportive of civil liberties and the Bill of Rights, supportive of the Experimenter in the Milgram situation, high shockers themselves in a “punish the learner” situation, punitive toward law-breakers, mean-spirited, ready to join government “posses” to run down almost everyone (including themselves), happy with traditional sex roles, strongly influenced by group norms, highly religious (especially in a fundamentalist way), and politically conservative (from the grass roots up to the pros, say studies of over 1,500 elected lawmakers). They also have remarkably compartmentalized minds, endorse a multitude of contradictory beliefs, apply a variety of double standards to their thinking on social matters, are blind to themselves, dogmatic, fearful of a dangerous world, and self-righteous to beat the band. (You will find the evidence for this perhaps startling thumbnail sketch in Altemeyer, 1996. You will also see that the search for *left*-wing authoritarians continues largely to draw a blank.)

Right-wing authoritarians are also relatively prejudiced—against just about any racial, ethnic, or nationalistic minority you can think of, and against homosexuals, women, Francophones (in Canada), atheists, and other religious people who happen to belong to different faiths. So widespread is the high RWAs’ ethnocentrism that I have called them “equal-opportunity bigots,” and at one time thought they were the most prejudiced group of people the social sciences had ever found.

In October 1994, I used the Global Change Game to compare how the earth would fare if everyone on it scored relatively low on the RWA scale, versus how things would turn out if everyone scored relatively high. The game is a sophisticated three-hour simulation of the earth’s future, usually involving 50–70 players who are assigned to various regions on a large map of the world (see www.mts.net/~gcg/). It was designed by my son and others to raise environmental awareness, and has been played, mainly in high schools, in Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The picture posted here shows part of the map, with groups of students hunkered down in their various regions.



When Authoritarians Inherit the Earth

What kind of future did the low RWAs produce in 1994? An entirely peaceful one, although 400 million people died from disease and starvation over 40 years. But a great deal of inter-regional cooperation eventually produced food, health, and jobs for nearly everyone at the end. The high RWA simulation, on the other hand, produced a nuclear holocaust that killed everyone and destroyed the planet. When the players were given a second chance to make a better world, conventional wars still broke out, and global problems of overpopulation, hunger, and disease went unaddressed. After 40 years, *not* counting the nuclear war, 2.1 billion people had died, according to the complicated formulae used in the game to take into account the consequences of war, long-term unemployment, malnutrition, and poor medical infrastructures—five times as many as died during the low RWA game according to the same rules (Altemeyer, 1996, pp. 130–136).

The Plot Thickens: High SDOs

Remember a few lines ago when I said high RWAs seemed to be the most prejudiced group ever found? Well, they lost the title when Felicia Pratto and Jim Sidanius began studying social dominators (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Pratto, 1999). Assessed by a deceptively simple Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scale which basically asks, in various ways, how much you believe in equality, high SDOs turn out to be even *more* prejudiced than high RWAs (unless there is a religious basis for the prejudice). They are the new bullies on the block, as far as research goes, so we don't know much about them. But they do seem to be relatively power hungry, domineering, mean, Machiavellian and amoral, and hold “conservative” economic and political outlooks. And they are mostly guys. I have suggested (Altemeyer, 1998) that they would also tend to become authoritarian (“dictatorial”) leaders to whom high RWAs would submissively flock.

Our need to understand high SDOs and RWAs in tandem intensified when McFarland and Adelson (1996) made the rather astonishing discovery (which has been replicated many times since) that *together* SDO and RWA scores can account for most of the variance in prejudice scores—you name the prejudice. In other words, most of the prejudice we find in our surveys can be traced back to these two authoritarian personalities: the wannabe authoritarian leaders and the wannabe authoritarian followers. One can obviously see why social movements that unite the two could present serious problems.

“Double Highs”

The SDO and RWA scales can account for so much variance together because (as we would expect) they correlate only slightly with one another—about .20. Leaders don't want to be followers, and vice versa. But that small correlation still means a few people in our samples score high on both traits. Research shows these

rare “Double Highs” want to be dominators. They probably endorse submission on the RWA scale because they like the idea of others submitting to them. High SDO-high RWAs would win the gold medal in a Prejudice Olympics, having even stronger prejudices than ordinary high SDOs and ordinary high RWAs. They are also more power hungry, more dominance-oriented, meaner, more Machiavellian, and more amoral than any other identifiable group in my samples. They have an almost magical ability to alloy the worst features of social dominators and right-wing authoritarians, and I have likened them to Hitler (Altemeyer, in press). They would seem to be the most likely persons to rise to the top of movements thickly sewn with high RWAs.

The January 1998 Global Change Game Experiment

I tested this and other expectations a few years ago when I reprised the Global Change Game experiment. Let me set the stage. In January 1998, I recruited (just) high RWA introductory psychology students for a three-hour experiment in which “players would be assigned at random to different regions of the earth and challenged to solve the problems of the future.” In each of the seven large classes visited, eligible students (supposedly chosen at random, but actually recruited because they had scored in the upper quartile of the RWA distribution the previous autumn) could serve on either a Tuesday or a Wednesday evening. By discreetly manipulating the eligibility lists, I forced the few high RWAs who were *also* upper-quartile SDOs into the Wednesday night game. Just under 60 students signed up for each night, including eight Double Highs for Wednesday—all males.

Unlike my 1994 study, in which I randomly assigned students to the various regions of the earth, this time I made a few non-random assignments beforehand. Specifically, I slotted the eight Double High guys into eight different regions on Wednesday night. I also spread the students from each intro class around the world, such that they probably had not previously known anyone else in their region.

What else do you need to know? The “facilitators” who ran the simulation knew, of course, that I was conducting an experiment. But all were kept blind about what was actually going on, and I don’t think they could have guessed the difference between Tuesday and Wednesday night based on dress styles, hair styles, jewelry, and so on. I myself observed the simulations from a corner of the gymnasium and said nothing to anyone during the play of the games.

The Tuesday Night Run involved 53 persons who had scored high on the RWA scale, but *not* in the upper quartile on social dominance. Twenty-one of them were males, and 32 were females. After an overall introduction to the game, each region studied its economic and environmental situation for about 15 minutes. Then the facilitators, with no forewarning, asked for a leader to emerge in each region: they said, “Whoever is going to be the leader of your region, stand up. *Nobody* stood up for about 15 long seconds, but by 40 seconds, five men and three women had made

When Authoritarians Inherit the Earth

themselves leaders of their groups—the last being pushed to her feet by others. These “Elites” were taken aside, handed hats to wear, given control of the finances of their region, and told they could secretly hoard personal wealth.

The three female Elites sought each other out when the game began and tried to involve the male leader of North America in a foreign aid program. He turned them down. And *that* was the largest meeting of the Elites for the rest of the evening. An overhead projector provided for announcements to the entire world was rarely used. A global crisis halfway through the simulation involving the ozone layer produced no international conferences, or even small meetings among the Elites. While individual Elites would occasionally visit other regions to inquire about resource exchanges, for the most part, the Elites stayed at home and worked with their fellow “regionaires” on the problems besetting their land. As one of the facilitators put it afterwards, “The Elites went into their groups and never came out.”

The groups, which (another facilitator noted) sometimes said, “Go away,” when a “foreigner” came over to talk, “worked well together, shoulder to shoulder,” but were nonetheless slow in addressing their problems. They especially had difficulty dealing with population growth. India began bursting at the seams, and Sub-Saharan Africa became increasingly disease-ridden and poverty stricken. The prosperous regions got by all right, and Europe took in 100 million refugees from India, while North America gave India a generous loan. But, generally, the poor regions of the world went down the tubes. Military action can play an important role in the Global Change Game. But there were no wars, or threats of wars, on Tuesday night. Most regions kept the armies they possessed at the beginning of the game, even after their need for food and medicine became overwhelming. And the North American Elite increased his military strength quite a bit. But he did not use it for anything.

By the end of the game, 1.9 billion people had died of starvation and disease, which the facilitators thought was close to a record for a non-war run of the game. After the facilitators debriefed the students on things they had done right and things they might have done better for the planet, I asked the participants to say nothing about the game for 24 hours, if asked, except that people got divided into regions, had to solve problems, and that it was an educational experience.

For the Wednesday Night Run, 55 students—22 males and 33 females—appeared for the experiment the next night. However, the high SDO I had slotted into Europe failed to show, so there were only seven Double Highs in the room. Self-promotions to Leader were finished in 12 seconds, which was faster than it took for the *first* person to stand up on Tuesday. Four of the seven Double Highs (that is, 57% of them) nominated themselves, significantly higher than the four of 48 ordinary RWAs (that is, 8%) who also stood up ($z = 3.42; p < .001$). One woman nominated herself; the Double High “planted” in her region remained completely unnoticed throughout the night.

After the Elites had been taken aside and given their additional briefing, the simulation began, whereupon one of the three Double Highs who had *not* leapt to his feet went to some of the facilitators and gathered information on resource exchanges. He took this information to his region's Elite, convinced him of a strategy, and became his "lieutenant" for the night, accompanying him everywhere and participating fully in negotiations.

Wednesday's Elites spent much more time dealing with one another, and much less time in their home territories, than had been true the previous evening. There was a constant "buzz" of negotiations as Elites visited one another, sometimes in groups of two or three, working out the best deals they could get for their resources. The overhead projector was used extensively for announcements such as "Latin America selling natural gas. Best offer wins!" Various trading partnerships developed, and then dissolved. A global conference was held to deal with the ozone layer—although a united effort to deal with the earth's problems never resulted.

Meanwhile, back in the regions, the ordinary high RWAs were having the same difficulties solving their problems that the ordinary high RWAs had had on Tuesday. Populations grew out of control, poverty increased in the Third World, disease spread.

The Elites were trying to solve these problems by bargaining with one another when one of them got cut off at the knees. The remaining Double High who had *not* stood up to become his region's Elite at the beginning of the game led a revolution at home, and thereafter became its *de facto* leader—requiring the Elite to bring all decisions back to the group for approval.

Because of the Elites' wheeling and dealing, which brought some regions resources they needed, the world was *not* going to hell in a handbasket at quite the rate it had been on Tuesday. But no one got something for nothing. There was no charity. No region accepted refugees from impoverished areas. No one gave any generous loans to the impoverished.

Furthermore, various regions had been making military threats against weaker ones almost from the start. All regions still had their armies, which had often been increased. Then the Oceana Elite purchased lots of nuclear weapons and declared war on India. India's Elite tried to find a major power to protect him, but was unsuccessful. India surrendered at a price and became even more destitute. Pumped up by a bloodless victory, Oceana then began to threaten other militarily weak regions. At this point, the North American Elite offered to sell "protection" to whoever would pay. Various regions began converting plows into swords. The facilitators thought a nuclear war between North America and Oceana was imminent.

At precisely this point, however, the predetermined 40-year time limit for the game expired and the simulation ended. One billion six hundred million people had died from disease and poverty, which is an awful lot, but still 300 million less than the 1.9 billion of the night before.

Discussion

The point of the experiment was to see how right-wing authoritarians would act *with* and *without* Double Highs among them. What would the world be like with only authoritarian followers in it, and what would it be like if these followers had just a sprinkling of authoritarian leaders among them?

Generally speaking, ordinary high RWAs did poorly on both nights. Right-wing authoritarians tend to be pretty ethnocentric, and the Global Change Game punishes regional insularity. (One of the great benefits of the simulation, for the North Americans who participate in it, is a realization of how daunting are the problems that most of the world faces.) High RWAs also tend to be dogmatic and have various philosophical outlooks that keep them from dealing effectively with something like population control. And they tend to be pretty fearful, which kept a lot of their resources tied up in military spending.

In general, I think you have to give the worlds they created on those Tuesday and Wednesday nights an “F.” Ordinary *high school* students usually produce better futures when playing the Global Change Game.

That having been said about right-wing authoritarians in general, how did those special high RWAs who *also* scored relatively high on the Social Dominance scale perform? True to expectation, most Double Highs quickly jumped at the chance to become the leaders of their group. And if they missed that chance, they sometimes found other roads to power later on. In a world of submissive people, the Double Highs usually worked their way to the top and then concentrated on dealing with one another.

Which they did with gusto. The facilitators noted that Wednesday’s Elites spent a great deal of time competing with each other, trying to better one another in sundry negotiations. “It was like the stock exchange,” one facilitator commented. And the Elites’ efforts at negotiating for their regions made a somewhat better world on Wednesday night than the “under-led” and isolationist groups the ordinary RWAs had created on Tuesday—assuming the human race would have survived a forty-*first* year on Wednesday night. But no charity to the unfortunate blossomed, nor did a united effort to solve global problems ever crystallize, as it had in the 1994 low RWA simulation. The Double Highs proved as insular, ultimately, as the “folks back home” whom they led.

I was intrigued by the absence of warfare on Tuesday night—in fact, by the absence of any *threat* of warfare. The high RWA groups, with no high social dominators among them, appeared to adopt a “You don’t bother us, we won’t bother you” attitude. In turn, I was not surprised that war broke out on Wednesday night, when seven Double Highs were present, as it had in the 1994 high RWA simulation (when some “naturally occurring” Double Highs were probably involved). Warfare is an instrument of power, and we know that social dominators are very interested in wielding power. In fact, I was surprised that war was only declared once, although

a lot of bullying occurred. Interestingly, Oceana's war on India was not wanted at all by the citizens of Oceana, who said in their individual post-game comments that their Elite was "bad" and "evil." But they did not know how to stop him, and when he won a painless victory over India, he convinced some of his followers that "war is good."

Finally, remember the little twist about Elites' acquiring private fortunes? What difference do you think appeared between Tuesday and Wednesday nights in the amount of personal wealth stashed away? Let me give you some background. In the 1994 *low* RWA game, nine "gold coins" of private treasure were hoarded altogether by the Elites. In the 1994 *high* RWA game, 22 gold coins disappeared from the public treasuries into the pockets of the leaders. And on Tuesday night in 1998, with no Double Highs present, 26 gold coins were "appropriated." So what do you think happened on Wednesday?

If you are smarter than I am, you will predict that very *little* personal wealth was accumulated on Wednesday. In fact, only five gold coins were squirreled away. Why so few? My guess is that the competition among the Elites for economic and military dominance was so intense on Wednesday night that they could not afford to divert their region's wealth into their own pockets. Underdeveloped resources, fewer factories, and smaller armies meant less power while negotiating and threatening. But did I, with the fore-knowledge that Double Highs are basically only interested in "Number One," predict that almost no personal wealth would be stashed away on Wednesday night? Absolutely not. Another beautiful hypothesis killed by an ugly fact!

Conclusions

What can we conclude from this little experiment? Obviously, not a whole lot. A bunch of 19-year-old high RWA Canadian students do not begin to approximate all the high RWA people in their own country, much less those in Russia, Africa, Latin America, and so on. The Global Change Game is not nearly as complex as the real world. Real leaders do not get their jobs simply by standing up and saying, "Oh, shucks, I'll do it." Elites here and there in the real world *do* seem to accumulate vast personal wealth. And so on. As confirming and disturbing as the data may be for some, we must resist the temptation to overstate the implications of what was, after all, a "two-night stand."

Still, I would not dismiss the exercise as pointless. Basically, I think it suggests, as does much else, that high RWAs are not likely to come up with the answers to our global problems. They are far too ethnocentric. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the simulation was how automatically right-wing authoritarians, placed in a room filled with *people rather like themselves*, still divided the world into small enclaves of "Us" versus the global "Them."

When Authoritarians Inherit the Earth

Beyond that, high RWAs create—by their submissive tendencies—an easy opportunity for social dominators to attain power. And social dominators who are *also* right-wing authoritarians will be more acceptable to rank-and-file authoritarians than will social dominators who are not. So Double Highs have a built-in advantage over others in the game of Reach for the Top, as they have a ready cadre of people with similar economic and political leanings, steeped in the same prejudices and looking for just the kind of leadership they intend to provide. But dominating authoritarians are hardly the people I would choose to lead us.

Which is not to say they do not, at least in certain places.

References

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Altemeyer, B. (1996). *The Authoritarian Specter* (pp. 130–136). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Altemeyer, B. (1998). The other ‘authoritarian personality.’ In M. Zanna (Ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30 (pp. 47–92). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Altemeyer, B. (in press). *Highly dominating, highly authoritarian personalities*. *Journal of Social Psychology*.
- McFarland, S. G., & Adelson, S. (1996). *An omnibus study of personality, values, and prejudice*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Pratto, F. (1999). The Puzzle of Continuing Group Inequality. Piecing Together the Psychological, Social, and Cultural Forces in Social Dominance Theory. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 31 (pp. 191–263). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M., & Malle, B. F. (1994). Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 741–763.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

BOB ALTEMEYER is associate professor of psychology at the University of Manitoba. He does research on authoritarianism, prejudice, dogmatism, love, and the impolite topics of religion, politics, and sex.