

The Authoritarian Personality

This theory suggests that prejudice is associated with a particular personality type. Authoritarian personalities have a number of characteristics. They are very concerned with status and upholding convention; they are very conformist; they tend to be very obsequious towards people they see as having a higher status than them but treat those 'below' them with contempt and they are suspicious of and hostile towards those they see as different.

Theodore Adorno believed that people develop an authoritarian personality because of the upbringing they had as a child. If their parents are overly strict and punitive and show little love, the child grows up harbouring resentment and hostility towards their parents. This hostility gets directed towards members of minority groups through a process of displacement.

An important study

In the 1940s, Theodore Adorno and his colleagues developed an attitude measurement scale called the F-Scale to measure how authoritarian people are. The F-Scale contains scale items like:

- Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn.
- People can be divided into two classes: the strong and the weak.
- Homosexuals are hardly better than criminals and ought to be severely punished.

Adorno et al (1950) found that there were strong, positive correlations between respondents' scores on the F-Scale and their scores on other measures intended to measure anti-semitism (prejudice against Jews) and ethnocentrism (the belief that one's own ethnic group is right and all others are wrong if they differ).

Questions to guide evaluation of this theory

- The F-Scale consists entirely of positively scored items (i.e. the more you agree with, the higher your score). Why might this be considered a problem?
- During the development of the F-Scale, Adorno and his colleagues made extensive use of projective measures like the Thematic Apperception Test. Was this wise?
- The authoritarian personality theory states that the roots of prejudice are formed in childhood. Is this consistent with the fact that the years between 1923 and 1933 saw an enormous rise in the level of anti-Semitism in huge sections of the German population? Or the fact that prejudice against the Japanese rose sharply in the US following the attack on Pearl Harbor?
- Can the authoritarian personality theory easily account for the fact that whole societies (or sections of society) can be prejudiced?

Realistic Conflict Theory

This theory suggests that prejudice arises where there is competition between groups. According to Muzafer Sherif (1966), when two different social groups compete for the same valued resource their members become prejudiced against and hostile towards each other. This hostility is adaptive, in that it causes people to attempt to deny the resource to members of the out-group, thereby ensuring a greater share for their in-group and, consequently, themselves. The resource can be anything (e.g. food, money, employment) as long as it is wanted by both groups.

An important study

In the 1960s, Sherif and his colleagues (e.g. Sherif et al, 1961) conducted a series of studies in which they created conflict between groups of American boys at a summer camp (Robber's Cave). The boys were randomly assigned to one of two groups of who then spent several days getting to know each other, choosing a name for the group (e.g. the Rattlers, the Eagles) and generally developing a sense of group cohesion.

Once the groups had become established they were made aware of each others' existence and quickly developed an 'us and them' way of speaking about each other. The researchers then arranged a competition between the groups with a trophy and attractive prizes on offer. Before the tournament even began the Eagles burned the Rattlers' flag and a fight broke out between the groups. Each group stereotyped themselves in positive ways (e.g. 'brave', 'tough' and 'friendly') and the other group members negatively (e.g. 'sneaky', 'smart alecks' and 'stinkers').

Questions to guide evaluation of this theory

- Is it possible to criticise the validity of the studies carried out by Sherif et al? How might such criticisms affect the extent to which we can accept their theory?
- Tyerman & Spencer (1983) carried out a replication of the Robber's Cave studies, with a couple of differences. First, their participants were all members of the Scouts and they knew each other before the study began. They found none of the hostility and prejudice found by Sherif. What implications does this have for the realistic conflict theory?
- Is Sherif's theory consistent with the observation that prejudice tends to increase during times of recession and economic hardship? Examples you might want to consider include Germany during the Great Depression, the United Kingdom during the economic recession and South Africa during the apartheid era.
- Sherif claims that competition is necessary and sufficient for prejudice to arise. In other words, there will be no prejudice without competition; and all that is required for prejudice to arise is competition. To what extent is this true?

Social Identity Theory

This theory, developed by Henri Tajfel, suggests that prejudice occurs because of two general needs people have: (1) to feel good about themselves and (2) to belong to social groups. Our sociality gives us a tendency to affiliate with social groups (e.g. religion, culture, profession, football team etc.) which then inform our sense of who we are (our social identity). Because of the link between group membership and social identity, there is a strong link between how we feel about our in-groups and how we feel about ourselves (e.g. when our football team loses, we feel bad; when our religion is insulted, we feel offended). It follows that one of the ways we get to feel good about ourselves is to feel that the groups we belong to are better than similar groups to which we don't belong (e.g. another religion or sect, a different football team's supporters). This leads to a tendency to overvalue the characteristics of our in-groups' and undervalue the characteristics of the out-groups; in other words, prejudice.

An important study

Henri Tajfel (1971) randomly assigned schoolboys to different groups. The groups were given completely arbitrary names. The boys then played a game in which they could allocate points (and win money) to their own and the other group. Three strategies were possible:

- Maximum fairness (equal points for each group)
- Maximum gain for in-group (most points possible for own group)
- Maximum difference (biggest difference in points to favour the in-group)

It was found that the boys always chose to maximize the difference in their in-group's favour even though they could have won more points (and hence money) for their own group by choosing a fairer allocation of points. In other words, doing better than the other group seemed more important than doing best for their own group.

Questions to guide evaluation of this theory

- Could the validity of 'minimal group' experiments like Tajfel's be criticised? If so, what implications would this have for the theory?
- Tajfel's experiments could be said to show a bias in favour of the in-group. Is this the same as a prejudice?
- Social identity theory predicts that, when one of a person's in-groups is doing badly relative to an out-group they will expend considerable mental effort looking for ways to reverse their perception of this situation. Can you identify some examples of this that would be consistent with SIT (thinking about football fans might help)?