Autocratic leaders and authoritarian followers revisited: A review and agenda for the future

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long history within the field of leadership, the subject of authoritarianism and how it influences leadership and leadership processes has been neglected in recent decades. However, recent global events make it clear that a better understanding of authoritarianism is needed and that leadership researchers would benefit from a renewed interest in studying why followers embrace autocratic leaders. The nature of authoritarian character, how authoritarian values develop, and how it is measured will be discussed. We will also review autocratic leadership, the factors that make it more likely, its consequences for followers, and the moderators of its effects. A future research agenda for the study of authoritarian character and autocratic leadership will be provided.

Imagine a world attempting to recover from a huge economic crisis where one nation after another seemed to be electing populist, autocratic leaders who promised to restore national pride and the glories of the past. Imagine also how shaken the citizens of democracies were when nations headed by leaders espousing these seemingly backwards ideologies started overcoming their problems, decreasing unemployment, finding themselves with booming stock markets, powerful militaries, and as increasingly prominent in a realigned global order. Where strong leaders seemed to be able to "get things done" while at the same time multi-party democracies seemed trapped in petty squabbles and gridlock. And where the dictator Mussolini was glowingly referenced in the Cole Porter song "You're the top!" alongside Fred Astaire, the Mona Lisa's smile, Mickey Mouse, and Houdini. It was under these conditions that Lewin, Lippitt, and White engaged in their classic study of autocratic and democratic leadership to evaluate scientifically whether democracies could hope to compete against the autocratic juggernauts that threatened them.

In the present review, we revisit some of the earliest research in the field of leadership with the aim of demonstrating its relevance to the modern day for both organizations and nation-states. Specifically, we will begin by addressing a fundamental question that has driven research for over 70 years: "Why do free people willingly choose leaders who will restrict their liberty?" In order to do so, we review the history of the study of authoritarian followers, those individuals who tend to prefer strong, autocratic leaders. In particular, we focus on not only

theoretical developments in the understanding of what motivates authoritarian followers and how they behave, but also developments in the measurement and operationalization of authoritarian character over time. We integrate findings from several different fields in order to more clearly define the nomological network of authoritarian character in terms of its relations with abilities, values, and personality traits. Having explored the psychological mindset of individuals who seek powerful leaders, we then investigate the nature of autocratic leadership itself in order to determine whether such preferences are warranted. Specifically, we look at whether or when autocratic leadership facilitates or hinders the performance of groups as well as how it impacts the well-being of followers (see Fig. 1 for a theoretical model). We believe that such a review is both necessary and important for both future research and practice.

It should be noted that although autocratic or authoritarian leadership have been argued to be largely indistinguishable when referring to leadership styles (Bass, 1990; Lewin & Lippitt, 1938), we will use the term *autocratic leadership* throughout most of this article. Autocratic leadership is generally understood to reflect a particular style of leadership where power and authority are concentrated in the leader, whereas authoritarian leadership reflects a domineering style that generally has negative implications (e.g., House, 1996). Consequently, we believe that autocratic leadership is more likely to be reflective of the desire of authoritarian subordinates for strong leaders. That said, we will use the term authoritarian leadership in instances where it is

Situational Factors

- *Crisis: Uncertainty or Hostile Contexts*
- *Cultural Values: Power Distance and Vertical Collectivism*
- *Resource Availability*

Follower Characteristics

- *History of Authoritarian Parenting*
- *Low Efficacy*
- *Low Intelligence*
- *Need for Structure*
- *Rigidity of Thinking/ Low Openness*
- *High Conscientiousness*
- *Low Empathy*

Follower Authoritarian Mindset and Values

Autocratic Leadership

Outcomes

- *Follower Well-Being and Commitment*
- *Follower Cynicism and Aggression*
- *Group Cohesion*
- *Group Performance*

Leader Characteristics

- *Low Agreeableness*
- *High Neuroticism*
- *High Narcissism*
- *High Psychopathy*
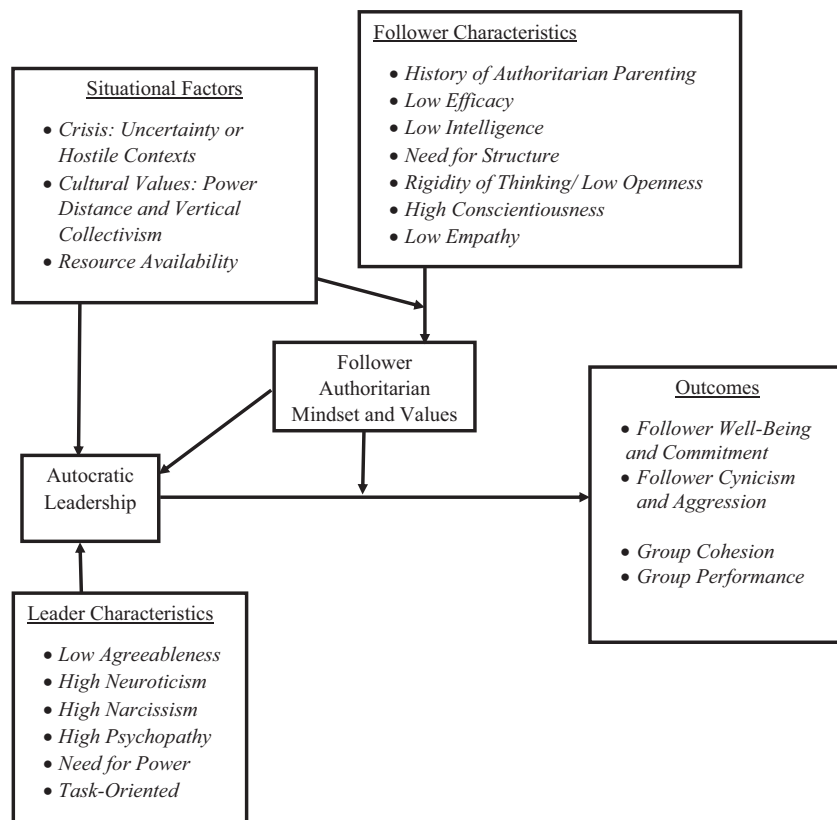- *Need for Power*
- *Task-Oriented*

Fig. 1. Theoretical model of autocratic leadership and authoritarian followers.

Note: This figure is not intended to display all potential factors in the model. Rather, it is meant to be illustrative of the need to consider both follower characteristics and situational factors as potential moderators. The variables listed simply indicate where the preponderance of work has been done to date.

clear that the authors intended to reflect a domineering style of leadership.

Origins of the study of autocratic leadership and authoritarian followers

At one time, the study of autocratic leaders and authoritarian followers was one of the most researched topics in the social sciences (Meloen, 1993), but interest has fallen off, leaving some researchers to speculate as to the causes of this decline even as they continue to argue that such research is now more important than ever (Cohrs, 2013; Ludeke, 2016). Even within the leadership literature, Bass (Bass & Bass, 2008) noted the initial enthusiasm for authoritarianism research, but also noted that "by the 1980s, research interest in the leadership performance of the authoritarian personality had dissipated" (p. 156–157). Support for Bass's analysis of this trend is further reinforced by searches of major Management and Industrial Psychology journals showing that most have only a handful of studies on the subject in recent years. The recent resurgence of studies into toxic, abusive, and "dark side" leadership tangentially relates to authoritarianism, but does not specifically measure the construct (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). But even as social scientists have largely turned their back on the subject, the general public is increasingly interested in understanding this phenomenon. This is reflected in Google searches for "authoritarian," "authoritarianism," and "autocratic" which have all doubled or tripled in frequency over the past decade even as searches for other leadership-related terms such as "transformational leadership" have stagnated (see Fig. 2). Thus, it has been argued that even if the prevalence and effects of authoritarianism are diminishing, it nonetheless continues to play a major role as a determinant of social attitudes in modern society (Peterson, Doty, & Winter, 1993), particularly as societies see a resurgence of successful populist, autocratic leaders.

Lewin, Lippitt, and White

The well-known set of studies by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) is considered by many researchers to be the first major study into the effects of leadership styles on group dynamics and performance and a foundation for much of what followed in both the leadership literature and in social psychology in general (e.g., Bass, 1990; Hollander & Julian, 1969; Scheidlinger, 1994). In these studies, adults led groups of young boys on various tasks over the course of several weeks. The "leaders" were instructed to utilize either *autocratic* or *democratic* norms in how they led. The experiment did not always run as planned, and one of the democracy groups had to be re-categorized as laissez-faire (an unintended experimental condition) when the adult running it failed to properly institute democratic norms by neglecting to initiate any sort of structure for the group (White & Lippitt, 1960). The autocratic leader was impersonal, dictated the group's activities, and was dismissive of feedback or the opinions of followers. The democratic leader encouraged group planning and individual decision-making, and tried to foster a friendly group climate. The laissez-faire leader was mostly passive, left the group to make their own decisions, and only offered help when asked.

A number of interesting conclusions were drawn from the study (Lewin et al., 1939). First, when leaders were present, autocratic and democratic groups seemed to perform at equivalent levels. Second, when the leaders were absent from the groups, performance fell off in the autocratic groups, but not the democratic ones. Third, the boys in the autocratic group acted in a more dependent manner than those in the democratic group (e.g., asking for instructions and demanding attention) and became increasingly more submissive as time passed (White & Lippitt, 1960). Fourth, the autocratic groups suffered from much higher levels of attrition, which was attributed as a consequence of the greater extent of scapegoating behavior which occurred in these groups in stressful situations (White & Lippitt, 1960). Fifth, although