

The relevance of class in shaping authoritarian attitudes: A cross-national perspective

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Abstract

This study provides the first thorough and cross-national assessment of the concept of authoritarianism with regard to the distinction between the working and non-working classes. This pan-European study is the first to demonstrate that, because there are no substantial differences in interpretation between the working class and the non-working class, authoritarianism scores can be compared meaningfully across the two classes. We demonstrate that the working class is more strongly inclined to authoritarianism, as suggested by Lipset. Building further upon this assessment allows a clear picture of the mediating effects of some of Lipset's presumed drivers of this relationship. Although educational levels explain a major part of class differences in authoritarianism, income level, media use and psychological insecurity play a role as well, albeit to a lesser extent. In addition to examining the underlying processes at the individual level, country-level characteristics are studied. Results show that class and authoritarianism are more strongly related to each other in richer countries than they are in relatively poor countries.

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1. Introduction

Five decades ago, Lipset (1959, 1960) launched his theory on working-class authoritarianism. In his seminal paper on democracy and working-class authoritarianism, Lipset distinguishes between economic and non-economic liberalism. *Economic liberalism* refers to the conventional issues concerning the redistribution of income, status and power amongst classes. According to this argument, the poorer everywhere tend to be more liberal or leftist on such issues, favouring measures opposed to those of higher class position, including addi-

tional welfare-state measures, graduated income taxes and support for trade unions. Many studies have shown evidence of such class differences regarding economic attitudes (e.g. Svallfors, 2004, 2007). *Non-economic liberalism* refers to such issues as civil liberties for political dissidents, civil rights for ethnic and racial minorities, international foreign policies and liberal immigration legislation. Fewer studies have reported on the relationship between class and non-economic liberalism. According to Lipset, both evidence and theory suggest that lower strata are more authoritarian. This controversial statement sparked a debate within the research community (e.g. Dekker & Ester, 1990, 1991; Lipset, 1961; Middendorp & Meloen, 1990, 1991; Miller & Riessman, 1961; Ray, 1991). Although many studies have been conducted on working-class authoritarianism,

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there is still no consensus concerning the validity of this hypothesis.

In this article, we address three important issues that have been raised previously. First, we consider whether the class differences that have been reported are a genuine phenomenon, or whether they are merely an issue of measurement (e.g. Christie, 1954). Authoritarianism scores can be compared across classes only if both classes have the same interpretation of authoritarianism measurements (i.e. scalar equivalence). No previous studies have included statistical tests for the possibility of making meaningful comparisons of authoritarianism scores between classes. A second issue involves the explanation of working-class authoritarianism. Although Lipset suggests a number of variables that explain the relationship conceptually, research thus far has provided only piecewise tests of these assumptions, in most cases focussing solely on educational differences. Third, Lipset assumes working-class authoritarianism to be a universal phenomenon, thereby suggesting cross-cultural uniformity (Rigby, Metzger, & Ray, 1986). Such an assumption obviously has strong implications, and it deserves to be validated. Previous research has demonstrated important cross-national variation in the extent of – and even the direction to which – authoritarianism is related to external variables (e.g. Social Dominance Orientation: de Regt, 2012; de Regt, Smits, & Mortelmans, 2010).

Taken together, this article examines working-class authoritarianism according to a validated measure of authoritarianism, based upon representative samples and in multiple socio-political contexts. In addition to testing for the existence of working-class authoritarianism, we explicitly model possible mechanisms behind these class differences. Furthermore, we go beyond the mere description of cross-national variation in class differences in authoritarian attitudes, conducting an explicit test of whether the relationship between class and authoritarianism is dependent upon country features.

2. Previous literature

2.1. Working-class authoritarianism

Studies of economic attitudes (e.g. redistribution, inequality and welfare policy) have frequently provided evidence of economic conservatism amongst the working class (e.g. Edlund, 2007; Kumlin & Svallfors, 2007; Svallfors, 2006). It would be interesting to examine whether class also predicts attitudes that might initially appear unrelated to class position. Recent studies have reported significant class (or

socioeconomic) differences in several aspects of cultural conservatism/authoritarianism. More specifically, class differences have been reported with regard to the priority assigned to the value of obedience in child-rearing (Stenner, 2005), attitudes towards sexual behaviour and civil rights (Svallfors, 2005, 2006), attitudes towards moral issues (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007), obedience to authority and cynicism (Napier & Jost, 2008) and the rights of sexual minorities (Brooks & Svallfors, 2010). In general, such studies find that the working class is more conservative/authoritarian than other classes are. With exception of these recent studies, most studies on working-class authoritarianism are relatively old. Although some studies find no evidence to support the existence of working-class authoritarianism (e.g. Hamilton, 1966, 1968; Hopple, 1976; Ray, 1974, 1983, 1985; Scheepers, Eisinga, & Vansnippenburg, 1992; Wright, 1972), many studies have identified higher levels of cultural conservatism and authoritarianism amongst working-class individuals (e.g. Farris, 1956; Felling & Peters, 1986; Janowitz & Marvick, 1953; Kohn & Schooler, 1969; Mackinnon & Centers, 1956; Ransford, 1972). The fact that previous literature has failed to reach consensus on this issue, together with contextual changes that have taken place (e.g. the democratisation of higher education; increasing female employment and other labour-market changes; heterogeneity in life paths) make it important to examine this issue again, using more advanced techniques in order to provide additional detail.

2.2. The meaning of authoritarianism differs between classes

One unresolved issue in the literature on working-class authoritarianism is whether authoritarianism has the same meaning amongst the working class that it has amongst other classes. Christie (1954) was amongst the first to suggest the possibility that the meaning of authoritarianism items would vary amongst populations of varying sophistication and that this could explain class differences in authoritarianism. In addition, Miller and Riessman (1961) questioned the validity of authoritarianism scales as measures for use within working-class groups. Obviously, if substantial differences exist between the two classes regarding the interpretation of authoritarianism items, these differences could lead to suboptimal or even incorrect conclusions when comparing authoritarianism scores across classes. The first test in this article thus concerns whether working-class individuals interpret authoritarianism in the same way that other individuals do.

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