

Authoritarian Submission: Definition & Examples

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Introduction and Definition of Authoritarian Submission

Authoritarian submission represents a fundamental psychological orientation characterized by a high degree of acceptance, obedience, and uncritical deference toward figures or institutions perceived as established authorities within society. This construct is not merely about occasional compliance but reflects a deep-seated readiness to yield to the demands, perspectives, and ideologies promulgated by those in positions of recognized power. It constitutes one of the three core attitudinal clusters identified by psychologist Robert Altemeyer in his seminal work defining the concept of **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)**, alongside authoritarian aggression and conventionalism. Submission, in this context, is specifically directed toward authorities deemed legitimate and sanctioned by the existing social order, distinguishing it from general subservience or compliance motivated purely by fear of immediate punishment. Individuals scoring high on this trait tend to view authority figures--such as police, religious leaders, government officials, or military commanders--as inherently correct and deserving of unwavering loyalty, often suspending their own critical judgment in favor of the established hierarchy. This orientation provides the psychological bedrock necessary for maintaining social stability, albeit sometimes at the cost of individual liberty or ethical scrutiny, emphasizing adherence to existing rules and structures above all else.

The concept hinges upon the internalization of a belief system that values structured order and hierarchical relationships, where the role of the follower is clearly defined as one of obedience and respect. This submission is often rooted in early socialization experiences, where parental authority is enforced strictly and respect for elders and tradition is paramount, leading to the development of a cognitive framework that equates established authority with moral correctness and societal necessity. Consequently, when faced with conflicting information or demands that challenge the status quo, the individual exhibiting high authoritarian submission is predisposed to side with the authority figure, viewing resistance or dissent as inherently dangerous or morally suspect. Furthermore, this submission is typically generalized across various domains of life; whether in the workplace, religious setting, or political sphere, the pattern of deference remains consistent. This generalized tendency makes authoritarian submission a powerful predictor of political attitudes, especially those favoring strong leadership, strict law enforcement, and resistance to rapid social or political transformation, as change is often perceived as undermining the necessary stability provided by established power structures.

It is crucial to differentiate authoritarian submission from simple conformity or situational compliance. While conformity often involves yielding to peer pressure or group norms, submission involves yielding specifically to a recognized vertical authority structure. Moreover, situational compliance, such as obeying a traffic light, is transactional and context-specific. Authoritarian submission, conversely, is an enduring personality disposition that predisposes the individual to actively seek out and respect strong leadership and established institutions. This disposition

implies an active, internalized acceptance of the power dynamic, rather than a passive or temporary response. High submitters often feel anxious or uncomfortable in situations lacking clear leadership or defined rules, finding psychological comfort in the certainty provided by a strong, guiding hand. This intrinsic motivation to obey and respect authority figures highlights the deep psychological need for order, security, and structure that underpins the authoritarian personality profile, making the submission component perhaps the most foundational element in understanding how authoritarian systems maintain their power base.

Historical Context: The Authoritarian Personality

The psychological exploration of submission to authority traces its roots deeply back to the mid-20th century, notably through the groundbreaking research conducted by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues in the aftermath of World War II. Their monumental 1950 work, *The Authoritarian Personality*, sought to identify the personality structures that made individuals susceptible to fascist ideology and anti-democratic movements. While Adorno's initial conceptualization of the authoritarian syndrome (often measured by the F-Scale) was broad and rooted in psychoanalytic theory, submission played a central, albeit complex, role. The original formulation suggested that authoritarians developed rigid, punitive superegos due to harsh parenting, leading to a repressed hostility that was then displaced onto weaker out-groups (aggression) and simultaneously channeled into exaggerated respect for the parents and legitimate authorities (submission). This submission was seen as a defense mechanism, a means of managing internal conflict by identifying with the powerful external figure.

In the Adorno framework, submission was often tied closely to conventionalism, manifesting as a rigid adherence to middle-class values and societal norms, accompanied by a profound aversion to anything perceived as weak, deviant, or unconventional. The submission described here was largely uncritical and stemmed from a deep-seated fear of defying powerful figures, especially those representing the patriarchal structure. The psychoanalytic focus emphasized the role of internal conflict: the individual both hates the punishing parent but also desperately seeks their approval, leading to an external display of extreme deference. This early model, however, faced significant methodological criticisms, particularly regarding its reliance on projective techniques and its tendency to conflate submission with various other traits like rigidity, superstition, and cynicism, making the specific measurement of the submission component difficult and often ideologically biased towards right-wing political structures.

Despite these early limitations, Adorno's work established the critical link between personality structure and political obedience, laying the groundwork for subsequent empirical refinement. The concept highlighted that the acceptance of hierarchy and the willingness to submit were not merely political choices but were deeply embedded psychological characteristics. The emphasis on the familial origins of submission--specifically the influence of punitive, status-conscious parents--

provided a powerful explanatory model for why some individuals readily accept strong, non-democratic leadership. While modern research, particularly Altemeyer's, would later streamline and empirically purify the construct, the legacy of *The Authoritarian Personality* remains vital for understanding the historical origin of inquiry into the personality dynamics governing uncritical acceptance of established power.

RWA Theory and Altemeyer's Refinement

Robert Altemeyer significantly refined and empirically validated the concept of authoritarian submission in the 1980s, moving away from the complex psychoanalytic underpinnings of the Adorno model toward a more focused, social learning theory perspective. Altemeyer distilled the complex authoritarian syndrome into three statistically distinct, yet highly correlated, factors that constitute **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)**: Authoritarian Submission, Authoritarian Aggression, and Conventionalism. Altemeyer's primary contribution was to emphasize that submission is specifically directed toward established, legitimate authorities within the individual's social context, rather than submission to all forms of power or dominance. This distinction is critical; an RWA high scorer is not necessarily subservient to a criminal gang leader, but they are highly deferential to a police officer, a president, or a recognized religious leader.

In Altemeyer's model, Authoritarian Submission is defined as the belief that authorities are inherently correct, good, and justified in their actions, coupled with a generalized eagerness to comply with their directives. This compliance is voluntary and driven by an internalized respect for the office or institution, independent of the personal qualities of the officeholder. The RWA Scale, developed by Altemeyer, operationalized this submission component through items measuring compliance with established authorities, belief in the necessity of strong leadership, and rejection of insubordination or criticism directed toward those leaders. This empirical focus allowed researchers to isolate the submission trait and demonstrate its predictive power regarding political and social behaviors, such as voting patterns, attitudes toward civil liberties, and responses to societal crises requiring strong governmental action.

The refinement also addressed the methodological flaws of the F-Scale by ensuring that RWA items were balanced (avoiding acquiescence bias) and empirically sound. Altemeyer viewed authoritarianism as primarily learned through social experience, where individuals internalize specific norms regarding obedience and respect for power structures. The high degree of correlation among the three RWA factors--submission, aggression, and conventionalism--suggests that they operate synergistically: adherence to conventional norms (Conventionalism) dictates who is a legitimate authority (Submission), and this obedience is reinforced by punitive attitudes toward those who defy the system (Aggression). Therefore, authoritarian submission acts as the regulatory mechanism that ensures the individual remains aligned with the established power structure, viewing their own adherence as a moral imperative necessary for maintaining societal

order and stability.

Psychological Mechanisms of Submission

The psychological mechanisms driving authoritarian submission are multifaceted, involving cognitive biases, motivational processes, and deeply ingrained emotional responses to perceived threats. One core mechanism is the cognitive simplification of complex social and political issues. High authoritarians prefer clear-cut answers and unambiguous rules, and submission provides a ready-made solution: deferring judgment to the authority figure relieves the individual of the burden of independent critical thought. This cognitive efficiency is highly appealing in uncertain or threatening environments, leading to what is often termed a "closure" motivation--a strong desire for definite knowledge and firm structure, which authorities are perceived to provide reliably. When confronted with ambiguity, the authoritarian submitter defaults to the established rule or the leader's decree, reinforcing the submission pattern.

Furthermore, fear and the desire for security play a significant motivational role. Authoritarian submission often correlates highly with perceptions of a dangerous world. When individuals perceive society as chaotic, threatening, or morally decadent, the appeal of a strong, decisive leader who promises to restore order becomes overwhelming. Submission, in this context, is a defensive reaction; by aligning oneself uncritically with the powerful, the individual gains a sense of protection and inclusion within the strong in-group managed by the authority. This mechanism explains why authoritarian submission tends to spike during times of perceived crisis, such as economic downturns, terrorist threats, or widespread social instability, as the psychological need for security overrides concerns about democratic accountability or individual rights.

Another key mechanism involves the concept of moral absolutism and the sanctification of authority. For the high submitter, authority figures are often imbued with near-sacred legitimacy, meaning their directives are not just rules but moral obligations. Challenges to authority are therefore perceived not merely as political disagreements but as moral transgressions that threaten the entire social fabric. This moral framework makes critical evaluation of authority nearly impossible, as questioning the leader is equivalent to questioning the moral order itself. This psychological process is reinforced through conventionalism, where traditional values and religious doctrines often explicitly mandate respect and obedience to established hierarchies, creating a powerful internal justification for uncritical submission, regardless of the ethical implications of the authority's specific actions.

The Role of Legitimate Authority

A critical nuance in the study of authoritarian submission is the prerequisite of perceived legitimacy. Unlike generalized dominance-seeking behavior, which might involve submission to the

physically strongest individual, authoritarian submission requires the authority figure or institution to be established, sanctioned, and recognized as legitimate within the social structure. Legitimate authority is typically defined by tradition, legal framework, or consensual acceptance within the group. The high submitter respects the 'office' rather than necessarily the 'man' (though they often highly idealize the man holding the office). For instance, a high submitter will obey a uniformed police officer because the uniform and badge represent a legitimate, state-sanctioned authority, whereas they would likely resist an individual attempting to exert control without such recognized symbols of power.

This reliance on legitimacy explains why authoritarian submission is often closely tied to conventionalism. Conventional norms dictate who holds power and how that power should be exercised. If an authority figure deviates significantly from these conventional norms--for example, if a president acts in a manner widely perceived as illegitimate or unconstitutional by the established system--the submission of the RWA high scorer may waver. However, as long as the authority maintains the veneer of legitimacy and operates within established institutional boundaries (or successfully redefines those boundaries), the high submitter remains loyal. This loyalty often extends to defending the authority against critics, arguing that even flawed leaders deserve respect simply because they occupy the legitimate position.

Moreover, the perception of legitimacy provides a cognitive comfort; it means that the social hierarchy is stable and predictable. The high submitter views the existence of a legitimate hierarchy as essential for preventing anarchy and chaos. Therefore, any challenge to legitimate authority is seen as an attack on the stability of society itself. This perspective motivates the submitter not only to obey but also to actively enforce the authority's directives and to support punitive measures against those who demonstrate disobedience. The psychological contract is clear: the authority provides order and security, and the individual provides unwavering submission and loyalty in return, reinforcing the systemic power structure that defines the authoritarian environment.

Behavioral Manifestations and Obedience

The disposition of authoritarian submission manifests in a variety of observable behaviors, extending far beyond simple political compliance. At the individual level, high submitters often exhibit extreme deference in professional settings, showing excessive respect toward supervisors, adhering meticulously to bureaucratic rules, and rarely questioning established procedures, even when those procedures are inefficient or ethically questionable. In educational environments, students high in submission are often model pupils, strictly following teacher instructions and expressing discomfort with assignments that require challenging conventional wisdom or thinking outside established paradigms. This behavioral pattern stems from the underlying belief that the established system knows best and that individual deviation is detrimental.

Perhaps the most profound behavioral manifestation of authoritarian submission is the willingness to obey commands, even those that conflict with personal conscience or ethical standards, provided the command originates from a legitimate source. Classic social psychology experiments, such as the Milgram obedience studies, although not explicitly measuring RWA, provide powerful analogies for the behavioral consequences of this trait. While submission is generally adaptive for maintaining stable societal structures, it becomes problematic when legitimate authorities demand harmful actions. High submitters are less likely to engage in whistleblowing, dissent, or civil disobedience, viewing these actions as dangerous insubordination rather than necessary checks on power. Their primary motivation is to fulfill the expectations of the legitimate authority, prioritizing institutional loyalty over individual moral autonomy.

In political behavior, authoritarian submission translates into robust support for leaders who project strength, decisiveness, and a commitment to order. This support often remains steadfast even when the leader's actions are criticized by external observers or the press. High submitters are often highly resistant to investigative journalism or critical reports concerning authority figures, viewing such scrutiny as disrespectful and subversive. They are strong proponents of 'law and order' policies, favoring increased police power and stricter penalties, fundamentally believing that authorities must be given the necessary tools to enforce obedience and maintain control. This behavioral loyalty serves to stabilize and perpetuate the power of the established leadership, making authoritarian submission a key pillar in the maintenance of conservative political regimes.

Societal Implications and Political Behavior

The prevalence of authoritarian submission within a population has profound societal and political implications, particularly concerning democratic resilience and social change. Societies with high levels of submission tend to exhibit greater political stability but often at the expense of dynamism, critical debate, and minority rights. High submission populations are more easily mobilized by strong leaders who frame political opposition as threats to national unity or moral decay. This vulnerability makes such societies susceptible to populist appeals that promise a return to traditional order and the restoration of firm authority, often leading to the erosion of checks and balances designed to limit governmental power.

In the political arena, authoritarian submission is strongly associated with conservative and right-wing ideologies, though it is a personality trait that transcends specific party lines. High submitters consistently oppose policies that promote radical social change, advocate for greater civil liberties for marginalized groups, or challenge traditional institutions like the family or the church. They view such changes as destabilizing attacks on the conventional order that the legitimate authorities are tasked with upholding. Furthermore, this submission contributes significantly to polarization; when leaders define political opponents as illegitimate or dangerous, the high submitter is psychologically predisposed to adopt this view and support aggressive measures (Authoritarian

Aggression) against the perceived threat, thereby deepening societal divisions and hostility.

Finally, the societal implication of authoritarian submission is its role in reinforcing cycles of obedience and rigidity. Because high submitters resist criticism of authority, institutions are less likely to undergo necessary reform or self-correction. When institutions fail, the submitter is more likely to blame external factors or dissenting groups rather than the leadership itself. This resistance to critical feedback can lead to institutional stagnation and ultimately, decreased effectiveness, yet the submission persists because the psychological need for a strong, unquestionable authority structure remains dominant. Understanding this dynamic is essential for analyzing the political behavior of large segments of the populace who prioritize order and obedience above all other political values.

Measurement and Empirical Evidence

Authoritarian submission is primarily measured as a sub-scale within the broader RWA instrument developed by Robert Altemeyer. The RWA Scale consists of various items designed to capture the three core components, with specific items dedicated to measuring the degree of uncritical deference to authority. Typical submission items assess agreement with statements emphasizing the necessity of absolute obedience to established leaders, the belief that respect for authority is the most important virtue children should learn, and the strong rejection of dissent or rebellion. The use of psychometrically sound scales has allowed researchers to consistently demonstrate that authoritarian submission is a highly reliable and stable personality trait, showing strong internal consistency across diverse populations.

Empirical evidence consistently links high scores on the submission sub-scale to a range of predictable outcomes. Studies have shown significant positive correlations between authoritarian submission and traditionalism, ethnocentrism, prejudice against minority groups, and negative attitudes toward civil rights movements. Furthermore, submission is strongly predictive of voting behavior supporting highly punitive and traditionalist political candidates. In workplace and military contexts, high submission scores correlate with job satisfaction in highly structured environments, lower rates of rule violation, but also reduced creativity and initiative, reflecting the trait's emphasis on strict adherence rather than independent problem-solving.

Cross-cultural research, while demonstrating that RWA exists across various nations, also highlights variations in how authoritarian submission manifests, depending on the specific cultural definition of legitimate authority. In highly religious societies, submission may be primarily directed toward religious leaders and doctrines, while in secular, state-centric societies, it may focus more heavily on governmental or legal institutions. Despite these contextual differences, the core psychological tendency--the uncritical acceptance of established, legitimate power--remains a robust and measurable dimension of the authoritarian personality structure, confirming its

importance as a key construct in political psychology and personality research.

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