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Gender and Right-Wing Authoritarianism in a working-class case-study

Abstract

Objective: In this article we attempt to shed light on the changing attitudes American workers may have, specifically authoritarian personality characteristics, by reviewing the results obtained from our survey of 74 retired auto workers.

Research Design & Methods: Part of our survey utilizes the Zakrisson short version of the Right-Wing Authoritarian scale and our interests are to provide any differences found between men and women. Also, we seek to test for the presence of authoritarianism as one aspect to understand the appeal of right-wing politics among the white working class.

Findings: Our findings indicate that men and women are each no more or less likely to develop authoritarian personality characteristics. The differences by gender that we found in our case-study mirror the literature over the last several decades since empirical research began in 1950 – ambivalence.

Implications/Recommendations: As a discontented citizenry searches for answers, by leaning more politically right or left will gender differences widen or converge due to the issues.

Contribution/Value Added: Given the current social and economic climate in the United States we find this research study to be both timely and important. A conservative or liberal orientation by American workers may have important contributions for the direction the US takes not only on pressing economic and social issues at home but abroad as well.

Article classification: research article

Keywords: labor, gender, right wing authoritarianism, labor studies

JEL classification: J1, J7

Introduction

Over the past few years the social fabric of the United States has been stretched in a variety of directions. For many Americans, tolerance and understanding of difference seems to be buttressed against issues of morality and traditionalism. This conflict created starkly antagonistic themes

in the Presidential campaigns of two political mavericks, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, and elevated Trump to the Presidency with strong core support from the white working class, especially those who manifest strong authoritarian personality traits (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; MacWilliams, 2016). Far more extensively than the recent national elections, the major issues in the media, such as

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the war on terror (Bayoumi, 2015; Paletta, 2016; Coghlan 2016; Mashal & Shah, 2016), immigration (Santos & Medina, 2016; Campo-Flores, 2016), and gay and transgender rights (Londono, 2016; McGregor, 2016; Kaufman, 2016), provoke strongly polarised perspectives, which speaks of a bifurcated citizenry (Romans, 2016). The broader economic context of an ever-increasing gap between the rich and poor (Fleming & Murphy, 2015) has mostly reduced the traditional working-class to a lower socioeconomic position as a result of stagnant wages and job loss (Goldstein et al., 2016) and detached the wage-earning segment from conventional political moorings and pushed them to look both to the political right and left at the same time (Myers et al., 2016). We are not concerned here with official platforms or the campaign promises a particular candidate makes. Rather, our work draws from the long tradition in Critical Theory to test for the presence of authoritarian personality traits among the traditional unionised working class rather than survey opinions about recent issues or the election. In this way, we seek to test for the presence of authoritarianism as one aspect to understand the appeal of right-wing politics among the white working class.

In this article we attempt to shed light on the changing attitudes American workers may have by reviewing the results obtained from our survey of 74 retired auto workers. Part of our survey utilises the Zakrisson short version of the Right-Wing Authoritarian scale and our interests are to provide any differences found between men and women. As a discontented citizenry searches for answers, by leaning more politically right or left, will gender differences widen or converge due to the issues. A conservative or liberal orientation of American workers may have important implications for the direction the US takes, not only with regard to pressing economic and social issues at home but abroad as well.

Literature review

Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Over the past 60 years, Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) has been well-established in literature. Beginning with Adorno et al. (1950), *The Authoritarian Personality* became the basis of numerous subsequent studies, and with Altemeyer (1981, 1996, 1998) received a substantial conceptual update that collapsed nine measures into three: conventionalism, submission, and aggression. Although various researchers have reformulated the particular survey items and varied the specific number of items, these three variables have remained consistent conceptually as the core of authoritarianism.

Conventionalism refers to a high degree of commitment to authorities or dominant cultural standards that are seen as inherently superior and therefore legitimate. Submission refers to uncritical allegiance to conventional norms and authority. Aggression refers to authoritarian aggressiveness towards people, values, or lifestyles perceived to be different and therefore inferior to and in conflict with conventional norms. Hence, authoritarians overwhelmingly cluster on the right of the political landscape – more conventional, judgmental, and exclusionary compared to liberals found to be more open minded and tolerant (Carney et al., 2008). Authoritarian conservatives adhere to traditional gender-role identity and attitudes (Duncan et al., 1997) and see the world as a dangerous place, which shapes non-political aspects of life as well (Unger, 2002), such as attitudes towards education and religion, all guided by the belief that a disintegrating moral state (Crowson, 2009) allows allegedly lazy and dangerous minorities to invade, undermine and eventually overthrow the hard-working and moral white hegemony (Crawford, 2012; Crowson et al., 2005; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Duckitt 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Hodson et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2003; McFarland, 1998).

RWA and the working class

The relationships between RWA and the working class has been reviewed and debated for many years. With the influential work of Lipset (1959), the working class, being exposed to negative experiences and having low levels of education and cultural capital, develop low levels of political interest, high levels of prejudice and a narrow world view. Since the mid-twentieth century, extensive research has supported Lipset's foundational discoveries (Middendorp & Meloen, 1990; Goodin & Dryzek, 1980; Solt, 2008; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Kohn, 1977; Oakes & Rossi, 2003; de Regt et al., 2012), while others have fine-tuned and expanded those initial conclusions (Dekker & Ester, 1987; Case et al., 1989; Lott, 2002 and 2012; Diemer et al., 2012; Funke, 2005; Napier & Jost, 2008), namely that the working-class is in general highly ambivalent, which is a highly charged state that results from emotional conflict that pulls people in competing directions at the same time, which may create many and varied behavioural and attitudinal maladjustments.

As the status of the working class eroded with the decline of industrial jobs, members of the working class embraced authoritarian commitment to right-wing ideals of power, moral authority, and hostility towards ethnic minorities as emotional compensation to their disadvantaged status (Brandt et al., 2015; Kohn, 2006). When an RWA loses (or feels he/she loses) status and prosperity, he/she typically embrace a law-and-order mentality, usually attached to racism – black and brown people's criminality will destroy civilisation (Hodson et al., 2017) – because they perceive the world as a fundamental battle between in-group homogeneity and out-group transgressions of normality. For the RWA, diversity is a threat to moral order and consequently, the existence of diversity in any form inherently creates a conflict in which neither can prosper as long as the other survives (Perry et al., 2013). However, the very nature of labour unionisation requires some commitment to collective benefit, and the larger

collectivity (workers) supersedes particular attitudes or individual preferences (Kurtz, 2002); the more workers who join a union the better. In essence, workers exhibited high levels of ambivalence.

RWA and gender

In terms of the relationships between gender and authoritarianism, some of the literature points to no differences between the genders (Brandt & Henry, 2012; de Regt et al., 2012, p. 288; Henry, 2011, p. 430; Duncan et al., 1997, p. 45; Feather, 1993; Heaven & Bucci, 2001, p. 52). Although men and women can both register high on the RWA scale, the magnitude of difference within their answers to the questions on the scale can be different. For example, Nagoshi et al. (2007) linked male and female high-responders on the RWA scale and in this way found a decrease in coping strategies for males but no change for females before and after the events of 9/11 (Nagoshi et al., 2007). In a similar way, other researchers have found male and female high-responders approached their personal life orientations differently, such that men and women live in highly gendered worlds with social roles narrowly defined (Peterson & Zurbriggen, 2010), so that while both men and women test equally high, women also exhibit higher countervailing traits. This produces observable differences in applied research, such that high RWA scoring men remained decisively focused on career goals, whereas high RWA scoring women experienced career confusion (Peterson & Lane, 2001). Similarly, Eagly and Karau (1991) found that, overall, men emerged as singularly focused leaders more often than women, who tend to self-reflect to a greater extent, which partially minimises their authoritarian commitments. Eagly et al. (2003) argue that this accounts for consistent differences in leadership styles even among men and women who both score high on the RWA scale. Specifically, men's leadership abilities were seen in the area of task-oriented work groups. On the other hand, women emerged as social leaders (in long-term groups requiring socially complex

tasks) slightly more than men (Eagly & Karau, 1991) and women are opposed to group-based hierarchy more than men (Lee et al., 2011).

Similarly, Sidanius et al. (2000) shows males being more domination-oriented than females and score higher on both the RWA and SDO (Social Dominance Orientation) scales. Lippa (1995) found men to be more authoritarian than women and, accordingly, Lippa and Arad (1999) found that authoritarian individuals, especially men, were defensive and prejudiced. Kimmelmeier (2010) argued that the need for structure in one's thinking predicts authoritarianism and prejudice, and furthermore that women show lower levels of authoritarianism and prejudice than men in this regard. Also, some studies have shown females tend to have more positive attitudes toward culturally different people and display greater empathy than men (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008, p. 8). Also, women were found to be more socially compassionate and more supportive of equal rights for minorities than men (Eagly et al., 2004).

On the other hand, Cundiff and Komarraju (2008) found that women and men may be more psychologically similar than once believed. Hyde (2005) shows that we have overinflated gender differences by assuming that women are more caring and nurturing and that men lack nurturing skills and naturally take charge, when in fact the differences are an intersection of sociocultural factors. An early study (Kelman & Barclay, 1963) argued that the narrower "breadth of perspective" that many women exhibited made them more amenable to authoritarian thinking because their lives were more regimented with limited social opportunity compared to men. Duncan et al. (1997) reported similar results, that stronger relationships between authoritarianism and traditional gender role attitudes are high for both women and men in groups that extoll traditional gender roles (Duncan, 2006, p. 60). Sibley et al. (2007) correlate RWA with so-called "benevolent sexism" (where women are seen as fragile and need protection) and, although they find that high RWA men exhibit high degrees of benevolent sexism toward women,

women in sexist nations are higher in benevolent sexism (more likely to believe in the inherent inferiority of women) than men. This may be due to the need for women to counteract hostility toward them (citing Glick et al., 2000; Sibley et al., 2007), as well as internalised oppression common to hierarchical societies in general. Given that all of the respondents in our sample are union industrial workers, we expect that gender would not produce a significant difference in the results.

Rather than confirming or denying particular aspects of the existing literature, we found something different: ambivalence, which, as stated above, is a highly charged state that results from emotional conflict which pulls people in competing directions at the same time.

Methods

The union membership in this study consists of approximately 150 retired auto workers and their spouses. The survey was administered in October of 2015 to all members that were in attendance at the monthly meeting of the union. Our sample is a case-study.

This survey is divided into five main sections. The first section deals with background information on the respondent (i.e. demographics). The next two sections contain questions concerning the workers' involvement and commitment to their local unions. Next appears the Zakrisson (2005) short version of Altemeyer's RWA scale, and the last part asks about future activities for the retirees (this part was requested by the union).

The four-page, multiple question survey developed was anonymous and endorsed by the union. Each survey was inserted into an envelope containing a pencil. Copied onto each envelope was a description of the study and some general instructions on how to fill out the survey. Once completed, the respondents were directed to place the survey back into the envelope and drop the instrument off at an assigned station, which was monitored by the union.

A total of 74 of the 100 retiree union members present completed and returned the survey, yielding a response rate of just under 50% of the 150 total members.

Results and discussion

Table 1 gives the percentage that answered each of the 10 questions in each category. For readability of this table, slightly disagree and disagree were combined, as were slightly agree and agree. The demographic composition for gender of the sampled auto workers was 68% male and 30% female (2% of responses were missing gender). In addition, 92% of those sampled were white, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Native American/American Indian, and 1% defined themselves as “other” (3% of responses were missing race.).

To test for differences by gender, a Least-Squares Regression was run with the dependent variable

being the rating for the question on a seven-point scale and the independent variable being a dummy variable where 0 = male and 1 = female. To check the validity of the findings, a Mann-Whitney test was also run on the data. The Mann-Whitney test was used to check for differences between the two groups (male and female), since the scoring on each question is on a five-point Likert scale instead of a true continuous scale. According to both of these procedures, there is a difference in the way males and females feel about questions 1 and 2 on this survey.

As shown in Table 2, items 1 and 2 are significant at $p \leq .05$ in both tests. On Question 1, “Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral forces taking over society today”, a higher percentage of males were in agreement with this statement than females. While 96% of males agree with this statement (4% slightly agree, 14% agree and 78% strongly

Table 1. Authoritarian and Contrait Items Frequency

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Question 1 Country needs a powerful leader	1%	3%	4%	21%	71%
Question 2 Country needs free thinkers	4%	6%	6%	31%	54%
Question 3 Tolerance for gays and lesbians	15%	13%	18%	38%	16%
Question 4 God’s laws for abortion, pornography, marriage	6%	14%	15%	35%	29%
Question 5 TV and internet need to be censored	14%	16%	7%	28%	35%
Question 6 Many good people challenge government	0%	9%	9%	52%	31%
Question 7 Silence people who disrespect Founders	7%	21%	11%	32%	29%
Question 8 Free to live by own morals	7%	10%	7%	39%	37%
Question 9 Police allowed to do what is necessary	18%	31%	10%	26%	15%
Question 10 Do what’s necessary to stop illegal immigration	7%	13%	11%	29%	40%

Table 2. Significance Testing

Question	Regression p-values	Mann-Whitney p-values
Question 1 Country needs a powerful leader	0.035	0.038
Question 2 Country needs free thinkers	0.016	0.032
Question 3 Tolerance for gays and lesbians	0.967	0.958
Question 4 God's laws for abortion, pornography, marriage	0.759	0.61
Question 5 TV and internet need to be censored	0.708	0.596
Question 6 Many good people challenge government	0.816	0.939
Question 7 Silence people who disrespect Founders	0.717	0.847
Question 8 Free to live by own morals	0.026	0.053
Question 9 Police allowed to do what is necessary	0.367	0.268
Question 10 Do what's necessary to stop illegal immigration	0.181	0.180

agree), only 82% of females agree with this statement (27% agree and 55% strongly agree).

On Question 2, "Our country needs free thinkers, who will have the courage to stand up against traditional ways if necessary, even if this upsets a lot of people", again a higher percentage of males were in agreement with this statement than females. While 92% of males agree with this statement (8% slightly agree, 24% agree and 60% strongly agree), only 68% of females agree with this statement (14% slightly agree, 14% agree and 40% strongly agree).

The differences by gender that we found in our case-study mirror the literature over the last several decades since empirical research began in 1950: ambivalence. Our respondents want both a strong leader and, at the same time, more free thinkers. Such apparent contradictions are typical of ambivalence. Although strong leaders seldom tolerate the dissent that free thinkers inspire, ambivalence is this very type of contradiction: a person pulled in competing directions with

no logical resolution. Rather, both sentiments "feel right" and "feel justified" even if they defy rational resolution. While only two significant items may seem like a non-finding, we argue differently, that men and women are each no more or less likely to develop authoritarian personality characteristics. Both are equally high, moderate, or low depending on social roles and cultural norms. The literature predicts that social stability exerts considerable influence on the expression of authoritarian attitudes, so even for those who exhibit moderate to high levels of authoritarianism, high levels of social stability in the form of pay and status will minimise authoritarian attitudes. Since 1950, the *frequency* of authoritarian characteristics has changed very little in the American population, but the *strength* of authoritarian attitudes varies with social stability (Bremmer, 2006; Kohn, 2006). As people feel a loss of economic livelihood, threats to status, or perceived dangers from outsiders, the more likely they are to embrace authoritarian attitudes. In our case, these manifest as a desire for a strong

leader who will right all the wrongs, and restore moral order. In the case of authoritarianism, any sense of strength and order, whether moral, legal, or otherwise, refers to traditional and conventional normative values, including conventional gender roles. While female factory workers were much less common when the women in our study started work, the presence of authoritarianism negates rational assessment of social or personal conditions, and, instead, a person embraces emotions of power and normativity even if that doesn't really match their own experiences; these are working women who completed a lifelong career as industrial workers, which does not suggest they needed special care or protection because of some alleged frailty. Yet, and like the men, they long for a strong leader who will right all the wrongs.

Conclusion

One of the ironies of the working class in the United States has been that they only minimally identified as working class – working people yes, but not as working class. From a scholarly standpoint, many have legitimately argued that class has decisively shaped social life and politics in the United States since its founding, even if most Americans don't use that perspective. However, few Americans from any class have ever identified by class. As a nation of immigrants from diverse ethnic groups, people identified instead around religion, cultural traditions, and race (Olson & Beal, 2010), such that white workers often sided with owners and the wealthy against black workers and other non-whites (Pearson, 2016). Consequently, race and gender overwhelmingly eclipsed class awareness in any sense (Kendi, 2016; Pearson, 2016; Walker, 2002), despite sometimes radical labour activism (Dray, 2011; Smith, 2006). In the US context, the traditional working class has been strongly ambivalent in general – torn between class and cultural identity – and our case-study supports that historical consistency. As they fought for higher wages and safer working conditions, they also at times sided with management and

conservative political interests against ethnic and gender inclusion and interpreted race and class as the same thing. Today, with unions largely broken in the private sector and marginalised in the political realm, the ambivalence has perhaps resolved with a decisive rightward shift. As found, Donald Trump's core support comes from the white working class. Our research suggests that strong authoritarian tendencies are one reason and they are gradually winning over more inclusive and rational tendencies. In the end, the working class may, in fact, be the revolutionary class, but at present, the revolution they support is something more like white nationalism over and against democracy.

We recognise that our case study may not be generalisable across the population, given our statistical measures due to our sample size. With a greater number of respondents, we could have added more explanatory statistical power to our research. Also, the link between authoritarianism, ambivalence and gender needs further analysis above and beyond what we have reviewed. Since the literature is quite varied in those areas, a greater number of case studies could greatly add to the literature.

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