

AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY IN SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to identify the share of the authoritarian personality in social work students, as well as the format of these students' studies. Data collection was implemented via a survey method using a standardized *F*-scale questionnaire, with additional questions about the socio-demographic character. These were the basis for testing the relation between authoritarian personality and these factors. The research sample consisted of students of two social work study programs at the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice ($N = 195$). The results show a significant relation between authoritarianism and age within the dimensions of submission ($p < 0.01$; $F = 7.68$) and superstition ($p = 0.03$; $F = 4.81$). We also focused on the relation between the authoritarian personality and full-time vs. part-time study forms. There was only a statistically relevant relation for the dimension of submission ($p < 0.01$; $t = 2.77$). For this, part-time students had a lower average, meaning they were less submissive than full-time students. The last statistically significant relationship found was between the study programs, where the *t*-test showed a significant relationship for eight of the nine dimensions of the questionnaire. In practice, public administration graduates will more often use a control and power approach in relation to their clients.

Keywords: Adorno; Authoritarian personality; Social work; Social work students

INTRODUCTION

The concept of an authoritarian personality is crucial from social workers' perspective. They are legitimate state authorities and have certain requirements from clients according to the social policy. The actual social work is however perceived as a helping profession, which creates a certain dichotomy of social interactions between the worker and the client. It also forces social workers to find a balance between these two poles of their professional responsibilities, and to adapt them to the requirements of their clients and the

specific social situation. Some of the key factors that can influence the level of the authoritarian approach are the individual personal factors of the workers, which can be evaluated based on the concept of the so-called authoritarian personality. The objective of the study is to identify the share of the authoritarian personality in social work students, as well as the format of their studies. The reason for the elaboration of this topic is the fact that the authoritarian personality can significantly negatively affect the work with minority target groups in the following career of social work students.

Authority, authoritarian personality, and its impact on social work

Authority expresses the power dynamic between its carrier and receiver. It is connected to legitimacy and leadership that receives spontaneous support (Balík and Kubát, 2004). It is based on shared group norms and on the right to control individuals (Lukas and Smolík, 2008). Weber (1978) divides authority into three basic types: rational or legitimate, traditional, and charismatic. Rational authority is closely connected to the belief that the established rules and powers of authorities to issue orders are legal. Traditional authority is based on the belief that ancient traditions are holy. Charismatic authority is based on being loyal to the extraordinary character of an individual that establishes order. There is usually a dichotomous relation to authorities – it is basically a process of looking for a compromise between the authority, freedom, and personal responsibility (Beck, 2007). From a social perspective, authority can be divided into personal, positional, and functional. Personal authority is the natural influence stemming from individual characteristics, abilities, and skills of a person. Positional authority means believing the influence that an individual receives from his/her position within the system of an organization. Functional authority is the influence that stems from the expected implementation of tasks and its quality within a certain role or function (Vališová, 2008).

In the area of social work, authority is a form of social influence that is implemented via an imbalanced relationship between the social worker and the client (Balogová and Žiaková, 2017). Janebová (2013) states that, in social work, it is legitimate to use the authority of a social worker with the client if the intervention aims to influence them. This conviction allows the influence to be successful.

An authoritarian personality is characterized by a very rigid approach to discipline, an extreme tendency to have a hostile attitude towards social deviations, and a very intolerant view on what is good and what is bad (Hayesová, 2021). Such a person is overtly submissive towards authorities. At the same time, they are susceptible to prejudice (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2006) and demand discipline (Fromm, 2016). According to Krejčí (2004), the authoritarian personality is also characterized by equating goodness with

weakness and trying to take advantage of that – with a tendency to see other people as rivals, by striving to achieve external prestige attributes such as power, money, or status, by internal mental conflicts, being unhappy with his/her life, and feeling guilty. Authoritarian personalities are attracted to environments where they can hide their pathology behind institutionalized authority, or even, where, without having to worry, they can show their neurotic obsessions in the name of upkeeping the myth of a hero in culture (Lukas and Smolík, 2008). There lies the risk endangering democratic society (Adorno et al., 1950).

Adorno et al. (1950) clearly state that the need of an individual to identify themselves with an authoritarian personality is the result of an inferiority complex and is rooted in upbringing. A personality whose foundation is not solid and who has a need to identify with authority, thereby gains an unsubstantiated but psychologically incredibly effective feeling that it is itself becoming a part of the said authority, and it adopts all of its apparent positive or positive traits (Žantovský, 2015). Their own ethnic group is also perceived to be entitled to more power and status. If its status is lower or endangered however, the personality understands this situation as proof of persecution and bullying (Adorno et al., 1950). Fromm (2016) strived to explain the rise of fascism and found its cause in the fear of freedom and the need to escape. He defined one of the means for this as authoritarianism and provided many researchers after him with hypotheses. These were then used by a team of researchers working with T. W. Adorno, who conducted the study *Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950). Authoritarian personality is connected to lower intelligence and educational level (Balík and Kubát, 2004), and the male sex (Taylor, 1995).

The occurrence of authoritarian personality in the population of social workers has yet to be researched. The specifics of exercising power in the profession have been described multiple times. Hasenfeld (1987) states that the role of power in social work is often underestimated – it is however evident that it has a fundamental influence on its result, since it empowers the client. Gambrill (2001) adds that authority of the helper is based on the awareness of the client. This also means clients being aware of the social workers try-

ing to influence them, which empowers the attempts and makes them more likely to succeed. According to Hugman (2017), power and authority in social work are in some cases inevitable and necessary since they can make interactions with clients easier. However, they can also negatively influence the cooperation. Norrie et al. (2016) add that it is necessary to focus on the use and abuse of power in social work – not only from the perspective of clients to employees but also from employees to clients, which in both respects negatively affects goals and desires. According to Welbourne (2011), a standalone chapter in the new millennium for social work is the repressive influence of political context on social work and social services in general. The requirements on the personality of social workers seem to be in direct conflict with the characteristics of the authoritarian personality. For example, Graham and Shier (2009) discuss reflective practice, which includes openness in communication and cooperation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection was implemented via a survey method using a standardized *F*-scale questionnaire (the so-called California Scale) (Adorno et al., 1950), to which were added questions about the socio-demographic character. These were the basis for testing the relation between the authoritarian personality and these factors. Adorno et al. (1950) identified and described nine characteristics of an authoritarian personality, which were the basis for the so-called California *F*-scale.

These are:

- *Conventionalism* – conformity to the traditional societal norms and values of the middle class.
- *Submission* – non-critical relation towards an idealized authority within the group meaning submitting.
- *Aggression* – the tendency to seek out, condemn, and punish persons who do not fulfil conventional values. Authoritarian aggression is always directed against members of different groups who are the subject of ethnocentric prejudices.
- *Anti-intraception* – rejecting subjectivity, unwillingness to explore one's own mental state or the mental states of others. Opposing

subjectivity, fantasy, imagination, gentleness of the spirit. The life of a superstitious person is guided by destiny, not by his/her own will.

- *Superstition and stereotypes* – giving responsibility to external factors (which cannot be influenced by individuals) and believing in the magical power of fate.
- *Toughness* – believing in power, judging weakness, not compromising, roughness. Overt emphasis on the dimension of dominance – submission, strong – weak, leader – follower, identifying with persons in power, overvaluing conventional attributes of ego, trying to overly assert oneself with power and toughness.
- *Destructiveness and cynicism* – generalized hatred towards people and their evaluation.
- *Projecting* – being convinced that the external world is hostile or dangerous.
- *Sexuality* – attributing excessive importance to the issue of sex.

The questionnaire includes 30 statements that accommodate the above-mentioned dimensions. Agreeing with a statement is worth one point. The authoritarianism trait is not defined by a specific number of positive answers that suggest the person is authoritarian. The results were used to compare the various groups and persons (Adorno et al., 1950).

The research sample consisted of students of two social work study programs at the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice (the final number $N = 195$, return rate of 70%) who were approached at lectures or via an e-mail sent to their university e-mail. The students were informed that the research is completely anonymous and focuses on personal characteristics. Data collection was carried out in 2018. The collected data was statistically tested with the SPSS program via a *t*-test for independent selection and dispersion analysis. Social work is a feminized profession, so only four questionnaires were filled out by males. The ages of the respondents were mostly people between 18 and 22 (44%) or 26 and older (33%) – these were primarily studying part-time. The least frequent were people between the ages of 23–25 (23%). 53% of the research sample were respondents studying full-time, 47% were studying part-time.

RESULTS

The study focuses on the connection between the dimensions of authoritarian personality and other surveyed factors – age and form of study (see Table 1). The results show a significant relation between authoritarianism and age within the dimensions of submission ($p < 0.01$; $F = 7.68$) and superstition ($p = 0.03$; $F = 4.81$). In other cases, there was no significant statistical relation. The age of the participants lowered the averages for the other dimensions.

We also focused on the relation between the authoritarian personality and full-time vs. part-time study forms. There was only a statistically relevant relation for the dimension of submission ($p < 0.01$; $t = 2.77$), for which part-time students had a lower average, meaning they were less submissive than full-time students.

Another tested variable was the type of study program. Despite both programs providing graduates with the title of social worker, they are different when it comes to focus.

The Social Work in Public Administration program tends to prepare graduates for social work jobs in administration of public or private institutions. The program Rehabilitative, Psycho-social Care of Children with Disabilities, Adults, and the Elderly, focuses more on comprehensive rehabilitation, working in NGOs, and field social work. The difference between the two programs was reflected in the hypothesis that the students of the programs will also be different based on their personality traits. Graduates of public administration will, in practice, more often use the control and power approach in relation to their clients. The hypothesis proved correct, as the t -test showed a significant relation for eight out of nine questionnaire dimensions. A statistically relevant relation was shown for the following dimensions: conventionalism ($p < 0.01$; $t = 4.97$), submission ($p < 0.01$; $t = 3.07$), aggression ($p < 0.01$; $t = 5.99$), anti-intracception ($p < 0.01$; $t = 5.12$), superstition ($p < 0.01$; $t = 2.86$), destructiveness ($p < 0.01$; $t = 6.98$), projectivity ($p < 0.01$; $t = 4.52$), and sexuality ($p < 0.01$; $t = 4.50$).

Table 1 – Dimensions of authoritarian personality in the context of study factors

Dimensions of authoritarian personality	Average values	Part-time study form	Full-time study form	Study program Rehabilitation	Study program Public
Conventionalism	159.5	146	173	141	178
Submission	286.5	238	335	291	282
Aggression	243.0	250	236	205	281
Anti-intracception	187.75	168	207	177	199
Superstition	204.0	170	238	216	192
Toughness	284.5	258	311	289	280
Destructiveness	56.5	60	53	35	78
Projectivity	208.0	185	231	198	218
Sexuality	36.0	33	39	20	52

DISCUSSION

Although it seems essential to study social workers as a target group where an authoritarian personality is manifested, this field has not yet been sufficiently researched. Taylor (1995) explains that from the social, legal, and ethical context of social work, we can understand power and authority as its integral parts. How social workers understand the definition of

these two terms within their work (and what their attitude is toward them) are the result of their efficiency as professionals. Skyba (2017) conducted research which shows that female students are aware of the dimensions of power that they will encounter when practicing their profession. As part of the data set, a significant relation was discovered between submission and age, as well as between form of study of social work, which represents the ten-

dency to abide by authorities. In this context, it could symbolize the representation of state authority towards the clients of social services. The study program factor also points out a significant difference across many dimensions – eight out of nine dimensions of the *F*-scale to be precise. Students who prepare for a career in field social work have a higher tendency to be superstitious and submissive towards internal authority. Students preparing for administration work show higher results in the dimensions of conventionalism, aggression, anti-intraception, destructiveness, projectivity, and sexuality.

There are no *F*-scale norms for the Czech Republic, which is why the research sample cannot be compared to another same-aged population. In the Czech environment, this tool has been used before, e.g., to examine teachers (Novotný, 1997), and showed that teachers with authoritarian tendencies have more negative attitudes towards their parents. They are also more inclined to demand discipline. Novotný (1997) summarizes that authoritarianism influences the performance of teachers and impacts the teacher-student relationship. It can also impact the development of the student. Authoritarian personality was also researched by Hnilica (2012) from the perspective of its relation to morally problematic behavior, based on a sample of 279 students of humanities. The results show that there is a relation between authoritarianism and lower tolerance of behavior opposing traditional expectations of social roles but have higher tolerance towards amoral and criminal behavior. Therefore, authoritarianism can be a significant personal determinant, which leads toward a non-critical enforcing of the will of state power, regardless of the specifics of the situation. Authoritarian personality is associated with a greater tendency to

have prejudices (Weinerová, 2014), primarily towards minorities.

The main limitation of this study is that the research tool has not been standardized for the Czech Republic, and there are no standards to compare the results with.

CONCLUSIONS

The study presents fundamental evidence of the presence of authoritative personality traits in students of social work study programs. It also shows different tendencies towards authoritarianism between students who focus more on field work and those who focus more on administrative roles in public or private institutions. In general, these had a higher tendency towards authoritarianism. The difference was apparent in eight out of the nine authoritarian dimensions. The most sensitive dimension was submission, which showed differences based on the age and study form of the students. Full-time students showed a higher level of this trait, meaning they abided by the shared authority the most. The topic of the authoritarian personality is very relevant for social work. Therefore, a deeper exploration of this trait is necessary in social workers; and the results of this study can provide valuable data for comparison with other target groups. We consider it possible to use a questionnaire that would be standard for Czech conditions in the personal diagnostics of job seekers in the helping professions. It could be used by organizations that work with ethnically diverse groups, and in teaching social workers as part of their self-reflection.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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