

# Moral Judgment, Authoritarianism, and Ethnocentrism

MARINUS H. VAN IJZENDOORN

*Department of Education  
University of Leiden, the Netherlands*

---

**ABSTRACT.** Although much has been written about the moral basis of authoritarianism, empirical research on the relationship between moral judgment level and authoritarian and ethnocentric attitudes has been sparse. In this study, I hypothesized that higher levels of moral judgment are related to anti-authoritarian and anti-ethnocentric attitudes, whereas lower moral levels predict the presence of authoritarian and ethnocentric opinions. Dutch university students ( $n = 126$ ) and high school students ( $n = 88$ ) completed the Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SROM) and scales for authoritarianism and ethnocentrism. Results in the two samples converge: Moral judgment level indeed appears to be related to authoritarianism in the expected direction and—to a lesser extent—to ethnocentrism as well.

---

**THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY** was born more than 35 years ago in the scientific literature (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Since its birth, more than 1,200 studies on the authoritarian personality have been reported, mainly in the Western countries. In the 1970s, about 750 papers on authoritarianism were published (Meloan, 1983). This continuous stream of articles focuses particularly on the claims and hypotheses of the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his colleagues. They assumed authoritarianism to be a syndrome that would make a person very susceptible to antidemocratic movements. Authoritarianism was supposed to consist of nine traits: conventionalism, submission, aggression, anti-intracception (i.e., rejection of self-reflection), su-

---

*I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Tim van Houten in the data collection.*

*Parts of this article were presented at the 44th Annual Convention of the International Council of Psychologists, Tel Aviv, Israel, July 7-10, 1986.*

*Requests for reprints should be sent to Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, Department of Education, University of Leiden, P. O. Box 9507, NL-2300 RA Leiden, the Netherlands.*

perstition, power orientation, cynicism, projectivity, and excessive fixation on sexuality.

These traits point to the psychoanalytic perspective of Adorno and his colleagues, who tried to explain the development of the authoritarian personality by describing its typical family background. An authoritarian person would have been raised in a family with a dominant, status-oriented father and a very restrictive mother. In this family, every tendency toward disobedience would have been strongly suppressed; therefore, a premature and complete identification with as well as submission to the powerful parents would follow. Aggressive feelings would not be focused on their cause—the powerful adults—but on less threatening and weaker elements inside (anti-intracception) or outside the person (racism). A weak ego, a rigid and external superego, and a strong and primitive id would be characteristic of the authoritarian personality. Conventionalism, submission, and aggression in particular would refer to a malfunctioning superego. In fact, authoritarianism would consist mainly of a disorder in the superego or moral development. In its childhood, the authoritarian personality would have had too little room for developing and internalizing its own value system: It was prematurely forced to take over the parental value system.

Because authoritarianism is supposed to result from a problematic moral development, it is remarkable that almost no research has been done on the relationship between authoritarian tendencies and the development of moral reasoning according to the theories of Piaget (1932/1973) or Kohlberg (1981, 1984). These investigators formulated an alternative and empirically well-founded view of moral development that might throw some light on the development of authoritarian traits. Against the background of stage theory, authoritarian conventionalism, submission, and aggression toward weak elements could be interpreted as a stagnation in the development of moral reasoning. Obedience to powerful individuals or groups is a characteristic of the first stages in moral development. In these stages, moral reasoning is determined by external authorities and conventions. A relationship between the moral judgment stage and authoritarianism is therefore hypothesized to exist. Authoritarian traits are presumed to correspond to lower stages of moral judgment, whereas anti-authoritarian traits would characterize higher stages of moral judgment. Empirical evidence for this hypothesis is scarce and indirect. In one of Milgram's obedience-to-authority studies, obedient subjects appeared to be more authoritarian than subjects who refused to obey the experimenter in all circumstances (Keniston, 1969; Wrightsman, 1977). In another Milgram study, it was found that most of the subjects reasoning at the highest moral stage quit the experiment (Kohlberg, 1984; O'Connor, 1977). Because we deal here with context-bound variables, more recent data from different cultures are necessary to test the generalizability of the original theory.

A strong tendency toward authoritarian conformity to the social reference group also implies a negative view of individuals outside this group, especially if they are perceived as less powerful. Adorno and his colleagues, therefore, considered ethnocentrism to be an aspect of the authoritarian syndrome. Ray (1984) criticized this thesis, but a relation between ethnocentrism—defined as a negative attitude toward those not belonging to one's own reference group—and authoritarianism has been found in several different empirical studies (see Meloen, 1983, for a review). Convergence between studies in different cultural contexts may not always be expected, especially if cultures with and without serious minority problems have been studied. An important question is whether a relation also exists between ethnocentrism and moral reasoning. In cognitive-developmental theory it is supposed that higher levels of moral judgment imply less emphasis on arbitrary and morally irrelevant characteristics of people, such as race, status, and sex. All human beings are considered to have the same basic human rights and should be treated equally if these rights are at stake (Kohlberg, 1984). It is therefore hypothesized that moral judgment level and ethnocentrism are correlated: Higher levels of moral judgment are considered to be incompatible with ethnocentric evaluations of status and rights of minorities in our society. To our knowledge, no empirical studies exist that confirm or falsify this hypothesis. In an earlier study, moral judgment appeared to be strongly related to respondents' attitudes toward women's rights (Van IJzendoorn, 1986). These data can be interpreted as indirect evidence in favor of our hypothesis.

In sum, three hypotheses about the relation between authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and moral judgment level have been derived. First, higher levels of moral judgment were hypothesized to correspond with a less authoritarian attitude; second, a more authoritarian attitude was presumed to correspond with a more ethnocentric attitude; third, higher levels of moral judgments would be incompatible with an ethnocentric attitude. In the present two empirical studies on these hypotheses, a restricted definition and operationalization of the concept of authoritarianism has been used. Only superego elements such as conventionalism, submission, and aggression were taken into consideration. These elements are, of course, important from a cognitive-developmental perspective. The much criticized complexity of the concept of authoritarianism (Heaven, Rajab, & Ray, 1985; Meloen, 1983; Ray, 1983, 1984; Wrightsman, 1977) is thereby considerably reduced.

## Study 1

### *Method*

*Subjects.* The sample consisted of 126 first-year education students studying at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. The questionnaire was com-

pleted during an introductory course in education given in 1985. All students attending the course took part in the study. The mean age of the students was 25.6 years ( $SD = 7.18$ ); 75% were female. The socioeconomic status of the respondents' fathers was 4.7 ( $SD = 1.4$ ) on a scale ranging from *unskilled labor* (1) to *academic professions* (6) (see Van Westerlaak, Kropman, & Collaris, 1975 for details about the scoring system).

**Procedure.** The questionnaire, including short instructions for respondents as well as examples of questions and answers, consisted of four clusters of questions. The first cluster was derived from the Sociomoral Reflection Objective Measure (SROM; see Gibbs et al., 1984). The SROM is a paper-and-pencil multiple choice test used to assess the level of moral judgment with respect to two classical Kohlberg dilemmas: the Heinz dilemma and the father and son dilemma. The test for moral judgment level contains some checks for the respondents' tendency to give socially desirable answers; because of these checks, 6 subjects had to be removed from the sample. In the present study, alpha reliability was .71 ( $M = 388$ ,  $SD = 29.5$ ). The second cluster was a scale for measuring ethnocentric attitudes toward minorities, validated by De Jong and Van der Toorn (1984). This ethnocentrism scale, consisting of 16 items with five alternatives for agreeing or disagreeing with the content of each item, appeared to be unidimensional. Alpha reliability was .86 ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). The third cluster contained an adapted, 14-item version of Adorno's F scale that was validated for the Dutch population by Roe (1972). The original F scale has been strongly criticized by Ray (1984), who devoted too much attention to the so-called acquiescence response set provoked by the positively formulated items. Several different authors, however, showed the irrelevance of this criticism (Hagendoorn & Janssen, 1983; Meloen, 1983; Roe). The adapted version of the F scale appeared to be unidimensional. Alpha reliability was .86 ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = .56$ ). The fourth cluster consisted of questions about background variables such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status (SES) and asked the respondents their political party preference, religion, and political position on a left-right scale.

## Results

Pearson correlations between social psychological and background variables are given in Table 1. Authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and political position appear to be correlated in the expected direction: The more rightist respondents were, the less tolerant they were toward minorities and the more authoritarian they appeared to be. Although there is no overlap with the content of the items of the ethnocentrism scale, authoritarianism is correlated with ethnocentrism: The more authoritarian—or the less anti-

authoritarian—the subjects were, the less tolerant they appeared to be toward minorities.

Moral judgment level and authoritarianism are correlated in the expected direction ( $-.36$ ): A lower moral judgment level is related to a more authoritarian attitude, and a higher moral judgment level to a more anti-authoritarian perspective. The correlation between moral judgment and ethnocentrism is weak ( $-.19$ ) but significant and in the expected direction: A higher moral judgment level is related to more tolerance toward minority groups. Age correlates with moral judgment level, authoritarianism, and political position: Older subjects reasoned at a somewhat higher level of moral judgment, were somewhat more anti-authoritarian, and were more leftist. Male respondents, lastly, appeared to be somewhat more leftist than female respondents.

A multiple regression analysis with age, sex, SES, political position, moral judgment, and ethnocentrism as predictors and authoritarianism as criterion variable was conducted (with backward selection of predictors) to obtain an overview of the most important relationships between variables from a multivariate perspective. Authoritarianism was predicted rather well,  $R^2 = .41$ ,  $F(3, 106) = 24.1$ ,  $p < .001$ , by three variables: moral judgment, ethnocentrism, and political position. Partial correlations were  $-.30$ ,  $.32$ , and  $.32$ , respectively. After controlling for intervening variables, moral judgment appears, therefore, to remain significantly correlated with authoritarianism: The higher the moral judgment level, the more anti-authoritarian the subjects were.

**TABLE 1**  
**Pearson Correlations Between Moral Judgment, Authoritarianism,**  
**Ethnocentrism, Political Position, SES, Age, and Sex (University Students)**

Variable	Sex	Age	SES	Moral judgment	Authoritarianism	Ethnocentrism
Sex						
Age						
Socioeconomic status (SES)						
Moral judgment	-.15	.26*	.01			
Authoritarianism	.07	-.22*	-.06	-.36*		
Ethnocentrism	.11	-.16	-.04	-.19*	.52*	
Political position	.23*	-.26*	.10	-.18	.51*	.53*

\* $p < .05$ ;  $110 < N < 124$ .

## Study 2

*Method*

**Subjects.** The subjects were 88 Dutch high school students who completed the questionnaire during school hours. Every student attending the classes participated in the study. The mean age of this sample was 16.7 years ( $SD = .77$ ); 41% were female. The socioeconomic status of the respondents' fathers was 4.2 ( $SD = 1.4$ ) on a scale ranging from *unskilled labor* (1) to *academic professions* (6).

**Procedure.** The same test and scales were used in the second study as in the first study. Although the high school students attended four different classes, the effect of this variable on moral judgment,  $F(3, 71) = .05$ , authoritarianism,  $F(3, 84) = 1.64$ , and ethnocentrism,  $F(3, 84) = .70$ , was not significant. Reliabilities of the SROM, ethnocentrism scale, and authoritarianism scale were .73, .92, and .92, respectively ( $Ms = 348, 2.6, 2.8$ ;  $SDs = 32.2, .67, .70$ ). Somewhat more respondents than in the first study had to be removed from the sample because of a tendency to make socially desirable responses ( $n = 13$ ).

*Results*

Pearson correlations between the most important variables of this study are given in Table 2. The correlations between authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and political position are rather strong. Authoritarianism and ethnocentrism

TABLE 2  
Pearson Correlations Between Moral Judgment, Authoritarianism,  
Ethnocentrism, Political Position, SES, Age, and Sex (High School Students)

Variable	Sex	Age	SES	Moral judgment	Authoritarianism	Ethnocentrism
Sex						
Age						
Socioeconomic status (SES)						
Moral judgment	.17	.13	.00			
Authoritarianism	-.23*	-.23*	-.07	-.48*		
Ethnocentrism	-.26*	-.22*	-.13	-.42*	.82*	
Political position	-.25*	-.22*	-.22*	-.33*	.66*	.68*

\* $p < .05$ .

correlate .82, in the expected direction: The more authoritarian, the more ethnocentric respondents were. Political position is correlated with both variables: The more rightist respondents claimed to be, the more authoritarian and ethnocentric they were. Level of moral judgment correlates in the expected direction with authoritarianism ( $-.48$ ) and ethnocentrism ( $-.42$ ): The higher the level of moral judgment, the less authoritarian and ethnocentric the respondents were. Remarkably, moral judgment level also correlates with political position ( $-.33$ ): The more rightist the respondents were, the lower their level of moral reasoning. The correlation, however, is not strong and has not been replicated in other studies (Study 1; Van IJzendoorn, 1986, 1987). Sex and age of respondents are systematically related to the central variables of this study: Girls and older respondents appeared to be less authoritarian, less ethnocentric, and more leftist than boys (see Hagendoorn & Janssen, 1983, for comparable results) and younger subjects.

In order to explore the multivariate interdependencies, another multiple regression analysis was calculated. The analysis yielded the same predictors as in Study 1: moral judgment, ethnocentrism, and political position explain a considerable part of the variance (72%),  $F(3, 68) = 57.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . The contribution of ethnocentrism to the prediction is considerable: The partial correlation is .64. But after controlling for this strong predictor, the significant contributions of moral judgment (partial correlation =  $-.25$ ) and political position (partial correlation =  $.23$ ) remain.

### Discussion

The two studies performed with two different samples show converging results that confirm our hypotheses. First, higher levels of moral judgment were related to a less authoritarian attitude. Second, a less authoritarian attitude was related to a less ethnocentric attitude (contrary to Heaven et al.'s, 1985, thesis). Third, a less ethnocentric attitude was found to be related to higher levels of moral judgment. Especially in Study 2 on high school students, correlations are stronger, probably because, in that sample, the variation of answers on the scales for moral judgment, authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism is larger than in the more homogeneous sample of university students. In the high school sample, moreover, moral judgment level explains about 23% of the variance of authoritarianism and about 18% of the variance of ethnocentrism. Authoritarianism explains about 67% of the variance of ethnocentrism.

Although effect sizes are comparatively large (see Meloen, 1983), large proportions of the variance remain unexplained. Because the moral judgment ability and authoritarian and ethnocentric attitudes develop in a specific cultural context that could promote or block extreme expressions of these abilities and attitudes rather effectively, some of the unexplained vari-

ance may be attributed to such contextual factors, changing from culture to culture, and over time. Our results are therefore restricted in generalizability, and cultural differences could be responsible for discrepancies with Heaven et al.'s (1985) study. Nevertheless, it appears possible to validate some expectations derived from Adorno's (1950) theory, developed more than 40 years ago in a different society, and to expand Adorno's suggestions about the moral basis of the authoritarian personality.

Adorno and his colleagues (1950) considered, in particular, a weakened superego function to be the main cause of authoritarian conventionalism, submission, and aggression. Without denying the importance of a psychoanalytical interpretation of the authoritarian syndrome, I posit that the cognitive-developmental theory of morality could add some specific insights to the theory of the authoritarian personality. Although Wrightsman (1977) and others have stated that Adorno's genetic hypotheses have not yet been confirmed, no proposals have been put forward to revise, or at least supplement, the theoretical foundation of the authoritarian syndrome. The cognitive-developmental theory has been tested rather thoroughly (for a review, see Kohlberg, 1984; Kohlberg, Levine, & Hower, 1983), and the present study's data show a covariation between moral judgment level and authoritarianism. Without jumping to causal conclusions, it is relevant to take this result as a point of departure for studying the authoritarian personality as a stagnation in moral development and to emphasize somewhat more explicitly the moral reasoning instead of the psychodynamic basis of the syndrome in future research.

## REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- De Jong, M. J., & Van der Toorn, J. H. (1984). Etnisch vooroordeel onder middelbare scholieren [Ethnocentrism among high school students]. *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift*, 9, 509-517.
- Gibbs, J. C., Arnold, K. D., Morgan, R. L., Schwartz, E. S., Gavaghan, M. P., & Tappan, M. B. (1984). Construction and validation of a multiple-choice measure of moral reasoning. *Child Development*, 55, 527-536.
- Hagendoorn, L., & Janssen, J. (1983). *Rechtsomkeer. Rechtsextreme opvattingen bij leerlingen van middelbare scholen* [Turning right. Extremely rightist attitudes among high school students]. Baarn, the Netherlands: Ambo.
- Heaven, P. C. L., Rajab, D., & Ray, J. J. (1985). Patriotism, racism, and the disutility of the ethnocentrism concept. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125, 181-185.
- Keniston, K. (1969). Moral development, youthful activism and modern society. *Youth and Society*, 1, 25-34.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 1. The philosophy of moral development*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development*. New York: Harper & Row.



- Kohlberg, L., Levine, C., & Hewer, A. (1983). *Moral stages. A current formulation and a response to critics*. Basel, Switzerland: Karger.
- Meloen, J. D. (1983). *De autoritaire reactie in tijden van welvaart en crisis* [The authoritarian response in times of prosperity and crisis]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- O'Connor, J. (1977). Moral judgments and behavior. In L. S. Wrightsman (Ed.), *Social psychology* (pp. 243-275). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Piaget, J. (1973). *Das moralische Urteil beim Kinde* [Moral judgment in children]. Frankfurt, Germany: Suhrkamp. (Original work published 1932)
- Ray, J. J. (1983). Half of all authoritarians are left wing: A reply to Eysenck and Stone. *Political Psychology*, 4, 139-143.
- Ray, J. J. (1984). Alternatives to the F scale in the measurement of authoritarianism. A catalog. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 122, 105-119.
- Roe, R. A. (1972). *Over jazeggen en autoritarisme* [On response set and authoritarianism]. *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Psychologie*, 27, 385-397.
- Van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1986). Is Kohlberg's theorie van de morele ontwikkeling sexistisch? [Is Kohlberg's theory of moral development sexist?]. *Kind & Adolescent*, 7, 34-39.
- Van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1987). Moral judgment and concern about nuclear war. *Youth and Society*, 18, 283-301.
- Van Westerlaak, J. M., Kropman, J. A., & Collaris, J. W. M. (1975). *Beroepenklapper* [Occupational index]. Nijmegen, the Netherlands: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie.
- Wrightsman, L. S. (1977). *Social psychology* (2nd ed.). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

*Received December 1, 1987*