Social Discrimination in a Personnel Selection Context: The Effects of an Authority’s Instruction to Discriminate and Followers’ Authoritarianism¹

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Social discrimination in a personnel-selection context was studied using an in-basket exercise. West German participants had to select personnel from an applicant pool that included West German applicants (in-group members) and East German applicants (out-group members). As predicted, we found a main effect for an authority’s instruction to discriminate against out-group members. This main effect was, as predicted, qualified by an Instruction × Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) interaction effect. Only high scorers on RWA discriminated against out-group members when instructed to do so.

Social discrimination can be understood as the tendency to favor in-group members and to behave negatively toward members of out-groups (e.g., Turner, 1981). In the quest for understanding social discrimination, researchers have employed several classic paradigms, including the authoritarian personality approach (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), the group conflict approach (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), and the minimal group paradigm (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

More recently, Brief, Buttram, Elliot, Reizenstein, and McClure (1995) and Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, and Vaslow (in press; see also Duncan, 1976; McConahay, 1983) have studied social discrimination in its relevant social contexts (e.g., social discrimination at work). For example, Brief et al. (1995), using an in-basket exercise with an American sample, found that in an organizational context, White subordinates discriminated against African Americans (the out-group) in order to comply with requests from organizational authorities. Brief

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et al. (1997) showed that compliance with discrimination requests was particularly strong for people with anti-African American attitudes.

The current study is a constructive replication and an extension of Brief et al.'s (1995, in press) studies. We attempt to replicate the compliance effect with a West German sample that was instructed to discriminate against East Germans. Moreover, we extend Brief et al.'s research by investigating the effects of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981, 1988) on people's compliance behaviors with instructions to discriminate. In doing so, we draw on theory and research on the authoritarian personality and compliance to authority, two bodies of literature that are relevant to social discrimination, but have not received much attention in recent social-discrimination research. More particularly, we hypothesize that (a) participants will discriminate against out-group members if they are instructed to do so by an authority; and (b) participants who harbor strong RWA attitudes will be more likely to comply with an authority's instruction to discriminate than will participants who do not harbor such attitudes.

Social Discrimination Research

The social discrimination research of the last 30 years has been dominated by situational approaches. Sherif and his associates (e.g., Sherif et al., 1961; Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Sherif, White, & Harvey, 1955) studied social discrimination as a consequence of between-group conflict, cooperation, and competition. On the basis of three field experiments (including the robber's cave experiment), Sherif and his associates concluded that social discrimination is the result of interest conflicts among social groups; that is, goals that a group can only achieve at another group's expense lead to social conflict and competition. Social conflict and competition, in turn, cause hostility and social discrimination among groups.

Later studies, however, indicated the existence of social discrimination even in the absence of group conflicts (e.g., Ferguson & Kelley, 1964). Tajfel et al.'s (1971) minimal group paradigm is exemplary of this research. This paradigm reduced the situational antecedents of social discrimination to the mere existence of group membership. Participants were randomly assigned to groups based on trivial criteria. Then, participants had to allocate resources to other participants of whom they only knew group membership. Repeatedly, the participants allocated more resources to members of their own group than they did to members of the other group. Tajfel (1970) concluded that trivial categorization into two groups was sufficient to cause social discrimination. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the minimal group paradigm guided most of the research on social discrimination (e.g., Allen & Wilder, 1975; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978; Edington, Harrod, Haller, Hong, & Sapp, 1988; Gerard & Hoyt, 1974; Hewstone, Fincham, & Jaspers, 1981; Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983; Turner, Sachdev, & Hogg, 1983).
In the 1990s, however, the minimal group paradigm has been used less often in studies of social discrimination. Brief et al. (1995, in press) took an alternate approach to studying social discrimination. Drawing on Milgram's (1974) obedience research and the literature on compliance in organizations (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978; Simon, 1976), Brief et al. suggested that organizational members tended to comply with their bosses' instructions, even if these instructions led to social discrimination. Using in-basket exercises, these authors found support for their suggestions. The current study employs Brief et al.'s in-basket technique to investigate the discrimination of East Germans by West Germans. The categorization in West Germans and East Germans is meaningful, as several studies have indicated (e.g., Doll, Mielke, & Mentz, 1994; Kanning & Mummendey, 1993). These studies showed that West Germans and East Germans have stereotypes of each other that have not disappeared following the German reunification. Building on and extending Brief et al.'s research, we investigated the effects of an authority's instruction to discriminate against East Germans and followers' RWA on discriminatory behaviors.

The Authoritarian Personality and RWA

Adorno et al. (1950) suggested a personality approach to understand why the Holocaust happened in a country as civilized as Germany. These authors argued that people with an authoritarian personality were particularly likely to follow a charismatic leader and to discriminate against out-group members. The authoritarian personality is characterized by rigid adherence to conventional values, low tolerance for ambiguity, a preoccupation with dominance and submission, and a disposition to attribute evil motives to others (e.g., Samuelson, 1986; Sanford, 1971).

Altemeyer (1981, 1988) refined Adorno et al.'s (1950) definition of the authoritarian personality and developed the RWA scale. Altemeyer recognized that items measuring authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism were the most discriminatory items in past research on the authoritarian personality. Thus, according to Altemeyer (1988), RWA is a combination of three attitudinal clusters in a person: (a) *authoritarian submission*—a high degree of submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in the society in which one lives; (b) *authoritarian aggression*—a general aggressiveness, directed against various persons that is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities; and (c) *conventionalism*—a high degree of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities.

*Submission* to an established authority implies the general acceptance of the authority's statements, as well as a general willingness to comply with the authority's instructions (Altemeyer, 1988). In an organizational context, there-
fore, authoritarian subordinates likely comply more readily with instructions from their bosses (i.e., established authorities) than do less authoritarian subordinates. Instructions to discriminate against out-group members—as we used them in our study—might amplify compliance behaviors by authoritarian subordinates because of their authoritarian aggression.

Authoritarian aggression refers to an inclination to cause harm to others, but depends on an authority’s approval (Altemeyer, 1988). Thus, authoritarian subordinates might comply particularly with instructions to discriminate, as compliant discriminatory behavior is an authority-sanctioned medium to vent authoritarian aggression. In other words, we hypothesize an Instruction $\times$ RWA interaction, such that authoritarian subordinates will discriminate against out-group members to a higher degree than will less authoritarian subordinates if they are instructed to do so by a legitimate authority. However, in an instruction-free control condition, the amount of out-group discrimination should not differ for authoritarian and less authoritarian subordinates.

This Instruction $\times$ RWA interaction hypothesis appears to be inconsistent with alternate conceptualizations of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950; Duckitt, 1989). Duckitt integrated authoritarianism and intergroup relations, arguing that authoritarianism can be seen as an individual’s or group’s “conception of the relationship between the group and its individual members” (p. 71). According to this definition, an individual is authoritarian to the extent that he or she believes that group interests are of higher priority than are group members’ individual interests. Both Adorno et al.’s and Duckitt’s conceptualizations imply a general tendency of authoritarian people to discriminate against out-group members if group membership is a predominant criterion. On basis of these conceptualizations, one might argue that authoritarian people discriminate against out-group members, even in the absence of an authority’s instructions to do so. This argument implicitly assumes that generally accepted in-group rules and norms exist that enforce discriminatory behaviors against out-group members.

Current norms of intergroup relations in Germany, however, seem to be egalitarian in nature, making out-group discrimination an inappropriate behavior (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Thus, in the instruction-free condition of our experiment, authoritarian participants cannot refer to rules or norms that sanction discriminatory behavior. Consequently, in this condition, differences in discriminatory behavior between authoritarian and nonauthoritarian participants should be negligible.

Few recent studies have integrated research on authoritarianism and compliance. An example of one of the older studies on authoritarianism and compliance is that by Elms and Milgram (1966). Their study provided tentative evidence for the compliance behavior of authoritarian people. These authors selected 40 participants from Milgram’s (1974) famous studies on obedience. Half of these participants had shown obedient behavior; the other half had shown defiant
behavior. All of the participants completed (among other things) the California F scale, Adorno et al.'s (1950) measure of authoritarianism. Previously obedient participants scored higher on the F scale than did previously defiant participants. However, because the F scale was administered following the experiment, Elms and Milgram's study could not address the issue of whether authoritarian attitudes were causal antecedents of compliance behaviors.

Instructions From an Authority and Compliance With These Instructions

Organizations have hierarchies that define authority relationships. In particular, members of a higher hierarchical level usually have the authority to give orders to lower-level organizational members. Organizational members are well aware of the authority relationships within an organization and render them to be necessary for effective organizational functioning (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978). In an organizational context, compliance with one's boss's instructions is common, as long as the instructions do not go beyond the "zone of acceptance" (Simon, 1976, p. 131); that is, as long as they do not ask the subordinate to do things that strongly contradict his or her personal interests or are unrelated to the organization. The psychological process behind compliance may be the acceptance and internalization of the role as an organizational member (Hamilton & Sanders, 1992). Organizational members generally accept this role that requires compliance simply their duty.

In social psychological research, Milgram's (1974) studies on obedience are the most extreme example of compliance effects. In these studies, experimenters instructed participants to administer electric shocks to a supposed fellow volunteer in a "learning experiment." When the experimenter was an authority (e.g., appeared to be a professor), a majority of the participants complied completely with the experimenter's instructions and delivered increasingly threatening electric shocks to the victim, an experimental confederate. Meeus and Raaijmakers (1986, 1990) replicated Milgram's findings in an organizational context. In Meeus and Raaijmakers' studies, participants were instructed to make job applicants nervous who were taking a test. Participants knew that their actions would hurt the job applicants. Nonetheless, a vast majority (91%) of the participants complied with the experimenter's instructions and caused psychological harm to the job applicants.

Milgram (1974) argued that the participants in his studies did not feel responsible, as they "just" obeyed an authority's instructions. The participants considered themselves instruments directed by an authority. The organizational theorist

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4 We would like to acknowledge that in this section we draw heavily on the work of Brief and his associates (e.g., Brief et al., 1995).
Barnard (1938, p. 170) made a related argument, stating that many organizational members tended to avoid responsibility and instead had a “fiction of superior authority.” On the basis of this fiction, people would assume that the authority had good reasons for his or her instructions, even if the follower did not understand or know these reasons. Relying on theory and research on compliance, we hypothesized that people, when instructed by a legitimate authority to discriminate against out-group members, will do so.

The present study is designed to test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Participants will discriminate against out-group members if they are instructed to do so by an authority.

Hypothesis 2. Participants who harbor strong RWA attitudes will be more likely to comply with an authority’s instruction to discriminate than will participants who do not harbor such attitudes.

Method

Experimental Design

We employed a $2 \times 2$ design with instruction from above (instruction/no instruction) and RWA (high/low) as the independent variables. The dependent variable was the number of out-group members selected for the job interview by the participant.

Sample

Participants were 62 first- and second-year students who attended psychology lectures at the University of Kiel/Germany. All participants were born and raised in the former Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). Of the participants, 36 (58.1%) were female, and 26 were male. The average age was 23.7 years. The participants were recruited for two supposedly independent studies: a questionnaire study and an in-basket exercise. To ensure that participants would not recognize the connection between the two studies, different experimenters (advanced graduate students in psychology) conducted the two studies. For their voluntary participation, participants received credit in form of participant hours (necessary for pre-diploma eligibility).

Procedure

The study was conducted in two stages. In Stage 1, participants completed a questionnaire that included a measure of RWA. In Stage 2, participants completed an in-basket exercise.
Stage 1: The questionnaire. The experimenters administered the questionnaire in a group session. The participants were informed that the questionnaire was designed to investigate factors that affect decision-making behavior. Before completing the questionnaire, the participants selected a code word that they would also use in the second stage of the study. The code word allowed us to match each participant's material from Stages 1 and 2 and ensured participants' anonymity.

The questionnaire, among three other filler scales, included a German version of the RWA scale (Schneider & Lederer, 1995) and asked for basic demographic information. The RWA scale, for which Schneider and Lederer reported a Cronbach's alpha of .90, contained 34 items, including 4 warm-up items that were not considered in our analyses. Of the items, 15 were positively scored, such as “Obedience is the most important virtue that children should learn.” The 15 other items were negatively scored, such as “There is not only one right way to live.” The 9-point Likert-type scale ranged from -4 (very strongly disagree) to +4 (very strongly agree). To analyze the scale, the negatively scored items were recoded. Then, the scores were transformed such that they ranged from 1 to 9. Thus, the sum scores for the scale could range from 30 (minimum) to 270 (maximum). In the current study, the scale sum scores ranged from 32 to 198, with a Cronbach's alpha of .94. On the basis of a median split (Mdn = 65), 34 participants having a sum score of 65 or lower were assigned to the low-RWA group, and 28 participants having a sum score of higher than 65 were assigned to the high-RWA group.

Stage 2: The in-basket exercise. In Stage 2, participants completed an in-basket exercise administered in a group session. At the beginning of the experimental session, the experimenter explained the meaning of assessment centers. The Institute for Psychology would currently test components of an assessment center, including the in-basket exercise that the participants were asked to complete. Then, the participants received the in-basket exercise that contained detailed instructions.

The participants played the role of a person named “Torsten Folger,” head of a department of a fast-food chain founded in the former Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). The first section of the in-basket exercise contained information about the structure of the company and the responsibilities of Torsten Folger. In their role as Torsten Folger, the participants, among other things, were responsible for personnel selection. Moreover, the participants were informed that they had 30 min to complete the exercise.

The second section of the in-basket exercise contained memoranda to which the participants in their role as Torsten Folger had to respond. For example, a memorandum required a decision about the starting salary of a new employee and another memorandum contained an employee's vacation request. The memorandum that contained the instruction-from-above manipulation asked participants to make a personnel decision for the position of the soon-leaving head of the human-resources group, a person named (in the in-basket) “Mrs. Schmidt-
Schwarz.” With respect to the personnel decision, the participants received the following memorandum from their boss, the president of the company:

It is good to know that you are the person who is responsible for recruiting a successor for Mrs. Schmidt-Schwarz. Please consider the following criteria that are very important to me:

1. We need somebody with experience in the fast-food industry. I do not want a person who is new to our business.

2. It is absolutely necessary that a competent and professional person solves the problems in the human-resources group.

Then, in the experimental condition, the instruction-from-above to discriminate followed:

3. While reading the applications, I observed that there are many East Germans among the applicants. When selecting an applicant, it is important to keep in mind that our personnel in the headquarters consist almost exclusively of West Germans. In the past, homogeneity of the human-resources group has contributed very strongly to good teamwork and company success. Because of this, the new leader of the human-resources group must be a guarantor of a “good chemistry” in that group.

Participants in the control condition did not receive an instruction from above concerning the composition of the human-resources group. They were only told to attend to applicants’ professional experience and competence.

Descriptions of eight applicants followed. Four of these applicants were West Germans (in-group members), and the other four were East Germans (out-group members). Group membership could be inferred from information about the place of birth (well-known cities in West Germany or East Germany) and locations where the applicants were educated and employed (West German or East German companies). Two of the West German candidates and two of the East German candidates were better qualified than were the remaining four candidates. The better-qualified candidates had experience in the fast-food industry and had already worked in human resources. Thus, these candidates met the professional requirements stated by the president of the company. The other four candidates met only one of the two professional requirements.

To check whether the participants recognized that four of the candidates were better qualified than the other four candidates, the participants rated the applicants’ suitability on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very well qualified) to 5 (not qualified at all). After the participants rated each of the eight candidates, they were asked to select three of the candidates for final interviews. The dependent variable was the number of East German candidates selected for a job interview.
by the participants. The experimenter debriefed the participants immediately after the experiment.

Results

Manipulation Check

A t test revealed a significant difference in the evaluation of better qualified and less qualified applicants, \( t(61) = 18.81, p < .001 \). Better-qualified applicants were more favorably evaluated by the participants (\( M = 2.21, SD = 0.59 \)) than were less qualified applicants (\( M = 3.72, SD = 0.58 \)). We did not find significant differences in the evaluation of West German and East German applicants, \( t(61) = -0.58, ns \). The evaluations of better qualified West German and East German applicants were similar (\( M = 2.28, SD = 0.71 \), and \( M = 2.13, SD = 0.84 \)). The evaluations of less qualified West German and East German applicants were also similar (\( M = 3.69, SD = 0.64 \), and \( M = 3.75, SD = 0.68 \)).

Selection of Out-Group Members

Table 1 shows the cell means of the dependent variable of number of East Germans selected by the participants. An ANOVA showed a significant main effect for instruction-from-above, \( F(1, 60) = 6.36, p = .014 \). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants who were instructed to discriminate against out-group members (East Germans) selected, on average, fewer out-group members (\( M = 1.41 \)) than did participants who did not receive this instruction (\( M = 1.79 \)). There was no significant main effect for RWA, \( F(1, 60) = 3.35, p = .072 \). Participants who scored high on RWA selected, on average, 1.46 out-group members, and participants who scored low on RWA selected, on average, 1.74 members.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the instruction main effect was qualified by a significant Instruction \( \times \) RWA interaction effect, \( F(1, 60) = 4.47, p = .039 \). For participants who scored low on RWA, a post-hoc t test did not reveal a difference in the number of East Germans selected across the two instruction conditions, \( t(32) = 0.46, ns \). Low scorers on RWA selected, on average, 1.69 East German applicants in the experimental condition, and 1.78 East German applicants in the control condition. However, participants who scored high on RWA selected fewer East Germans in the experimental condition (when they were instructed from above to discriminate; \( M = 1.08 \)) than they did in the control condition (\( M = 1.80 \)), \( t(26) = 3.19, p = .004 \).

Discussion

In the current study, as expected, West German participants discriminated against East German job applicants when they were instructed to do so.
Moreover, as expected, participants who harbored strong RWA attitudes tended to follow the authority's instruction to discriminate to a higher degree than did participants who did not harbor such attitudes.

The main-effect finding for an authority's instruction to discriminate is consistent with our prediction and earlier findings by Brief et al. (1995, in press), who used similar experimental designs. In Brief et al.'s studies and in our study, participants (playing the role of organizational members) discriminated against qualified out-group members in personnel-selection contexts on the basis of their bosses's instructions. These findings lend support to arguments made by Barnard (1938), Katz and Kahn (1978), and Simon (1976): Organizational members comply with instructions from organizational authorities, even if these instructions violate ethical principles and values. In the current study, however, the instruction main effect was qualified by an Instruction × RWA interaction.

Only high scorers on RWA behaved discriminatorily when they were instructed to do so. They selected significantly fewer out-group members in the experimental condition than in the control condition. Low scorers on RWA did not follow the authority's instruction to discriminate, as they did not select fewer out-group members in the experimental condition than in the control condition. Thus, as expected, RWA emerged as a moderator of the authority's instruction-discriminatory-behavior relationship. Although the moderating effect of RWA
was consistent with our hypothesis, the processes that underlie this effect remain to be uncovered. We argued that sanctioned authoritarian aggression underlies the moderating effect of RWA, but alternate processes in high-RWA scorers might have occurred. For example, conventional beliefs, made salient by the authority’s referral to the out-group in the instruction condition, might have driven high scorers on RWA to discriminate against out-group members (Walker, Rowe, & Quinsey, 1993). Future research should attempt to identify the mechanisms that underlie the moderating effect of RWA.

In the introduction, we mentioned that in the past some researchers (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950) emphasized personality as a factor leading to discrimination, whereas other researchers (e.g., Sherif et al., 1955) emphasized situational factors in explaining social discrimination. Our study revealed an interaction effect of a personality factor (RWA) and a situational factor (an authority’s instruction to discriminate) on social discrimination. While we believe that an interactional approach is fruitful for understanding social discrimination in general, we believe that this approach is particularly helpful for a new, more modern understanding of authoritarianism as an individual-differences factor that affects discrimination. That is, Adorno et al.’s early conceptualization of authoritarianism suggested a main effect on social discrimination. Thus, as discussed in our introduction, it might be argued that authoritarians would discriminate independent of an authority’s instruction to do so. Yet, consistent with Altemeyer’s (1981, 1988) definition of RWA, we hypothesized and found an effect of authoritarianism on social discrimination only in the presence of an authority’s instruction to discriminate.

How do we explain the contradiction between our findings and Adorno et al.’s (1950) hypothesis? We suggest that the answer lies in changes of societal norms of out-group discrimination, rather than in fundamentally different conceptualizations of authoritarianism. That is, some 50 years ago, societal norms did not prevent authoritarians from acting on their negative attitudes against out-group members, but today these norms no longer tolerate out-group discrimination. Thus, today’s authoritarians may harbor the same negative attitudes toward out-groups as did the authoritarians of the 1950s, but today’s norms prevent the release of these attitudes.

Note that in the control condition (no instruction-from-above), participants did not select fewer out-group members than in-group members. In this condition, the participants selected, on average, 1.79 out-group members and 1.21 in-group members. This finding is not consistent with predictions derived from the minimal group paradigm. According to this paradigm, discrimination should have occurred merely on the basis of the categorization into in-group and out-group (for reviews, see Diehl, 1990; Mummendey, 1985, 1995). A possible explanation for the null finding of out-group discrimination in the control condition is the relatively lower salience of the categorization into in-group and out-
group, compared to classical minimal group paradigm research. That is, in the control condition of our study, information on categorization was embedded in a large set of other information necessary for completion of the in-basket exercise. In the presence of other information, then, mere categorization may not be sufficient to cause discrimination. Further research might specifically study the categorization effect employing designs that vary the amount of noncategorization-related information provided to participants.

Of course, the current study has several limitations. First, we employed a role-play. The ecological validity of role-plays has been controversially discussed (e.g., Gorman, Clover, & Doherty, 1978). The primary problem is the representativeness of the psychological context: Role-playing methods often fail to produce patterns of results that match those emerging in more psychologically engaging situations. Thus, they often fail to reveal what happens in the real world. This may be problematic when studying phenomena that have strong normative contexts, such as prejudice and discrimination. However, it was not our intent to show that instructions-from-above and RWA are real-world antecedents of social discrimination. Instead, we intended to show that instructions-from-above and RWA could affect social discrimination. Future research should aim to replicate our laboratory findings in field settings, if possible.

Second, the sample consisted exclusively of students. Thus, the generalizability of the study’s results to other samples remains an open question, particularly because the participants’ RWA scores seemed rather low. It should be noted, however, that the use of a student sample with a probably restricted range of RWA scores decreased rather than increased the likelihood of producing significant findings. We speculate that future research with non-student samples (e.g., employees or retirees) and less restricted ranges of RWA scores might produce stronger effects.

Third, in the present experiment, the authority’s instruction alluded to the importance of homogeneous work groups. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that high authoritarians preferred in-group members because of their affiliation to homogeneous in-groups and not (as hypothesized by the authors) so much because of their obedience to authority. Future research might overcome this limitation by providing an instruction that does not refer to group homogeneity.

In conclusion, our most exciting finding is that, in an organizational context, people who harbor strong authoritarian attitudes tend to comply more with instructions to discriminate than do people who do not harbor such attitudes. This finding is troublesome because it reveals one mechanism of unethical discrimination in organizations. Future research should address what organizations can do to prevent authoritarians from acting on their negative attitudes toward out-group members.

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5 This point was noted by an anonymous reviewer.
References


