

Understanding the Rebellious Conformist: A Note On Rhoads's Study of Authoritarianism

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***Abstract:** James Rhoads's "Researching Authoritarian Personality with Q Methodology" represents a wholly new approach in research on the authoritarian personality. Many of his findings are counter-intuitive, but by beginning with the kind of scale scores traditionally used, he demonstrates that these findings have been within the grasp of previous researchers requiring only a change in analytic strategy. His intensive analysis of a single case is shown to agree well with the "remarkable parallel" between Q methodology and quantum mechanics in terms of the foregoing of averages, the indeterminateness of meaning, the complementarity of factors, and interference effects.*

James Rhoads's work represents something new in the study of authoritarianism. Although he starts where others have started — with scores obtained from the uppermost quartile of responses to a scale measuring authoritarianism — he departs from conventional practice by submitting the responses to a Q factor analysis instead of averaging them into a single scale score. This permits the values of individual items to interact in an unconstrained way with all other values, thereby revealing differences in pattern that are otherwise trapped inside the average. This change in strategy reveals sources of systematic variance, overshadowed by a general factor, indicating that even those high in authoritarianism may entertain unconventional views about sex, religion, and politics. These findings are counter-intuitive and serve to question the adequacy of past studies. The elegance of Rhoads's demonstration is that he shows that results such as his have been accessible all along, requiring only a change in statistical procedure for their disclosure.

How can an individual appear to conform and rebel at the same time? Are these authoritarians pulling our leg, lying, confused, or simply inconsistent? Rhoads gives the envelope one more push by showing how procedures similar to those employed in his initial study can be applied in the study of single cases, thereby placing us in a better position to answer questions such as these. Based on comments freely made by his participant during the course of

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interviews, Rhoads composed a Q sample and a set of experimental conditions that enabled the individual to provide Q sort descriptions of himself through the eyes of others in his interpersonal environment; i.e., “through the eyes of others” as understood by the person himself. The resulting factors reveal three separate identities and three modes of conformity — to “sacred” collectivities (tradition-direction), to peers (other-direction), and to authority figures (inner-direction), with the last predominating in the sense that the individual’s description of his present self and his future self also conform to this factor. This factor is “me” and not merely “mine” (James 1890).

In retrospect, we are now in a position to understand this person’s “rebellious conformity.” Under certain conditions, he expresses himself in terms of his predominant and more inner-directed predisposition, buttressed by all the familial and related experiences that have contributed to its development. Under different conditions, he expresses himself as an other-directed member of a more sexually tolerant peer group. What the initial factor analysis documented, therefore, was not lying or leg-pulling, or even inconsistency in the usual sense, but the person’s diverse response possibilities — or *response functions* (rf), in Kantor’s (1959) lexicon — which assume different probabilities under shifting field conditions.

During his last decade, William Stephenson made much of the “remarkable parallel” between Q methodology and quantum theory, and Rhoads’s study provides a good illustration of this parallel. This is not the place to elaborate on all the points of confluence, but some of the more important aspects are briefly as follows:

- 1) R factor analysis deals with variables and dimensions rather than states, whereas a Q sort documents a “mental” state (in the sense of “state of mind”), in the same sense that quantum theory refers to states of energy. R measures each trait singly, as in the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale discussed by Rhoads: the RWA is assumed to measure authoritarianism and nothing else. Even when Q factor analysis is applied to variable scores, as in Miller and Friesen’s so-called quantum study of organizations (1984), the concern remains with *variables in states* rather than with *states as such* (cf. Stephenson 1982, 237). In a Q sort, by way of contrast, individual statements are used to express an overall state (perspective, attitude, viewpoint), and individual items only have meaning *a posteriori* and in relation to the state from which their meanings arise.
- 2) R methodology relies on averages and meanings that are determinate. In Q, on the other hand, the average of each Q sort is set at zero, but the scores for the individual statements remain

indeterminate.¹ Perhaps Stephenson was present when Max Born stated in a 1926 paper read at Oxford that “classical theory introduces the microscopic coordinates which determine the individual processes only to eliminate them because of ignorance by averaging over their values” (cited in Pais 2000, 39). This is what occurs when the individual scores of the RWA are averaged to produce a single score: the values for individual statements are washed out. In Q, of course, such averaging is relinquished, a consequence being that meaning exists in an indeterminate “ghost field.”

- 3) In Q, factors emerging from diverse conditions of instruction exist in a complementary state. The individual under study in Rhoads’s case displays 3 response functions (factors X, Y, Z) that exist in a probabilistic state, but only 1 can appear at a time. This is the same dynamic that Kundera describes in his 1998 novel, *Identity*. Chantal remarks, “Yes, I can have two faces, but I can’t have them at the same time” [p. 27]; and later, Jean-Marc muses, “He...represented the abolition of all possibilities, he was the reduction...of her life to a single possibility” [p. 107]. Just as photons behave like waves or particles depending on the measurements taken, so Rhoads’s subject responds in an inner- or other-directed way depending on the condition of instruction.
- 4) The mathematics of factor analysis and quantum mechanics are virtually identical (see Gribbin 1998, 224-8; Peat 1990, 35-40), and so the parallel between Q and quantum theory is more than metaphorical. In particle physics, for instance, interference refers to “the way in which ... waves interact with one another to produce an overall pattern ... of high intensity and low intensity” (Gribbin 1998, 185). The equivalence of interference in Q is shown in those factor scores that display diverse response functions. Factor *z*-scores in the table below are for Rhoads’s factors X, Y, and Z, respectively.

Statement (1) receives the highest score ($z = 1.70$) in the inner-directed factor X, but this sentiment does not carry over into factors Y (peers, $z = -0.90$)

¹ This matter was elaborated in what was perhaps my final communique from Stephenson (personal communication 1989), in which he thanked me for a book review I had just completed (Brown 1991), and then went on as follows: “In Q-sorting, the concern is with a complex psychological event (PE). It involves the equivalent of position and velocity in physics: thus, the condition may be, ‘What did you feel as you kissed me in the rain?’ The Q-sort gives *zero* score (average) to the statements, for pleasure-unpleasure: but the actual scores to the statements are completely indeterminate. There are two parts: the ‘pleasure-unpleasure’ (like position) and the ‘kissing in the rain’ (like velocity). You cannot measure the two simultaneously. Thus, we *never* measure the pleasure-unpleasure, but can thereby always measure the ‘kissing in the rain.’ If we tried to measure the pleasure-unpleasure it would mean more-and-more ‘hidden’ about ‘kissing in the rain’ — and vice versa.”

or Z (church, football team, $z = -0.28$). There is some source of interference in this individual's behavioral field that prevents this statement from being acceptable to factors Y and Z. Similarly, statement (2) emerges to prominence in the interpersonal field dominated by the reference group, and (3) is given preference in the church/team context.

No.	Statement	X	Y	Z
1	Parents have to take a more active role in showing their kids respect and discipline.	1.70	-0.90	-0.28
2	I don't think premarital sex is a crime or anything. No one's actually getting hurt.	-0.34	1.10	-1.60
3	Homosexuality: it's just stuck in my head that it's wrong. It's like a religious thing.	-1.17	-0.53	1.91

To reiterate, there is nothing comparable to James Rhoads's study in the annals of research on the authoritarian personality. (I can be accused of partiality in this regard, of course, inasmuch as the original research was done as a dissertation under my direction, but I am confident that a detached review of the literature will justify this conclusion.) Gelbmann (1958) employed Q factor analysis in his dissertation, but in the manner of profile analysis rather than Q methodology; and Smith (1965) utilized Q sorts, but as a way to create variables for analysis under the assumption of individual differences. And whereas Stephenson (1953, pp. 228-232) sketched out the form that such a study might take, as Rhoads notes, he apparently never carried it out. What is valuable in Rhoads's execution, as well as by implication in Stephenson's blueprint, is not simply that Q sorts are used, but that operations are firmly attached to the phenomenon in a way that all the averaging in previous studies is not. Apart from the RWA Scale, which Rhoads adopted as a strategic starting point, all of the rest of the data come directly from the person under study — the statements (from interviews), the conditions of instruction, the 3 factors: all belong to the individual and are as much his as his arms, hair color, and respiratory rate. Contemporary social science would be hard pressed to find a more substantial foundation from which to launch a reconsideration of authoritarianism, and only time will tell whether it is too obedient to authority to do so.

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