

Shrink Rap Radio #127, December 19, 2007. The Authoritarian Personality

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Robert Altemyer (transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Excerpt: *“When I talk about authoritarianism I’m talking about on the leader’s part a strong need to dominate; a personality based need to control, to exert power, to have power. And on the follower’s part I’m talking about a strong need to submit to powerful authorities who will take over their lives and tell them what to do. It is a personality based thing.”*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest **Dr. Robert Altemyer**. Robert Altemyer, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Manitoba and is the world’s leading authority on The Authoritarian Personality, a topic he has researched and written on extensively.

In fact, he has made a book on this topic available for free from his website

<http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~altemey/>

Dr. Altemyer describes himself as follows: “Who am I? I’m a nearly retired psychology professor in Canada who has spent most of his life studying authoritarianism. I got into this field by being lazy. When I took the exams for getting a Ph.D. at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1965, I failed a question about a famous early effort to understand the authoritarian personality. I had to write a paper to prove I could learn at least something about this research, which had gotten itself into a huge hairy mess by then. However, I got caught up in the tangle too. Thus I didn’t start studying authoritarianism because I am a left-winger (I think I’m a moderate on most issues) or because I secretly hated my father. I got into it because it presented a long series of puzzles to be solved, and I love a good mystery.”

Dr. Dave: Dr. Robert Altemyer, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Altemyer: It’s a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Dave: You are the planet’s leading authority on the authoritarian personality – no pun intended (laughing).

Altemyer: It’s no great honor to be the leading authority on authoritarianism, let me tell you (laughing).

Dr. Dave: Right; I can understand. I seem to recall some research on the authoritarian personality way back when I was in graduate school.

Altemyer: Oh yes.

Dr. Dave: Yes; it's been around for a while. Why don't you start off by defining the term for us, and giving us a bit of its history in the field of psychology?

Altemyer: Well authoritarianism by my definition is something that leaders and followers cook up between themselves. Basically the leaders demand submission, and the followers submit. Then I can get more elaborate than that; we probably will.

As for the history of the concept, it really goes back – if you want firm footing it goes back to a research project that began across the bay from you – are you in Sonoma?

Dr. Dave: Yes I am.

Altemyer: OK, well over at Berkeley, back in the 1940s a psychologist named Nevitt Sanford began to do research on anti-Semitism and other prejudices that eventually produced the volume called *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Dr. Dave: OK, and I recognize his name, so that's probably what I'm remembering from graduate school. Go ahead.

Altemyer: Most people remember the book as Adorno et al; because Theodor Adorno was first named author. But the real leader of the project was Sanford. Adorno was sort of forced on the other authors by the people who had the money, who were sponsoring the research, and there was a squabble over naming rights when the book was about to be published, so Sanford very graciously said let's do it alphabetically. Theodor Adorno became associated in so many people's minds with this book *The Authoritarian Personality*. He actually had very little to do with it; he was the least involved of the authors – he wasn't even at Berkeley – he was down in Los Angeles, and so on.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness. But you said it's all about leaders who want to have followers, and the followers follow. But really there is the

implication that there is some kind of an underlying personality structure that is prone to be a follower.

Altemyer: Yes. When I talk about authoritarianism I'm talking about on the leader's part a strong need to dominate; a personality based need to control, to exert power, to have power. And on the follower's part I'm talking about a strong need to submit to powerful authorities who will take over their lives and tell them what to do. It is a personality based thing.

Dr. Dave: OK. Now I'm under the impression that early on there was some critique of the concept.

Altemyer: (laughing) Oh right.

Dr. Dave: What is that critique, and have you managed to lay it to rest?

Altemyer: Oh well the original *Authoritarian Personality* – the book that was published in 1950 – was critiqued to death. There was another book, a whole book that came out critiquing it four years later, edited by Dick Christie and Marie Jahoda; and the people who contributed to that book just found enormous problems with the research methodology, and with the thinking, and with the conceptualization, and with the theory, and the underlying Freudian model that guided them, and so on. That didn't stop the research from going ahead, but the research was very badly flawed.

So after about 20 years, by the early 1970s or so it was pretty clear that this field was not only dormant but it hadn't really accomplished anything. There had been probably over 1,000 studies published on the authoritarian personality by then using the Berkeley tool called the F-scale; and there was just enormous confusion in the literature as to what was found, what anything meant, and so on.

Dr. Dave: And yet there must have been some underlying conviction that there was something here worth looking at, to drive this much research. So how did you get into studying the authoritarian personality?

Altemyer: By being lazy. I tell the story in the book that you and I are talking about. That when I was taking my Ph.D. candidacy exams in 1965 I was asked a question about the authoritarian personality – all this research – and I didn't know anything about it; so I failed that question on the candidacy exam, and went on to pass the rest of the questions. So they gave me a pass provided I could write a paper on this. I did, and I got really hooked on the big mess that this field was in. So it had nothing to do

with my hating my father, or with my being a communist or anything like that. It's a real fulfillment of an Alfred Adler personality, where you find out what your perceived weakness is, and you spend the rest of your life over compensating for it.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness (laughing). And I should just mention that the book that you just made reference to is a book that is on your website, and it's free to people, and it is extremely readable. I'll put a link to it on my website. What's the title?

Altemyer: It's called *The Authoritarians*.

Dr. Dave: Oh yes – I don't know why I had trouble remembering that (laughing) I have just been reading it, and am very impressed by it. As I say I will put a link to that. So please give us an overview of your research.

Altemyer: We know a lot more about authoritarian followers than we do about the leaders. Some other people developed a scale that turned out to be a very good way to measure this power hungriness that we find in authoritarian leaders. So the Berkeley research, and the research that other people have done since then including my own, has given us a lot of knowledge and insight about the followers; so we know tons about them.

A good conceptualization of this personality trait is that these people are very submissive to established authority; they are very aggressive in the name of that authority; there is a lot of hostility in them, which has some interesting psychological roots; and they are very conventional, they really insist that everybody follow the rules and the norms of behavior that their authorities preach.

So we have a scale for measuring that, it's a 20 item scale now, that measures being an authoritarian personality follower; and it's been used lots in lots of research in lots of places now around the world. Basically a literature has emerged which is much cleaner, much more consistent, and digs deeper I think into the authoritarian follower than anything we have had before.

Dr. Dave: What are some typical items on that scale?

Altemyer: Well I will give you the first one for example. You can yell up and down if this really turns you on, but I don't think you will.

“Our country desperately needs a mighty leader, who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways, and sinfulness that are ruining us.” And people respond to that on a minus 4 to plus 4 basis. If you look at that statement – and a lot of the other statements on the scale – you can see that it’s tapping these three underlying elements: *submission* (we need a mighty leader); *aggression* (we need a leader who will destroy); and destroy what? The radical new ways and sinfulness – that is the *conventionalism*.

So the scale has equal number of pro-trait and con-trait items, so it controls to response sets; which is a big problem that the F-scale from the Berkeley research did not do. It has very high internal consistency; it’s very common for these 20 items to pull down an alpha of about .90. So it’s psychometrically a pretty internally consistent, reliable and rather powerful scale; and it comes up with relatively powerful findings compared to what we find generally in the journals nowadays as we look at things.

Dr. Dave: OK. Now you’ve mentioned submissiveness, aggressiveness and social conventionality. Does the scale relate to other important personality variables, for example things like intelligence, or rigidity versus flexibility, or psychopathology, permeability of boundaries, the Myers-Briggs?

Altemyer: Uh – no; yes; no; no; yes; and don’t know.

Dr. Dave: (laughing)

Altemyer: Now, which one do you want to talk about? (laughing)

As for intelligence: there is a negative correlation of about .20 in general populations – somewhere in the .20s – between scores on the follower scale and the amount of education the person has had. Education, we know from longitudinal studies lowers your tendency to be an authoritarian follower; and people who aren’t as well educated score higher in that trait of being a follower.

Don’t know anything about the Myers-Briggs.

Rigidity: we can certainly point to experiments on dogmatism in which people insist that black is white, despite the evidence staring them right in the face. So yes, high RWAs (Right-Wing Authoritarian), high authoritarian followers tend to be quite rigid, and so on.

Dr. Dave: So there is hardly any correlation at all between intelligence, and being an authoritarian follower. In fact I think your remark – both of us have been in an academic environment – we’ve both had colleagues, haven’t we, who were strongly authoritarian? (laughing)

Altemyer: I’ve especially had authoritarian leaders, in my experience at university.

Dr. Dave: Yes; like university presidents?

Altemyer: So, yes you can find authoritarian followers and leaders almost anywhere. I don’t think authoritarian followers are stupid people by any means. I think they are scared, I think they are a lot of other things, but I don’t think that they are what they are because of a lack of intelligence; and I don’t think they are psychologically ill or sick or anything like that.

Dr. Dave: OK. We were talking about how early on there was this critique of the concept. Has the tighter methodologies that you and others have employed in more recent years – has that pretty much laid that critique to rest? Or are there people out there who make their full time research job undermining your research?

Altemyer: One of the really interesting things about this has been – there certainly has been criticism of it, that’s the whole idea of the scientific method – the critiques have mainly dealt with what do the data really mean; what does the scale really measure; what is authoritarianism most based on? So you can find other authors who say then, what you are really measuring here is a strong need for group identification, rather than what Bob Altemyer says. So yes, there certainly has been that. I don’t think there is any convincing evidence that that’s the case, but people have suggested that.

But as far as the findings themselves, they are so widely replicated, and they are so strong, that really there hasn’t been any kind of dagger to the heart saying, “this whole stuff is completely wrong, there is a technical malfunction, or a methodological problem or so forth.” I think there is a pretty good consensus among people involved in this area – with of course some people who wouldn’t agree – that the findings are stable, and predictable, and powerful.

Dr. Dave: OK. Well let’s see if we can understand what’s going on.

In one of your chapters you review a Freudian theory to account for the authoritarian personality; then you go on to talk about Bandura's social learning theory; and then I think kind of your own general synthesis theory. Take us through those if you will.

Altemyer: This is Berkeley versus Stanford by the way – a familiar concept where you live. The original Berkeley theory was strongly influenced by Freudian thought. It thought that the authoritarian personality was rooted in early childhood experiences.

I think everybody knows the story: the authoritarian adult as a kid had really mean, distant, cold, harsh parents and the kid hated them; but when he showed displeasure he got whacked around; and he repressed all of that hatred and formed a reaction formation, and replaced it with adoring love; and then he projected his hostility toward his parents onto other targets that were safe to attack; and displaced his hostility and became very prejudiced. That's it in a nutshell.

There are problems with that, which were pointed out very quickly by lots of people. The biggest problem scientifically is that it is so untestable, because it's all repressed and you can't find evidence of this. And if you look for things like, do people who have strong inclinations to be authoritarian followers come from brutal backgrounds where they were whacked around a lot, or had harsh parents, or so on – there really is almost no research that shows that.

As I tried to figure out what was causing people to be what they are, I looked at a number of different theoretical perspectives, and the one of Albert Bandura at Stanford – his social learning theory – seemed to me to do the best job and offer the best explanation of things. Which in contrast to the Freudian theory says that: sure, childhood experiences are important but they are not the end of the story; that later experiences in life and the role that models play in our learning and behavior and understanding of things are what determined it.

This model is so good, that I've got an experiences scale which asks people to describe in various ways the experiences they have had in their lives with the authorities they have known, and what have their experiences been with being unconventional, and with the targets that people often attack and so on. If I know an intro psych student's score on the experiences scale, I can make a pretty good prediction of how big an authoritarian follower she or he is going to be. The correlation between the two scales is “.7 something” in study after study.

So these later experiences influence us quite a bit. So there is the difference between the Berkeley model, and the social learning model that I think works best.

I can give you more if you want to talk about why authoritarians are aggressive.

Dr. Dave: Yes, sure; I'd love to hear about that.

And you made reference to research with undergraduates, and we actually haven't said much about the research that you've done – probably because you've done so much of it – but you have researched lots and lots of students at your university, at other universities, and the parents of students, and you've done longitudinal studies.

Altemyer: I've even studied American state legislators, at almost all of the state legislatures in the 50 states there are. So lots of different groups have been involved. We studied people in the Soviet Union, and lots of other people have been doing this too now. I don't want to say it's a hot field, I hope it never becomes a hot field, but there has been a lot of research on a lot of different places, yes.

Dr. Dave: OK, well you were going to wax rhapsodically about aggression (laughing).

Altemyer: Well I hope I don't – that reminds me of the shooting in Colorado, and the reaction to that, by the way. We will get onto that.

But the Berkeley theory of the origin of aggression as I just said was based on displaced hatred of the authorities. That the kid learned that was the only safe way to act was to ignore them, but deep down he hated them and needed to find somebody to take it out on.

The social learning model of aggression that Bandura advances says that aggressive behavior is the result of an *instigation*: something that makes us want to aggress; and then some sort of a *releaser*: something that lets us aggress when we feel like doing it, because there are all sorts of inhibitions against being aggressive. A series of experiments that I ran over a number of years found that basically you could explain most of the variants in a number of different measures of prejudice, and hostility, and aggressiveness if you had a measure of how scared people were, how fearful they were of the world, how much they saw the world as a

dangerous place; and how self righteous they were – how much they felt like they were the very best people that there could possibly be. And if you had those two scores, which match up pretty well with Bandura's idea of an instigator (fear) and a releaser (self righteousness), you could explain most of the variants. This was a series of "pitting experiments" in which you give other theories a chance to try to predict things as well, and nothing could come close to what those two factors could do.

So it seems like the hostility you find so often in authoritarian followers is based upon more than anything else they are just being very frightened; and feeling that they are the good guys, they are god's designated hitters, and so they can go and attack whom they want because it's all in a good cause.

Dr. Dave: I'm having some sort of state versus trait thoughts here; that in general we are talking about traits and personality variables, but I'm also aware that sometimes – I don't think of myself as an authoritarian generally – but I do know that I have a sort of inner Richard Nixon; and there are times when my fear level gets stimulated, or my self righteousness can get stimulated, so

Altemyer: To be sure. One of the series of experiments I did, asked people to role play what their attitudes would be on this measure of being an authoritarian follower under various scenarios on the future – I said, imagine that this is the case, and this is happening in the country and so on. If there is trouble in the future – if social stability seems threatened – in general people become more likely to look to the authorities to solve problems.

And what was interesting about that was if the trouble was caused by, let's call them leftists – there were mass strikes, there were rioting in the street by left wing demonstrators and so forth – then that made people become much more authoritarian. But the other thing that we found, was that if the trouble makers in the street were right wingers who were trying to establish a coup d'état, or else there were right wingers in the street throwing bricks – some sort of a fascist movement – that also made people become more authoritarian. So, yes your inner Richard Nixon responds to fear.

Another good example of it is in Canada. When a couple of years ago there was a referendum in Quebec, in which the people of Quebec had the opportunity to say whether they wanted to separate from the rest of the country; and the rest of the country was pretty worried that a majority of Québécois would say they did. And as it turned out it was a razor thin decision to stay in Canada. But at that time I found in my studies here, was

that people where I live in the middle of the country in the province of Manitoba, quite a distance from Quebec, became significantly more hostile toward Quebecers, the Québécois, when the fate of the country was sort of in their hands; and then that went down after the referendum was over. But when there is fear going on, then it is quite normal for people to react that way I think.

Dr. Dave: Well of course I am also now thinking of 911

Altemyer: Sure.

Dr. Dave: And I think there was a big upsurge of fear, and self righteousness, and perhaps our national character swung a bit to the authoritarian.

Altemyer: And of course there was at the same time a strong endorsement of the leadership; so that was when George W. Bush had his very highest ratings of the job he was doing. It turned out he wasn't really doing, I don't think, that different a job or that good a job. But at that time there was this huge, "we've got to get behind the president, and support the president and do what he says because he is our leader." And it wasn't just authoritarians saying that, it was 80% of the population thought he was doing a good job.

Dr. Dave: Exactly. And I think fear played a big role in that, as your research seems to suggest.

You had some kind of passing thought about recent shootings in Colorado?

Altemyer: Well this is really interesting. There was, I guess it's just one gunman who shot some people at a missionary school and then went down to this mega church in Colorado Springs, and shot some people; and then he was killed there by a security guard. This is just-breaking news, so I may be greatly misinformed.

The thing that caught my eye about this was the statement that Tony Perkins released yesterday – he is the head of the Family Research Council, and he sent an email out to all of his followers – and he blamed the assault on the secular media which has been, he said, making people hate evangelicals. That really caught my eye because if you notice – first I have to say that evangelicals in the United States and in Canada tend very strongly to be authoritarian followers. You would have trouble finding any other group that scores as high on the authoritarian follower scale as these people do. So these are the people that Tony Perkins is talking to.

If you listen to them, and you follow them, you notice how often they say: if you don't agree with them, "you must hate god", or "you must hate America", or "you must hate the president" to say that, or "you must hate our troops" if you don't support the war; or you must hate evangelicals. It's how often they use the word *hate*. So there was Tony Perkins showing them that it's the secular media that are making people hate evangelicals.

I study evangelicals and authoritarians and I think they are dangerous people, and I am trying hard to understand them, but I don't think I hate them. I don't know anybody who hates evangelicals, but I know lots of evangelicals who hate lots other people; they score very high on prejudice scales and so on. So I think this is a good case of projection; I think they are haters much more than they are hated.

The other thing about that statement that caught my eye of course was that Tony Perkins blames this on the secular press, on the secular media. Well secular means that it's not religious; secular means that it's concerned with this world not the next one, or spirituality. I think what he's showing there is that he doesn't like that kind of media; he wants a religious media. If he just would say, this is the media doing this, then it wouldn't have caught my eye at all. But there is this thing to sort of link the word secular with the press in a way that makes you wonder, well *shouldn't* the press be secular? Should we have a religious NBC and so forth?

Dr. Dave: Yes; you know as you talk about evangelicals it stimulates a question that I had before I started reading the book, and then I discovered that you actually addressed this in the book, talking about fundamentalism. I wonder about the wave of fundamentalism that seems to be sweeping the planet, not just in this country but all over the world there are various flavors of fundamentalism. Does your research suggest any possible solutions to this dilemma of how we might influence or negotiate with people who are locked into black and white thinking extremes?

Altemyer: Uh, no.

Dr. Dave: That's too bad (laughing).

Altemyer: There are some things you can do. Go ahead?

Dr. Dave: I said, that's too bad, if it's no (laughing).

Altemyer: There are some things you can do, and I mention them at the end of the book. And people read them and say, “Is that all you’ve got? I was hoping for the solution to all of humanities problems.” So, no I don’t think I have the solution to that problem. There are things you can do, given what we understand about fundamentalists and about authoritarian followers that can lessen the problems they can cause for a democratic society, and those are mentioned in the book.

I will just mention a few right now: certainly education helps as I said earlier, in the long run it lowers authoritarianism.

Authoritarian followers are very conformist; if they find out that their opinions are at considerable variance to what most people think they actually shift their opinions so that they are more like everybody else.

You can let them get to know you better; because they are so ethnocentric, they travel so much in their own in-circles and exclude outsiders that they have a very distorted perception about what most people are like. So if you can join them in common cause: such as a lot of fundamentalists today are worried about the environment, so if you can work with them cleaning up the street, or a stream; or if your church can do joint services with their church; and just have some time together letting them get to know you will probably will help in some ways.

But the basic thing you have to do right now is outvote them in the United States; because the religious right is a very powerful force. There have been all these statements that it’s dead, gone away, you don’t have to worry about it anymore, and just look what’s happening in the first real show in Iowa, where Governor Huckabee now has come out of nowhere because he has the support of this very well organized group of people on the religious right. So there are lots of things that we can do.

Dr. Dave: Yes. You know I’m wondering if American media might play a possible role – I don’t generally think of it playing a possible role – but I wonder if it could play a role in making people less authoritarian; by exposing them to a wider range of experiences, to things like gay lifestyle, to experiences of other ethnicities. What do you think about that?

Altemyer: Well I think the media has done a very important job, if you want to talk about gay rights.

In my research, attitudes toward homosexuals have become amazingly more positive in a short period of time. The major thing that has

contributed to that, if you ask people, “why have your opinions changed” is that they have gotten to know some gay people, and they find out that the stereotypes are really misleading.

Another thing that is very important here, is that a lot of people get turned off by the hostility toward homosexuals that comes out of the religious right, so that backfires on the religious right; they are seen as being unreasonable and intemperate, and far from loving their fellow human beings.

So attitudes towards gays has really improved in the data I collect; and this shows up in American polling data too, in national samples. The media have played a big role in this I think because of the number of programs on TV, sitcoms mainly, which present homosexuality as a thing that is there, but is not evil, is not a perversion, and the people are likeable and they’ve got the same problems at work that everybody else does.

So one can only agree, and also agree with the religious right who hates these programs – and they say they hate them – that the media does play a good role in these things.

The same thing happened with black people.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I was thinking that myself.

Altemyer: And the same thing happened with women. There was a time when only men read the news – and nowadays that would be the silliest thing you could think of, but it was sort of assumed that people wouldn’t pay attention to the news if a woman read it – well that has gone away.

Dr. Dave: Yes. In one place you talk about authoritarians actually suffering from flaws in their thinking, and let me just read a quote here. You write, “But research reveals that authoritarian followers drive through life under the influence of impaired thinking a lot more than most people do, exhibiting sloppy reasoning, highly compartmentalized beliefs, double standards, hypocrisy, self-blindness, a profound ethnocentrism, and – to top it all off – a ferocious dogmatism that makes it unlikely anyone could ever change their minds with evidence or logic. These seven deadly shortfalls of authoritarian thinking eminently qualify them to follow a would-be dictator.”

Altemyer: Yes I think that says it well. Whoever wrote that knew what he was talking about.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) Yes; I thought it said it well too. You actually have evidence to back that up though; it could sound like just a strong judgment.

Altemyer: Sure. The nice thing about this evidence compared to some of the other findings we have, is that it's not just correlational, it's experimental. You do experiments and you see what happens.

For example let's talk about defensiveness. I several times have gone into intro psych classes and handed out a big survey and people answer various psychological scales, including what is obviously a self esteem scale. Then I come back at a later time and I tell the class that I am there to give them personal feedback about their self esteem score. And I say the self esteem scale that they answered was a really good valid scale; and that there is a lot of evidence that people who score high on it do well in life, and people who score low on it have terrible lives.

Then I hand everybody their feedback sheet, in which there is encoded in a way that I show them how to find out, what their score was on the self esteem scale. The thing is I give half the class chosen at random really high scores, and the other half of the class really low scores. I don't give anybody their real score. So they go through my encoding process to find out what their score was on the self esteem scale, and then I've drawn a thing on the board to show them what the range of scores is and so forth.

So some of them get really good news and some of them get really bad news about themselves; they are only going to be deceived about this for another minute or two, but during that minute that news is setting in. Then I tell them that I had intended to bring along some handouts today about evidence that this scale really is as valid as I say it is, but I didn't get it printed off in time, so if people want me to bring in one of these handouts for them for the next class I will be glad to. And I ask them to write down on the sheet that I gave them, if they wanted the handout or not. So they write that down, whether they want it or not, and they pass it to me. So this is a really simple, one factor experiment – good news or bad news about yourself – except I also know on each sheet, because I've coded it, whether the person was a high authoritarian follower or a low authoritarian follower.

So here is the payoff. If high authoritarian followers are told that they really do well on something that's good and important, they wanted the feedback. But if they were told they did poorly on something that was

important most of them did not want the feedback. So they are glad to have good news, but they ran away from bad news.

Now you may think that is quite a human characteristic.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Altemyer: And I would say it is. But when you look at what the low RWAs did – and these people usually shine in experiment after experiment, they are really quite extraordinary – the low RWAs wanted the feedback no matter what. If they got good news, three-fourths of them wanted it; if they got bad news three-fourths wanted the handout to show what the evidence was. So they don't run away from bad news – they probably wanted to see it and argue with it – but they didn't run away. But there is a lot of evidence that authoritarian followers run away, run away, run away.

Dr. Dave: OK when you say low RWA – RWA stands for Right-Wing Authoritarian?

Altemyer: Yes; and I keep using that, and we didn't really nail that down, but that is the name of the scale that measures the authoritarian follower.

Dr. Dave: OK. Now I was particularly interested in some of the longitudinal research that you did. You found that education was a leavening experience; that freshmen who come in high in authoritarianism, they drop down about, what was it, 7% or 10% somewhere in that range by the time they leave school?

Altemyer: Oh it's much better than that. If I had to pick a generalization from the longitudinal studies I've done at my university it's that if you look at people when they come in their freshmen year in September and you look at them as they are about to graduate, there is overall about a 10% drop in their RWA scale scores, on their tendency to be an authoritarian follower. It's a bigger drop in the liberal arts than it is in the professional schools, but basically all the schools show that drop. If you look at who dropped the most, in another way, you find out that it's the people who came in as high authoritarians who really profit the most from higher education. They drop about 20% overall, over those years.

That is really quite thrilling, because it shows that change is possible, and does occur in this context; and significant amount of change too. Not everybody changes, not everybody drops – some people go up – but overall

the effect of higher education at a big state university like mine seems to be very beneficial.

Dr. Dave: I was intrigued too, you note that most people hold the theory that as we get older we tend to become more conservative. And in general you found that people did not tend to rise with age and authoritarianism, except for those who became parents.

Altemyer: That's right. That's the real kicker.

Dr. Dave: (laughing) And I can understand that – as a parent – I understand that.

Altemyer: Oh I think we all do. We all find ourselves saying those things we swore we would never say.

I've done three longitudinal studies that way, which I call alumni studies. The first one I contacted people 12 years after they had entered university; and then the second study was 18 years later; and then the third study was 27 years later. These were all different groups of people but they all served in my experiments at about the same time in the 1970s. Generally speaking there is this drop in authoritarianism that we would attribute to the effect of education on them. And if you are not a parent, the drop is big and appreciable.

But if you look at the alumni who have become parents, you see that this beneficial education effect has been to a certain extent cancelled out; and their scores have rebounded back up somewhat, compared to the non parents in their graduating class. And I just think it just comes from being a parent. When you have got a two year old who wants to go play in the street, and you say, "Because I said so, that's why!" When that becomes your final argument, when they don't believe anything else you say, then your children make you more authoritarian. I've told my kids that – every time they wanted to do something that I didn't want them to do – that I could be a lot nicer if I didn't have to be their dad.

Dr. Dave: OK well I can certainly identify with that.

Altemyer: So can our kids, I'm sure (laughing).

Dr. Dave: There is so much more that we could talk about here, and I really do want to encourage people to get your book. After all it is free; and it should not be devalued for that fact.

I wonder if there are any last words that you would want to leave our listeners with?

Altemyer: Get organized, get active.

I really do fear for the future – I don't mean to make you afraid of a dangerous world, but I do mean to say that realistically we are not out of the woods yet – the United States is, I think, in a great deal of trouble. If you sit in the boat and leave your oars out of the water, don't be surprised if you drift toward even greater calamities than have befallen the country in the last 8 years.

That's what I would say.

Dr. Dave: OK; well thanks so much Dr. Robert Altemyer. And thanks so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Altemyer: It was my pleasure David. Thank you.