





The Affirmative Character Scale: A Tool to Explore New Forms of Authoritarianism

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Supplementary Materials: Code, Data, Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

There are two main points of reference to Frankfurt School's authoritarianism research. On the one hand, scholars who, following Fromm (1932), seek to identify a contemporary social character under conditions of post-Fordist capitalism emphasize that the authoritarian character has been replaced by a flexible, entrepreneurial self. On the other hand, research on authoritarianism still relies on adaptations of the F-scale developed by Adorno et al. (1950) (e.g., Altemeyer, 1981; Beierlein et al., 2014; Oesterreich, 1998; Decker et al., 2022). At the same time, certain new forms of authoritarianism are being identified (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025). In this paper, we aim to bridge this tension by introducing a measurement tool for a contemporary “affirmative social character” adapted to flexible capitalism, and to explore the relationship between this social character and authoritarian tendencies. Based on a German sample ($N = 1,196$), we develop the 28-item Aff-Scale to measure the adaptive authoritarian tendencies aligned with the demands of 21st-century meritocracy. The scale captures five dimensions: affirmation, self-optimization, flexibility & mobility, solutionism, and libertarianism. Validation measures included traditional authoritarianism (KSA-3; Beierlein et al., 2014), right-wing extremism (FR-LF; Heller et al., 2020), and sociodemographic variables. Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the multidimensionality ($CFI = 0.927$; $RMSEA = 0.048$) but showed a need for further validation. Internal consistency was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$; $\omega = .64$) and the expected correlations with RWA and educational-, social



status and age were significant. Despite its limitations, the Aff-scale is a useful tool for examining a 21st century social character and contributes to a better understanding of modernized forms of authoritarianism.

Keywords

Affirmative Character, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Neoliberal subjectivity, New Authoritarianism, Self-Optimization, Technological Solutionism, Social Character

Theoretical Background

Affirmative Character and its Relationship to Authoritarianism

Context and Objectives

In the early debates within Critical Theory on the so-called "authoritarian character" two distinct questions overlapped. On the one hand, especially in the works of Erich Fromm (1932, 1936), a concept of a social character was developed. He assumed that adaptation to or submission under given social conditions produced a specific character structure that subjectively supported those conditions and inhibited societal change towards more democratic conditions. Fromm argued that an authoritarian society produced authoritarian individuals. On the other hand, in the infamous studies on *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno et al. (1950), the F-scale was developed as a diagnostic instrument designed to identify authoritarian tendencies of 'potentially fascist individuals' (p. I). However, these two strands of inquiry were indeed conflated within early Critical Theory: proto-fascist dispositions were understood as effects of broader authoritarian social dynamics (Brunner, 2025).

In contemporary debates, however, these two approaches tend to diverge. In quantitative research on right-wing authoritarianism (Beierlein et al., 2014; Oesterreich, 1998; Decker et al., 2022) it is common to draw on a condensed version of the F-scale—the concept of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) developed by Altemeyer (1981). There, authoritarianism is primarily conceptualized as a triad of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism, whereas some researchers argue for the reintegration of dimensions that Altemeyer had excluded, such as projectivity or superstition (Decker et al., 2022). Thus, the authoritarian "syndrome" studied by Adorno et al. (1950) is still considered highly relevant for analyzing contemporary authoritarianism, even though alongside this "classical authoritarianism" newer forms—such as libertarian authoritarianism (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025)—are also being discussed.

By contrast, contemporary discussions of social character or dominant modes of subjectivity (Gruber, 2010; Eichler, 2013) tend to refer to Fromm's notion of the authoritarian social character only as an outdated point of reference. Researchers argue that the authoritarian social character has become obsolete due to societal shifts toward a post-Fordist, neoliberal, flexible capitalism, and has been replaced by a more flexible sub-

jectivity—individuals who act as performance-oriented yet hedonistic self-entrepreneurs (Bröckling, 2016) or "employees" (Pongratz & Voß, 2003a, b).

We aim to reconnect these two diverging lines of discussion. The affirmative character scale developed by Jäger (2022)—drawing on current accounts of contemporary types of subjectivation—attempts to conceptualize a new social character that is highly adapted to contemporary flexible capitalism. This scale is intended as a tool to relate contemporary subjectivity to current forms of authoritarianism: on the one hand, to explore overlaps and conceptualize how adaptation to present conditions may serve as a breeding ground for authoritarian tendencies; on the other hand, to identify differences between the affirmative character and classical authoritarianism, while also investigating whether latent authoritarian potential exists within the affirmative character structure that classical authoritarianism scales fail to detect. Thus, the affirmative character scale (Aff-Scale) is an instrument to gauge the junction between highly adapted individuals to flexible capitalism and anti-democratic, authoritarian traits, as can be observed, for example, in the U.S. since the 45th presidency.

While the scale (Jäger, 2022), which was first tested on a random sample ($N = 1,050$), showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$) and construct validity (F-scale by Adorno et al., 1950; Achievement Motive Inventory by Schuler & Prochaska, 2001; System Justification Scale by Kay & Jost, 2003), the assumed model structure could not be confirmed (see Appendix Table 8). This article aims to refine, revise and revalidate the scale using a larger data set from a quota sample.

Analyses of variance (RM-ANOVA) showed that the first Aff-Scale is significantly different from the F-scale and that it explains additional variance.¹ The current study aims to replicate the correlational patterns found in 2022 between the Aff-Scale and (high) education, (high) income, and (low) age, and to further validate the scale's structure using confirmatory factor analysis. The final scale presented in this article still needs to be further refined and revalidated, but it serves as a useful tool to better examine the relationship between current social character traits and authoritarian dispositions in contemporary Western societies.

Historical Change and New Subjectivity

Our theoretical framework rests on Erich Fromm's social character theory (1932) and Max Weber's (1920) sociological analyses. Although social character is understood as the result of the interaction between the socioeconomic structure of society and psychological structure, Fromm emphasized that the concept of "social character" must not be understood as static, but as a rather malleable feature. Social characters change and their

1) In Study 1 (Jäger, 2022), a sample group was identified that scored high on both the new Aff-Scale and the original F-scale. These 120 participants (Highscorer_both) even scored 7.5% higher on the F-scale than the group of high scorers on the F-scale itself.

relationship to social authorities constantly adapts to changes in line with the role of authority within societies. Thus, social character theory is consistent with the notion of Critical Theory, that emphasizes “a temporal core to truth instead of opposing it as something immutable to historical movement” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. IX). Social character does not refer to the most widespread character structure, but rather the structure most adapted to prevailing social conditions—one that best fulfills the function of maintaining and reproducing those conditions. Hence, the concept of social character must not be conflated with personality as it is understood in contemporary academic psychology. It is not concerned with relatively stable individual differences in thoughts, emotions and behaviors—even though thoughts and emotions are shaped by adaption to prevailing social imperatives. Social character rather focusses on how people are subjugated to those imperatives and how this process of subjugation entails specific relationships to authorities and ideologies. Thus, we will find a myriad of different personalities within the confines of affirmative social character. In short, the affirmative character aims at grasping the character structure that is most tightly adapted to the social conditions and imperatives of today.

At the turn of the 21st century, alongside the rise of flexible or post-Fordist capitalism, a so called “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006) emerged. It entailed outsourcing of parts of the production process, organizing work on a project basis and a shift in “work ethic and competence” (ibid., p. 205) from extrinsic motivation to internal motivation; the self is expected to act intuitively in an entrepreneurial manner. This is linked to increasingly blurred boundaries between work and private life and between “personal and professional knowledge, serious and playful activities. This corresponds to the requirements of a flexible, creative, individualized, knowledge-based, and global capitalism” (Nachtwey & Seidl, 2017, p. 14, translation by the authors).

Various authors have theorized this transformation, along with the new demands placed on workers and the resulting emergence of a new form of subjectivity. Bröckling (2019) speaks of an “entrepreneurial self”, that no longer simply performs prescribed tasks in exchange for wages but instead operates as an “intrapreneur”—continuously optimizing itself and its work in a proactive manner and adapting to new circumstances (Bröckling, 2019, p. 29). Pongratz and Voß (2003a, b) elaborate on this in their concept of the “entreplooyee” describing how the internalization of entrepreneurial logics—such as self-control, self-economization, and self-rationalization—leads to increased personal responsibility, self-organization, and a perception of work as a commodity. According to Reckwitz (2006), this flexibilization of the subject is also evident in the cultural field: the postmodern subject, as he conceptualizes it, no longer orients itself around fixed norms but appears as a hybrid figure, caught in the tension between the imperative of creativity and the demands of efficiency, between self-realization and the pressure to conform, between individuality and standardization.

In the field of psychoanalytically oriented social characterology, which explicitly builds on Fromm, there have also been attempts to capture a new social character: Fromm (1976) himself already addressed certain aspects of the emerging "entrepreneurial self" during the early phase of the neoliberal turn in his concept of the "marketing character". Later, various authors, drawing on sociological literature mentioned earlier, examined "postmodern ego-oriented" (Funk, 2006), "flexible" (Gruber, 2010), or "post-Fordist social characters" (Eichler, 2013), often linking these to narcissistic conflicts.

Interestingly, the question of authoritarian tendencies plays no significant role in these accounts of social character. The new subjectivity is typically sharply contrasted with the authoritarian one, which is often regarded as outdated (Brunner, 2025). However, Eichler (2013) proposes that the post-Fordist social character contains a potential for alienation and authoritarian tendencies, especially when contradictory social demands must be internalized and subjectively processed.

One approach that seeks to capture the social character of the 21st century by relating it to flexible, neoliberal subjectivities, while explicitly building on Fromm's earlier reflections on social characterology, is the concept of the affirmative character (Jäger, 2022). The theoretical perspective was updated and expanded by extending the analysis of inner-worldly asceticism beyond its cultural-historical and religious roots to contemporary socio-economic systems, especially in late modern performance societies such as Silicon Valley (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996).² Thus, this analysis focuses on the question of how this character structure contributes to the dynamic stabilization (Rosa, 2019) of modern performance societies.

The affirmative character is defined as a character structure that is primarily characterized by uncritical integration into existing social structures (Jäger, 2022, p. 412). In contrast to the classic authoritarian character, which is characterized by strict submission to authority figures, the affirmative character manifests itself in the quiet incorporation and reproduction of existing post-Fordist and neoliberal power structures (Jäger, 2022, p. 412). This dynamic is based less on coercion than on the internalized logic of the system (Jäger, 2022, p. 311). Thus, the affirmative character represents a form of "autonomous" submission that reflects more subtle mechanisms of adaptation to social power relations (see Foucault, 1993, Biopower) and thus represents a step forward in the commodification of subjectivity under libertarian authority (Jäger, 2022, p. 311).

2) The Californian ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) is a fusion of yuppieism and hippieism that emerged in the cultural bohemian milieu of San Francisco and the high-tech industry of Silicon Valley. It combines the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies with the physical free-spiritedness of the hippies. It can also be seen as a paradoxical mixture of ideas from the New Left and libertarian-authoritarian ideas, and it marks the birth of solutionism.

Relationship to the Authoritarian Character

The classic authoritarian character is characterized by unreflective conventionalism, submissiveness to authority, and aggressive behavior toward those who deviate from the norm. It strives for hierarchical order, power, and control, often embodied by a leader, rejects curiosity, reflection, and emotional openness, and is characterized by superstition, stereotypes, and hostile projection. Sexuality is strictly regulated, and deviations are punished. Based on psychoanalytic mechanisms of repression, this model corresponds to traditional forms of power that discipline individuals.

While the concept of affirmative character itself must not be conflated with authoritarianism per se, we assume that it relates to today's currents of authoritarian tendencies. In contrast to traditional notions of the authoritarian character, affirmative character structures pragmatically align themselves with the authority currently prevailing in society (in the form of the libertarian performance paradigm), reject leaders (authoritarian submission) and rigid norms (conventionalism), and demonstrate a flexible adaptability to social challenges. However, there is a similar sadomasochistic mechanism at play between submission and aggression, but aggression is used as a driving force, albeit less disintegrative and destructive toward the outside world than in the authoritarian character, but rather instrumentally more rational and self-optimizing (inwardly) or derived as a lack of empathy or solidarity. Emotional and social skills such as resilience and mindfulness are harnessed for adaptability and serve self-regulation rather than compassion, while superstition and strict hierarchies are rejected. Sexuality is viewed as a resource depending on the situation and is not regulated moralistically.

Rationale for the New Measuring Instrument

In light of these debates about the transformation of social conditions and the accompanying changes in prevailing subjective structures, it is notable that contemporary quantitative research on authoritarianism still draws on the theoretical reflections of [Fromm \(1936\)](#) and, above all, the F-scale developed by [Adorno et al. \(1950\)](#). The scale is continuously revisited, with efforts to reformulate and adapt its items, incorporate new aspects, as well as expand, delete, reintroduce, and revise its dimensions ([Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2015](#); [Altemeyer, 1981, 1996](#); [Beierlein et al., 2014](#); [Decker et al., 2022](#); [Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013](#); [Oesterreich, 1998](#); [Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005](#)). While recent theoretical discussions have focused on certain new manifestations of authoritarianism (the “libertarian authoritarianism” put forth by [Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025](#)), researchers generally agree that contemporary forms of authoritarianism can still be traced back to the traditional concept of authoritarianism ([Adorno et al., 1950](#)).

To empirically connect these lines of debate, relate the social character best adapted to contemporary flexible capitalism to authoritarian dispositions, and maybe detect

newer forms of authoritarianism, it is crucial to develop a measurement tool for the affirmative character.

Measurement Approach: Model and Operationalization

The measurement instrument developed, the Affirmative Character Scale (Aff-Scale), was derived from the theoretical work of Jäger (2022, pp. 27–412) and is based on five central dimensions that capture the character structure of the affirmative character:

1. **Affirmation** captures the tendency to uncritically accept social norms and demands. It reflects a passive affirmation of existing conditions and a resigned attitude towards social criticism. This applies, for example, to the affirmation of the performance paradigm in the globalized world, which includes the demand for flexibility and mobility. Rather, the disruptive dismantling of traditional values itself becomes a new type of social convention of modernity, which is intended to stabilize it dynamically (Rosa, 2019). In this context, fashions rather than conventions determine the new self.³
2. **Self-optimization** highlights the importance of self-discipline and performance orientation as central elements of modern (inner-)asceticism. It examines how individuals optimize their physical and mental abilities to assert themselves in a competitive society. This goes hand in hand with skills such as self-deciphering, self-management, and self-examination (Quantified Self) (see Jäger, 2022).
3. **Flexibility and mobility** measures the willingness to adapt to the dynamics of globalized societies through flexible living and working concepts. It captures attitudes towards mobility, networks and the breaking down of traditional structures. In the social sphere, this is linked to the internalization of the requirement for modern, globalized workers to maintain social ties as loose, interchangeable, and functional, and with the ability to adapt to foreign cultures without major irritation in order to perform well there.⁴
4. **Solutionism** examines the conviction that technology can define and solve all (social) problems. This is often accompanied by the belief that technical solutions are

3) As several studies on new forms of authoritarianism have already pointed out (Decker et al., 2022; Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025), it is mainly the dimension of conventionalism that is becoming fragile in the relationship between the authoritarianism and classical authoritarianism (see the COVID-19 protests). This is one of the innovations of the new Aff-Scale, which takes into account the fading relationship with classical conventions. This is also confirmed by the empirical results (see Appendix Table 7), as despite a high correlation with overall authoritarianism (KSA-3: 0.522), the sub-dimension of conventionalism has the lowest share in it (KSA-3 conventionalism: 0.342).

4) It can also be shown that the mobility dimension does not correlate at all with classical authoritarianism (0.092) or right-wing extremism (-0.021), whereas it does correlate with solutionism (0.285).

better at solving social and political problems than government or collective measures. It reflects a strong trust in technology and progress. This way of thinking usually goes together with the central narrative of disruption, which refers to the radical questioning, upheaval, or “destruction” of existing markets, institutions, and social practices through technological innovations.

5. **Anti-transcendence and subjective reason** focuses on the pragmatic inner-worldly orientation of the affirmative character and the inability to critically question or overcome existing conditions. This includes not only anti-intrareception, but also the rejection of transcendent values that cannot be exploited or used for earthly purposes.

Hypotheses for External Validation

Based on the theoretical reconstruction of the affirmative character as a psychosocial structure of flexible self-optimization, uncritical adaptation, and performance-oriented internalization of prevailing norms, it becomes necessary to examine which social groups are particularly predisposed to this character structure. Following [Fromm's \(1932, 1976\)](#) assumption that character is socially mediated and shaped by the requirements of the economic order, we can assume that individuals who are most integrated into the logics of late modern capitalism—namely, the young, well-educated, and economically secure—are more likely to exhibit this social character. [Pongratz and Voß \(2003a\)](#) demonstrate in an empirical study that “entreprenees” do not entirely replace traditional Fordist types of workers, but rather coexist alongside them (p. 242). Empirically, “entreprenees” are found primarily among highly qualified freelancers in the fields of IT, culture, and consulting. Also, [Bröckling's \(2016\)](#) analysis of the entrepreneurial self primarily addresses highly qualified groups that organize their life according to neoliberal meritocratic principles. Higher education is associated with increased self-optimization and internalization of market norms; and higher income reflects successful adaptation to prevailing socio-economic expectations. And since the affirmative character is assumed to be an increasing formation of the future, we expected that young people will show a stronger expression of this character. As self-marketing tendencies are increasing in terms of quantity (via social media) and quality (see [Ehrenberg, 2004](#)) in our accelerating performance-oriented society, it is assumed that young people in particular feel powerless in the face of these seemingly unavoidable demands. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are derived from the theoretical framework:

- **H1:** Younger individuals score significantly higher on the affirmative character scale.
- **H2:** Individuals with a higher level of education significantly score higher on the affirmative character scale.
- **H3:** Individuals with higher household income significantly score higher on the affirmative character scale.

Instrument

The Aff-Scale was developed as a research tool for general social science surveys. It aims to capture an individual's political, economic, and social beliefs, and to identify a comprehensive, coherent pattern of thought that is an expression of a specific psychological structure. By examining social change through the measurement of social-structural characteristics and attitudes, the scale serves to analyze current ideological trends while allowing to track its relationship to changes in authoritarian attitudes and beliefs over time.

For the validation sample, the German-speaking population aged 18 and over was defined as the target group. The set of ideological beliefs should have stabilized by this age. The quality criteria presented in this study refer exclusively to this target group and are thus limited to the social conditions in Germany.

The item pool comprised a total of 35 items across 5 dimensions. Item wording can be found in [Table 1](#). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement to each item on a six-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). They could refuse to answer by skipping individual items but were asked if they would complete missing items before moving on. The scale was designed to measure a mean score for each of the five dimensions as well as an overall mean score.

Table 1
Factor Structure and loadings. Assignment of Items to Factors of the EFA: Comparison of Theoretical and Extracted Dimensions of the Aff-Scale

Dimension	F1 Affirmation	F2 Self-optimization	F3 Flexibility and mobility	F4 Solutionism	F5 Libertarianism
<i>Affirmation</i>					
Those who are unwilling to be flexible and adaptable rightly fail.	-.414				
Criticizing the demands of a performance-oriented society is pointless; one should focus on keeping up instead.	-.775				
Education should primarily aim to prepare children to meet the professional challenges of the future.	-.456				
One should strive to do everything better than their predecessors.					
It is futile to agonize over whether the world is fair or unfair; in the end, everyone is on their own.					
It is important to stay mentally and physically fit in order to succeed in life.		-.546			
<i>Government support should be economically beneficial.</i>					
<i>Self-optimization</i>					
Anyone who wants to grow should track their physical activity so they can work on their weaknesses.		-.737			
Anyone who wants to grow should track their emotional state to identify and address their weaknesses.		-.792			

Dimension	F1 Affirmation	F2 Self-optimization	F3 Flexibility and mobility	F4 Solutionism	F5 Libertarianism
To achieve success, one should be able to put their needs aside.					
I eat healthily to stay fit.		-.438			
You should work on being mentally resilient in order to cope with life.		-.604			
I want to be more successful than my parents.					
You should start networking (social networking) early on in school, college, or your career in order to reap the benefits later on.					
I would put my professional future on hold for a relationship. (reversed)					
<i>Flexibility and mobility</i>					
Material things and money mean a lot to me. (reversed)					
Nowadays, there is a strong argument for no longer separating work and leisure time.					
There should be more foreign language teaching at school and less religion or ethics teaching.					
I feel at home anywhere in the world			.702		
I would love to travel the whole world.			.804		
I reject rigid and inflexible work relationships. I would like to work from anywhere. I don't need a fixed workplace or set working hours.					

Dimension	F1 Affirmation	F2 Self-optimization	F3 Flexibility and mobility	F4 Solutionism	F5 Libertarianism
<i>Solutionism</i> ^a Nowadays, there is a technical solution for every problem.				.563	
I am convinced that, in the case of a mental illness, a smartphone app that measures my mood and gives me tips can help.				.841	
Most problems can be solved with an app					
In the economy, the state should have less influence, and the market more.					-.490
The climate crisis can be managed without sacrificing our standard of living.					
Entrepreneurs like Elon Musk or Bill Gates have contributed much more to solving the problems of humanity's history than philosophy and religion.					-.462
Technological innovations are the key to a better life.					-.458
Continuous comparisons, like school grades, intelligence tests, or performance assessments, are important to know where one stands.					-.419

Anti-Transcendence and Subjective Reason^b

I am willing to sacrifice my ideals for my personal advancement.

What good are high moral values if they benefit no one?

Dimension	F1 Affirmation	F2 Self-optimization	F3 Flexibility and mobility	F4 Solutionism	F5 Libertarianism
Volunteering is mainly a matter for the resume.					
The whole is the sum of its parts.					
What influencers say is important to me.					.734
In school, one should rather learn about taxes, rent, or insurance than spending hours interpreting poems.					

Note. This table presents the assignment of the 35 items of the Aff-Scale (affirmative character disposition) to their respective theoretical dimensions (Affirmation, Self-Optimization, Flexibility and Mobility, Solution Seeking, Anti-Transcendence, and Subjective Reason) and the factors extracted through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) after selection based on item discrimination to 28 items. The extracted factors are labeled as follows: F1 (Affirmation), F2 (Self-Optimization), F3 (Flexibility and Mobility), F4 (Solution Seeking), and F5 (Libertarianism). The factor loadings in the cells indicate the assignment of each item to a factor based on the EFA results. The sample was split for analysis ($n = 608$). Factor loadings $< .4$ are not shown. Bolded items were part of the final instrument.

^aThe items now loading on this “new” fifth factor had been theoretically assumed to be part of “solutionism”. However, the EFA showed that assuming a separate factor may be more appropriate. After careful consideration of the item wording and after revisiting the theory, we renamed this factor “libertarianism”. ^bThis dimension proved problematic: Jäger (2022) showed it was difficult to operationalize. As a vanishing attitude formation—either abstract and hard to measure (e.g., pursuit of higher values) or outdated in indicators (e.g., church attendance)—it was not sufficiently replicated in our EFA and was replaced by the factor libertarianism.

Scale Development

This study is based on results of an earlier analysis of an online survey conducted in Germany 2021 (Jäger, 2022, $N = 1,059$). While results from this previous study pointed towards an acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$) and showed that the Aff-Scale captured a different social character profile than the F-scale, the analysis had several flaws, mainly the double loadings of some items on several factors as well as the non-representative sample, that called for a refinement of the item wordings and a confirmation of the results.

For the current study, data was collected between December 5 and 9, 2024, via the online panel provider Bilendi/Respondi. The sample was quota-assigned according to gender, age and education. The final sample consisted of $N = 1,196$ and was split for the analysis. ($n_{EFA} = 608$, $n_{CFA} = 588$). For the exact distribution of gender, age and education in the subsamples, see Table 4 in the Supplementary Material.

The item construction was based on an item pool provided by Jäger (2022; see Codebook 2022; 51 items). Some items were dismissed or their wording was refined due to insufficient factor loadings and item-total correlations in the first study. Three further items were developed based on theoretical considerations to account for all facets of affirmative character.⁵

The final instrument comprised a total of 35 items (see Table 1). To avoid double analysis of the same sample, it was randomly split, and an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the first subsample ($n_{EFA} = 608$), while a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the second subsample ($n_{CFA} = 588$; see Table 2 for an overview of sociodemographics of the subsamples). The subsample sizes can still be considered large enough to ensure a robust analysis.⁶ Parallel analysis suggested extraction of seven factors. Using oblimin rotation, a cut-off value of $> .40$ was applied for item selection. As a result, two factors were disregarded from further analysis: in one, all factor loadings fell below the cut-off, another only included one item above the cut-off. An additional item was excluded due to double loading $> .20$ (Langer, 2020). We thus decided on a five-factor solution with a total of 17 items: *affirmation* (3 items), *libertarianism* (4 items), *self-optimization* (5 items), *solutionism* (3 items), and *flexibility and mobility* (2 items). Although the theoretically derived model could not be fully confirmed

5) New: "What influencers say is important to me." New: "The climate crisis can be managed without sacrificing our standard of living." New: "State support should be economically worthwhile." Rephrased (originally AFF1_03: My parents are like friends to me): "Education should primarily aim to prepare children to meet the professional challenges of the future." Rephrased (originally AFF4_07: I would use a dating app (Tinder, Lovoo, Ok-Cupid, etc.)): "Most problems can be solved with an app." Rephrased (originally AFF2_09: I would be willing to sacrifice myself for a higher ideal (e.g. "going to a monastery", "political imprisonment", "whistleblowing", "military service" etc.)): "I am willing to sacrifice my ideals for my personal advancement." (Inverted)

6) Recommended sample sizes for factor analyses depend on several aspects, including item communality, number of factors, and variable-to-factor ratio (Mundfrom et al. 2005). Sample sizes > 500 are generally considered adequate.

by the data, the extracted factor structure is still in the expected relationship with the main characteristics of the affirmative character, which justifies further evaluation (see elements in bold in Table 1 for the final selection).

Table 2

Reliability Measures of Scales and Subscales

Scale/Subscale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Omega
Aff-Scale	17	.829	.636
Dimensions			
Affirmation	3	.683	.727
Self-optimization	5	.798	.780
Solutionism	3	.776	.781
Libertarianism	4	.631	.580
Flexibility and mobility	2	.687	.673

Quality Criteria

Objectivity

To ensure objectivity, data was collected anonymously, and all participants were presented with the same standardized instructions and answer format. Attention checks were implemented to identify inattentive behavior. Participants failing the attention checks were excluded.

Regarding objectivity of the evaluation and interpretation, the dataset was automatically generated by the survey tool and made available for download in various formats. The data was analyzed using the statistics program SPSS30 and statistics software R 4.4.2. SPSS and R syntax was saved and can be accessed through the Supplementary Material.

Reliability

Reliability was determined for the overall scale as well as its five sub-dimensions using Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega. The reliability values of the Aff-Scale mostly show acceptable to good values, with some exceptions. While the overall Alpha value is good ($\alpha = .829$), omega is significantly lower ($\omega = 0.636$)⁷. Internal consistency of the dimensions "self-optimization" and "solutionism" can be viewed as acceptable, while

⁷ Overall, the difference between the two values is (as expected) very high; omega takes into account the loadings of the items on an assumed total factor, while alpha assumes that all items load equally strongly. From a theoretical and methodological point of view, it can therefore be argued that the low overall omega values reflect a certain heterogeneity of the individual dimensions.

“affirmation”, “libertarianism” and “flexibility and mobility” should be considered at least questionable. In the case of “affirmation” and “flexibility and mobility” this may partly be due to the low number of items (3 and 2 respectively).

Validity

Content Validity

To ensure content validity, the team of authors generating the item pool consisted of researchers from different backgrounds (psychologists, political scientists, sociologists). Moreover, item selection was based on both theoretical considerations and empirical indicators from Jäger (2022). The measurement construct was sufficiently defined in advance and reviewed by the team regarding its validity. Changes in the factor structure due to the results of the EFA were thoroughly discussed in the team and tied back to the theoretical framework.

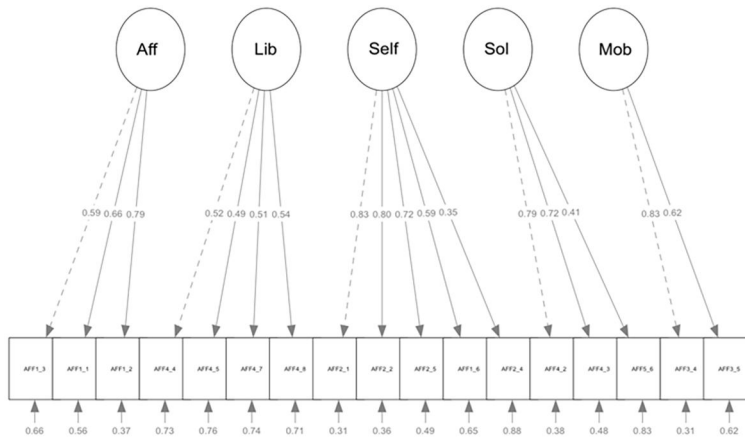
Factorial Validity

The factorial validity of the model was examined based on the second subsample ($n_{\text{CFA}} = 588$) using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). After item exclusion, five latent factors (affirmation, libertarianism, self-optimization, solutionism, flexibility and mobility) remained and were tested using robust maximum likelihood estimation to account for nonnormal distribution of the items (MLR).

Results indicated standardized factor loadings that were consistently statistically significant. As the CFI was low based on general cut-offs (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003): $\chi^2 = 247.05$, $df = 136$ $p < .001$; $CFI = 0.927$; $RMSEA = 0.048$ (95% CI [0.041, 0.055]); $SRMR = 0.057$, modification indices were examined. Based on the modification indices, one theoretically plausible residual covariance between item errors was released to improve the model fit. The covariance between AFF1_6 and AFF2_4 was released because both items target similar aspects of individual performance orientation and are also both part of the same dimension (self-optimization). The global fit indices indicate good model fit, with RMSEA, SRMR, and CFI all showing good values that are above the most common thresholds. These results can be viewed as a first indicator for factorial validity that needs to be replicated in future studies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Results



Note. Aff = Affirmation, Lib = Libertarianism, Self = Self-Optimization, Sol = Solutionism, Mob = Flexibility and mobility. Each latent variable is associated with a set of observed variables, represented by boxes, with arrows indicating the factor loadings. The dashed lines signify the constraint of the first item loading to 1, which is necessary for model identification. All factor loadings shown are standardized. Error terms (arrows below items) represent residual variance not explained by the factors. Covariance between the items AFF1_6 and AFF2_4 (.24) was freed to maximize fit (not depicted).

Low factor loadings of individual items (e.g., AFF4_6 for Libertarianism and AFF2_4 for Self-Optimization) may indicate that a revision and sharpening of the wording could be necessary (see Discussion).

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Derived from theory and based on results from Jäger (2022)⁸, several constructs were used to test convergent and discriminant validity with the following hypotheses:

A moderate to large correlation of the Aff-Scale with authoritarianism was expected, as the affirmative character is theorized to be a more subtle form of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism was operationalized using the validated short scale Kurzskala Autoritarismus 3 (KSA-3; Beierlein et al., 2014), measuring authoritarianism as an overarching dimension with three sub-dimensions: authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submis-

8) The study by Jäger (2022) was able to show theoretically (pp. 367–373) and empirically (RM-ANOVA) that the Aff-Scale exhibits convergent but, above all, discriminant properties compared to the F-scale (pp. 490–496). Furthermore, as mentioned above, construct validity was demonstrated using various established scales (Schuler & Prochaska, 2001; Kay & Jost, 2003).

siveness and conventionalism (three items each). The answers are indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Correlation with right-wing extremism was expected to be positive, but lower, as the Aff-Scale aims to capture less aggressive, more liberal, and well-educated subpopulations that do not necessarily share right-wing extremist attitudes (or know how to hide them better or see them as a socially sanctioned danger to their professional advancement), despite authoritarian tendencies. We measured right-wing extremism using the Fragebogen Rechtsextremismus - Leipziger Form (FR-LF; Heller et al., 2020). The FR-LF measures right-wing attitudes on six dimensions: approval of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, chauvinism, hostility towards foreigners, anti-Semitism, social Darwinism, and trivialization of National Socialism using three items per dimension. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Moreover, the following connections to sociodemographic variables were expected and used for further construct validation (see hypotheses): 1) Younger participants were expected to show higher scores on the Aff-Scale. 2) Unlike classical authoritarianism, we assume that the affirmative character is to be found primarily among the well-educated (2) and upper classes (3) (idid.). Hypotheses of the Jäger (2022) could thus be replicated, emphasizing the scientific robustness and validity of the Aff-Scale.

Correlation With Authoritarianism and Right-Wing Attitudes – Table 3 provides an overview of the results of the correlation analyses regarding authoritarianism and right-wing extremism. All correlations pointed in the assumed directions. As expected, there is a significant positive correlation between the Aff-Scale and authoritarianism (0.522) and a moderate correlation with right-wing attitudes⁹ (0.330). Significant correlations ($p < .001$): All correlations displayed (except for flexibility and mobility and “right-wing attitudes”) are statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the relationships between the variables are not random.

9) Negative or weak correlations with “Flexibility and mobility”: It shows the lowest correlation with the Aff-Scale (0.540) and no significant correlation with “right-winged attitudes” (-0.021), indicating a weak or non-existent link between mobility and right-wing attitudes. As we did not formulate explicit hypotheses regarding the subdimensions’ correlation with the external constructs and the overall correlation still points in the right direction, we do not see this as an issue for external validation.

Table 3
Correlations Between Aff-Scale, Sub-Dimensions, Authoritarianism and Right-Wing Extremism

Variable	AFF-Scale	Affirmation	Libert.	Selfopt.	Solut	Mobil.	Autorit.	Rightwing.
AFF-Scale	1	.683***	.748***	.739***	.607***	.540***	.522***	.330***
Affirmation	.683***	1	.458***	.469***	.197***	.180***	.495***	.300***
Libert.	.748***	.458***	1	.390***	.375***	.218***	.459***	.328***
Selfopt.	.739***	.469***	.390***	1	.204***	.257***	.357***	.154***
Solut.	.607***	.197***	.375***	.204***	1	.285***	.311***	.325***
Mobil.	.540***	.180***	.218***	.257***	.285***	1	.092**	-.021
Autorit.	.522***	.495***	.459***	.357***	.311***	.092**	1	.592***
Rightwing.	.330***	.300***	.328***	.154***	.325***	-.021	.592***	1

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients (r) are presented. p values are indicated with asterisks. Higher scores indicate stronger associations between the variables. Abbreviations: AFF-Scale = Affiliation Scale; Libert. = Libertarianism; Selfopt. = Self-Optimization; Solut. = Solutionism; Mobil. = Mobility; Autorit. = Authoritarianism; Rightwing. = Right-Wing Extremism.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Relationship Between Affirmative Character Dispositions and Sociodemographic Variables / Hypotheses

— The correlations of the Aff-Scale with age, income and social class were conducted using ANOVA. Again, the results pointed in the expected direction (see Figures 2 and 3; and Figures 7 and 8 in the Supplementary Material). Younger participants (< 30 years) showed the highest Aff-Scores, followed by the 30–44 years age group (in contrast to the authoritarian character, see Figure 8 in the Supplementary Materials). From 45 years onwards, Aff-Scores dropped significantly, but rose again slightly at retirement age ($F(3, 1192) = 10.281, p < .001$). Moreover, the profile plot (Figure 2) shows that participants with a high school diploma scored highest on the Aff-Scale, while those with a lower secondary school diploma and elementary school diploma scored lowest ($F(5, 1166) = 12.345, p < .001$). As expected, the scale value decreased for academics, especially for those with humanities-degrees.

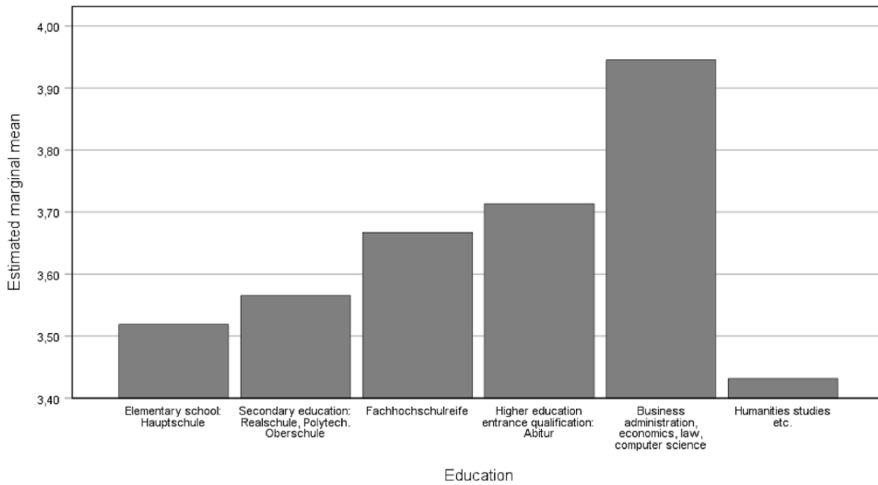
While a higher level of education is generally associated with affirmative character dispositions, the decline among (some) academics points to specific effects of the type of education: Economized or technocratic degree programs have the highest approval ratings—this reflects the theoretically assumed tendency toward values such as conformity, performance orientation, and acceptance of authority. Humanities students, on the other hand, show significantly lower ratings, which is related to a more critical attitude toward social conformity and market-driven subjectification. However, these effects are not apparent in authoritarianism.

Overall, the correlational patterns of the Aff-Scale with authoritarianism, right-wing extremism as well as the sociodemographic variables provide robust evidence for the external validity of the Aff-Scale. Hypotheses of Jäger (2022) could be replicated, further emphasizing the scientific robustness and validity of the Aff-Scale.

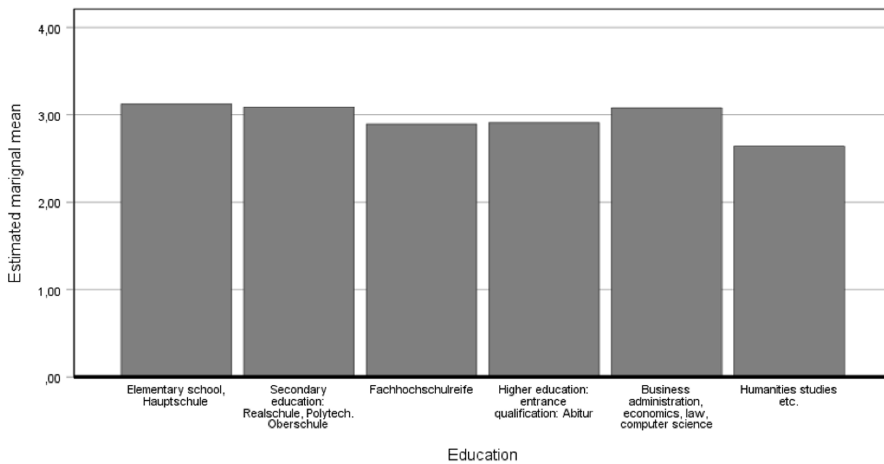
Figure 2

Estimated Marginal Mean of the Aff-Scale as a Function of the Highest Educational Attainment and Field of Study

Estimated marginal mean of AFF_Scale



Estimated marginal mean of Authoritarianism (KSA-3)

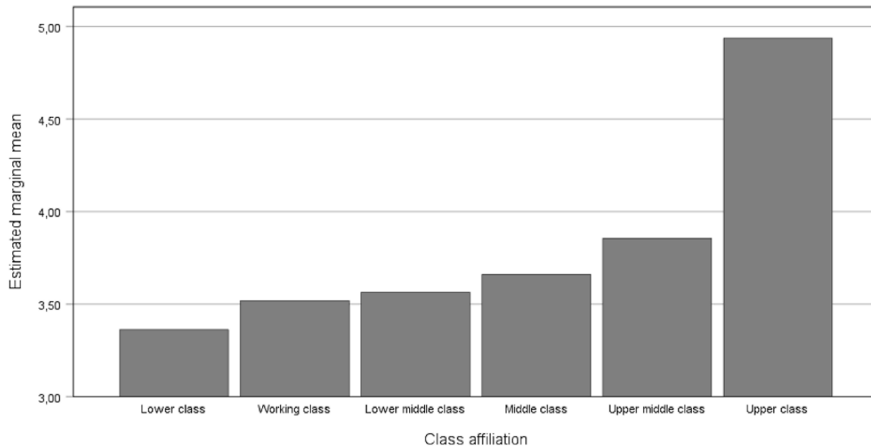


Note. The figure illustrates the relationship between education-level and Aff-Scale/KSA-3 (Authoritarianism) values using estimated marginal means.

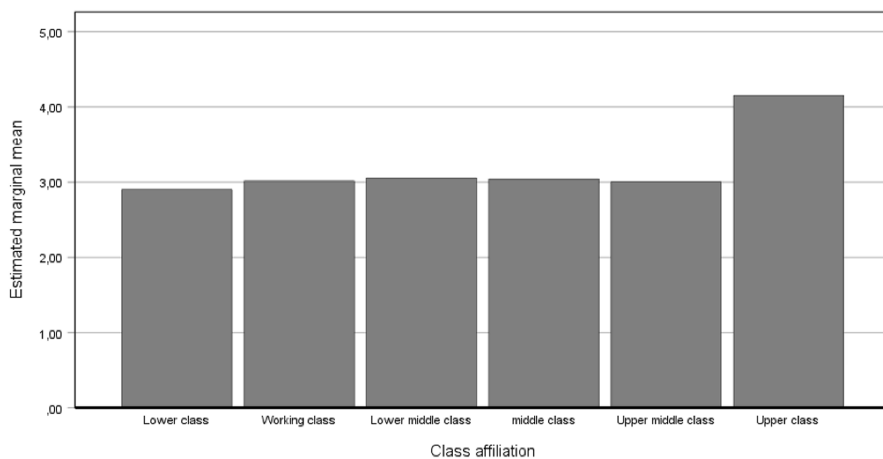
Figure 3

Estimated Mean of the Aff-Scale and KSA-3 as a Function of Social Class

Estimated marginal mean of AFF_Scale



Estimated marginal mean of Authoritarianism (KSA-3)



Note. The figure illustrates the relationship between class affiliation and Aff-Scale/KSA-3 (Authoritarianism) values using estimated marginal means.

Discussion and Limitations

In our theoretical considerations, we drew attention to the tension between, firstly, the obsolescence of the authoritarian social character in flexible capitalism, secondly, the “classic” authoritarian dispositions that can still be observed in authoritarianism

research, and thirdly, new forms of libertarian authoritarianism. With the Affirmative Character Scale, we aim to offer a new measurement instrument that enables us to relate these three dimensions to one another—namely, a social character adapted to the demands of 21st-century meritocracy, classical forms of authoritarianism, and newer authoritarian developments. While the overall correlational patterns of the Aff-Scale point to construct validity, some major drawbacks have to be addressed, including the limited internal consistency as well as some low item loadings and mixed results regarding the factorial validity of the scale.

Insufficient Reliability of Individual Subscales

The reliability analyses of the Aff-Scale show satisfactory values for the overall scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.829; Omega = 0.636), but some subscales show lower values. In particular, the subscale “libertarianism”, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.631 and an omega value of 0.580, suggests possible item heterogeneity. These results could impair the internal consistency and limit the interpretability of the scale. However, given the small number of items per subscale, the values remain acceptable. Nevertheless, future studies should critically revise and test the items of the less consistent subscales to increase reliability and enable a more robust measurement.

Varying item numbers per subscale was due to the multi-stage validation process, that mostly affected items in the flexibility and mobility, solutionism and affirmation dimensions. In the future, new theoretically substantial items should be developed and empirically tested to strengthen the scale in terms of its breadth in terms of content and psychometric quality.

Moreover, some items' wordings should be refined, as they showed low factor loadings and thus being suboptimal measures of their respective dimensions. First, the item “The climate crisis can be managed without sacrificing our standard of living.” may not be precise enough to capture the intended dimension of libertarianism. The term “standard of living” may be too subjective and thus interpreted differently. This should be avoided in future versions of the scale.

Second, the item “*I eat healthily to keep fit.*” may be too “easy”, i.e., too many respondents agreed leading to a poor discriminatory power. The normal distribution curve supports this interpretation (s. Supplementary Material 7). In terms of the theoretical considerations, “fit” was meant in the sense of the 'survival of the fittest', as adaptation to the environment. This rather performance-optimizing interpretation may not have been transparent to all respondents, as ‘fit’ is often generally associated with positive meanings and not with pressure to adapt. This suggests that the item does not adequately reflect the facets of self-optimization. The low factor loadings observed and the items analyzed illustrate the need for continuous improvement of the scale. Cognitive pretests could be used to investigate comprehension issues in the future (Lenzner et al., 2024).

Furthermore, we must assume that data collection through an online panel might cause distortions regarding agreement to items that concern technology-related attitudes. Therefore, other strategies for data collection should be considered for further research.

Methodological Limitations: Lack of Assessment of Measurement Invariance

The quality assurance criteria presented in this study relate exclusively to social conditions in Germany. This limits the transferability of the results to other cultural and social contexts. International or multicultural comparative studies are necessary to test the applicability of the Aff-Scale in other social and political environments. Particularly in view of increasing globalization and cultural diversity, such an extension is crucial to ensure that the scale also delivers accurate and valid results in other cultural milieus. Once the factorial structure of the scale is validated, the lack of testing of measurement invariance can be addressed. Multigroup confirmatory factor analyses (MG-CFA) could be used to investigate whether the scale's underlying structure differs across subgroups (Byrne & van de Vijver, 2017), thus ensuring the comparability of results.

Unlike the original study (Adorno et al., 1950), this approach has not yet been validated using qualitative methods (interviews with high scorers and low scorers). Future research on the affirmative character should provide this validation in order to enable a deeper understanding of the different levels of response behavior (individual vs. societal).

Despite these shortcomings, the Aff-Scale can be viewed as a first step towards a new scale to measure the authoritarian potentials of current subjectivity, taking into account the drastic societal changes that happened in the 21st century and thus adding a necessary perspective to research on authoritarianism today. The relationship to libertarian authoritarianism (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025) remains to be clarified for future research. Commonalities lie in the adoption of neoliberal market logic and self-optimization, but differences can be found in the manifestations: While libertarian authoritarians loudly oppose state intervention (e.g., Covid-19 pandemic protests), the affirmative character uncritically identifies with existing performance norms. It would be interesting to explore in more detail when and how the affirmative character shifts into a libertarian-authoritarian form.

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Competing Interests: Co-author Ayline Heller is employed at the GESIS – Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences and co-editor of the Article Collection this manuscript is being submitted to. We confirm that this had no influence on the scientific integrity of the study or the peer-review process.

Ethics Statement: Since the present study is concerned with the validation of a new psychometric scale, no direct interventions or treatments were carried out on individuals. The study was based exclusively on the analysis of anonymized questionnaire data, which was collected in accordance with ethical standards. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and all participants were fully informed in advance about the objectives and procedures of the study. A declaration of consent for participation was obtained.

The study complies with the ethical guidelines of the German Psychological Society (DGPs) and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (As of 01/2025). According to the applicable regulations, explicit approval by an ethics committee was not required.

Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in PsychArchives (see Jäger et al., 2025a).

Supplementary Materials

The supplementary materials comprise three components hosted on PsychArchives (see Index of Supplementary Materials). The Code includes the SPSS and R syntax used for all statistical analyses reported in the article, including reliability analyses, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, scale construction (subscales and total score), and validation analyses with external criteria and sociodemographic variables (see Jäger et al., 2025b). The Tables and Figures provide additional statistical documentation of the scale development and validation process, including descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, factor-analytic results, and supplementary figures illustrating age, education, and social class effects (see Jäger et al., 2025c). The Dataset contains the anonymized survey data underlying the analyses, enabling full transparency and reproducibility of the reported results (see Jäger et al., 2025a).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Jäger, D. W. G. F., Knasmüller, F., Brunner, M., & Heller, A. (2025a). *Dataset for: The Affirmative Character Scale: A tool to explore new forms of authoritarianism* [Dataset]. PsychArchives. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21524>

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- Jäger, D. W. G. F., Knasmüller, F., Brunner, M., & Heller, A. (2025c). *Supplementary materials (Tables & figures): The Affirmative Character Scale: A tool to explore new forms of authoritarianism* [Tables and figures]. PsychArchives. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21525>

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