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Empirical Research Paper

It's (a) Shame: Why Poverty Leads to Support for Authoritarianism

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Abstract

The literature has widely discussed and supported the relationship between poverty and support for authoritarian leaders and regimes. However, there are different claims about the mediating mechanism and a lack of empirical tests. We hypothesize that the effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism is mediated by shame: People living in poverty frequently experience social exclusion and devaluation, which is reflected in feelings of shame. Such shame, in turn, is likely to increase support for authoritarianism, mainly due to the promise of social re-inclusion. We support our hypothesis in two controlled experiments and a large-scale field study while empirically ruling out the two main alternative explanations offered in the literature: stress and anxiety. Finally, we discuss how the present findings can support policymakers in efficiently addressing the negative political consequences of poverty.

Keywords

poverty, authoritarianism, shame, anxiety, stress

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Recent decades have seen rising support for authoritarian leadership and regimes worldwide (Norris & Inglehart, 2019)—a worrisome development that has culminated in the tragedy of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. These events bestow new urgency to an old question: Why do people voluntarily submit to authoritarian leaders and regimes that threaten democracy, freedom, and, at worst, innocent lives?

A common explanation is poverty: A range of studies have indicated a relationship between poverty and support for authoritarianism (e.g., Conway et al., 2017; Doty et al., 1991; Lipset, 1960/1981; McCann, 1999; Napier & Jost, 2008). But on this front, we lack an answer to a central question: Why? Surprisingly, there is little known about the psychological mechanism behind the effect of poverty on authoritarianism. Previous works offer various—albeit mainly conceptual—explanations that revolve around three themes: Stress, anxiety, and shame. However, the empirical evidence for the same is lacking, with relevant previous findings and theoretical underpinnings contradicting one another (e.g., Laustsen & Petersen, 2017; Marcus et al., 2019).

With the present article, we aim to settle this debate by hypothesizing that shame mediates the effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism. This clarification is important because each of these psychological states (i.e., stress, anxiety, or shame) implies a different theoretical understanding of the experience of poverty, authoritarianism, and their relationship. But, perhaps more importantly, each of these psychological experiences calls for significantly different measures from policymakers and societies hoping to deter poor people from turning to authoritarian leaders who threaten democracy.

In the present work, we put forth the argument that poverty, defined as the "lack of the capability to live a minimally decent life" (Sen, 2000, p. 4), is psychologically threatening because it leads to shame: an emotional experience of worthlessness, powerlessness, and social exclusion (e.g., Scheff, 2000; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). That experience of shame is then likely to foster support for authoritarianism (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Henry, 2011; Sales & Friend, 1973) because authoritarian leaders and regimes promise a sense of social re-inclusion through their emphasis on strong social cohesion and conformity (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Hastings & Shaffer, 2008). As such, authoritarianism diffuses the sense of threat inherent in shame. Our overall argument aligns with recent notions that authoritarianism is the sociopolitical and attitudinal expression of motivational goals elicited by

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various forms of threat (e.g., Doty et al., 1991; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Mirisola et al., 2014; Oesterreich, 2005).

We aim to settle a debate about what exactly makes poor people susceptible to authoritarianism by providing empirical evidence explaining the psychological mechanism behind, that is, shame (while ruling out alternative explanations). Notably, previous studies have found a link between poverty and shame. Still, to the best of our knowledge, shame has not been empirically linked to support for authoritarianism, nor has there been a test of the mediated effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism. Thus, our study is not only the first to test this mediating mechanism, but the first to present causal evidence for an effect of shame on support for authoritarianism. In this way, we supplement the nascent literature about authoritarianism as a potentially compensational reaction to threats about one's social worth and inclusion (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Henry, 2011).

The Effect of Poverty on Authoritarianism

Today, authoritarianism is primarily understood as a willingness to submit to authority and a preference for intense group cohesion and conformity, as opposed to a preference for autonomy and self-regulation (e.g., Duckitt, 1989; Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005). Authoritarianism has been characterized as a psychological security mechanism in reaction to various forms of threat (e.g., Brandt & Henry, 2012; Doty et al., 1991; Mirisola et al., 2014; Oesterreich, 2005; Sales, 1972, 1973). The authoritarian reaction can take various forms: for example, heightened submission to authoritarian leaders and regimes; hostility and aggression toward "deviants," or an orientation toward conformity (e.g., Duckitt, 1989; Marcus et al., 2019; Oesterreich, 2005; Stenner, 2005). To avoid confounding authoritarianism with (conservative) political orientation, recent developments in the field have favored measuring (support for) authoritarianism as the desire for, and readiness to submit to, anti-democratic regimes, such as a "strong leader" (Nilsson & Jost, 2020).

Authoritarianism has been linked to poverty virtually since its inception (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950/2019). A range of evidence indeed supports the idea: For example, several studies show an increase in authoritarian reactions, such as the support of authoritarian leaders, in times of economic threat (Doty et al., 1991; McCann, 1999; McCann & Stewin, 1987; Sales, 1972, 1973). Other studies have indicated a negative relationship between income and right-wing authoritarianism (Carvacho et al., 2013), authoritarian child-rearing values (Brandt et al., 2015), preference for submission to authority (Napier & Jost, 2008), or support for anti-democratic leaders (Lipset, 1960/1981). Finally, a recent study by Conway et al. (2017) showed a positive relationship between poverty levels (as measured by an income threshold relative to household size) in the United States and indicators of authoritarianism, such as the restriction of political rights and civil liberties.

The Closer Look at the Concept of Poverty

Many of the aforementioned scholars have studied poverty (or related constructs) via income. However, we argue that, when studying the psychological consequences of poverty, the crucial element is the personal experience of poverty's daily hardships. In the words of Amartya Sen (2000): "Ultimately poverty must be seen in terms of poor living, rather than just a low income (and 'nothing else')" (p. 3). Indeed, looking solely at a person's income level can be deceiving, since such a person may still feel capable of "[living] a minimally decent life" (Sen, 2000, p. 4) and thus suffer little or no psychological consequences. This notion found support in a recent meta-analysis (Lund et al., 2010), which shows that indicators of such "lived" poverty (e.g., lack of food, housing, or financial stress) showed a clear relationship with common mental health disorders, like depression or anxiety disorders. By itself, though, income was a much more inconsistent predictor and frequently became insignificant after including indices of lived poverty (Lund et al., 2010).

As such, in line with Amartya Sen (1983, 2000), we define poverty in absolute, not relative terms: as the experience of an *absolute* lack of resources/capabilities, such as the (in) ability to pay rent.

Stress as a Potential Explanation

While there seems to be a theoretically and empirically strong link between poverty and authoritarianism, the literature lacks clarity on the specific psychological mechanism behind said link. Previous arguments, although mostly non-empirical, can be subsumed into three themes: stress, anxiety, and shame. For example, Sales (1972, 1973), Edelman (2021), or McCann (1999) argue that economic threat and struggle may lead to feelings of stress, defined as "an organism's reaction to environmental demands exceeding its regulatory capacity" (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014, p. 862), which in turn may evoke authoritarian reactions. Indeed, a range of studies provides correlational and causal evidence for the general link between poverty and stress (for an overview, see Haushofer & Fehr, 2014) and a positive relationship between stress and support for authoritarian leadership (Bass, 1992; Fodor, 1976) or authoritarian attitudes (Russo et al., 2020). Moreover, studies suggest that authoritarianism may function as a buffer against the negative psychological consequences of stressful events (Onraet & Van Hiel, 2014; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009). Following these notions, the effect of poverty on authoritarianism may be mediated by stress (Edelman, 2021; McCann, 1999; Sales, 1972, 1973).

Anxiety as a Potential Explanation

A second, related stream of work discusses the link between authoritarianism and poverty in terms of anxiety (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Lipset, 1960/1981), which is defined as "situational, anticipatory fear" (Hinton et al., 1991, p. 91). These notions are supported by studies showing that poverty is related to feelings of anxiety (e.g., Lund et al., 2010). Moreover, some of the most influential works on authoritarianism have described anxiety as one of its most central antecedents (Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Fromm, 1941/1969; Oesterreich, 2005; Wilson, 1973). For example, Adorno and colleagues (1950/2019) conceptualized authoritarianism as a result of internalized fears from childhood. Likewise, Oesterreich (2005) described the authoritarian reaction as a psychological security mechanism that is often elicited by feelings of anxiety. Thus, following this stream of research, the effect of poverty on authoritarianism may be mediated by anxiety: The insecurities and vulnerability of poverty facilitate anxiety, which then prompts support for authoritarianism as a defensive function (Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Jost et al., 2003; Wilson, 1973).

In sum, previous notions provide two theoretical explanations for the effect of poverty on authoritarianism: stress and anxiety. However, there is scant and inconsistent empirical support for the mediating role of stress and anxiety. For example, a longitudinal study by Duriez and colleagues (2012) did not provide evidence for authoritarianism buffering stress. Moreover, findings from highly threatening, real-world situations have indicated that anxiety is unrelated, or even negatively related, to support for authoritarianism, for example, after a terrorist attack (Marcus et al., 2019) or in or near Ukraine during the 2014 Crimea crisis (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Thus, the question of what compels poor people to support authoritarian leaders remains unanswered. With the present article, we seek to answer this question while also shedding light on a third, underappreciated perspective on the relationship between poverty and authoritarianism, that is, the role of shame (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Henry, 2011; Walker, 2014).

Shame as Potential Explanation

Poverty and Shame

Shame is a strong negative feeling that entails a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness, as well as a negative evaluation of the entire self (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Moreover, shame functions as a general sociometer (de Hooge, 2014) that signals a threat to the social bond (Scheff, 2000). Poverty is linked to shame in several ways. The capability deprivation (e.g., the inability to pay bills) reflected in material scarcity (Sen, 1983) is likely linked to feelings of powerlessness. As such, poverty is also related to social exclusion, for example, because it may deter people from joining social events because they cannot afford the material prerequisites, like sports equipment or appropriate clothing (Walker, 2014). Moreover, poverty is likely linked to negative self-evaluation by oneself and others, because many (Western) societies have a cultural tendency to blame poor individuals for their misfortune (e.g., Manstead, 2018; Walker, 2014). Undergirded by neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and personal responsibility, the incapacity borne from poverty is often perceived as reflecting individual failure (Manstead, 2018; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Walker, 2014), which is strongly related to shame (Tangney, 1992; Tracy & Robins, 2006).

Indeed, the relationship between poverty and shame has been widely discussed in the literature. As early as 1776, economist Adam Smith (1776/2007) described shame as one of the most crucial indicators of poverty. More recently, Walker (2014) provided qualitative evidence for a strong and universal link between poverty and feelings of shame in countries as diverse as China, India, Uganda, Norway, Pakistan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. Many studies have linked shame to different aspects of poverty, such as lacking food (Nanama & Frongillo, 2012), receiving welfare benefits (Goodban, 1985), or wearing the "wrong" clothes (Reutter et al., 2009). In sum, ample theoretical and empirical evidence substantiate that, as Sen (1983) noted, shame is at the "irreducible absolutist core" of poverty (p. 159).

Shame and Authoritarianism

People suffering from the shame of poverty are likely to be highly motivated to escape their painful experiences. Here, we argue that authoritarianism, as a psychological protection mechanism, serves this precise purpose because it provides psychological protection against feelings of social exclusion and diminished relational value. First, submission to authoritarian leaders and group norms, thus trading freedom for "oneness and sameness" (Stenner, 2005), promises the diffusion of personal responsibility for one's misfortunes and thus offers relief from the shame of poverty. Relatedly, Jay and colleagues (2019) argued that in unequal societies coined by neoliberalism, poor people are likely to be especially concerned with their low status in society, which increases their susceptibility to far-right populist leaders and parties. Second, feeling small, worthless, and powerless is likely to heighten the desire for a "strong" leader who reinstates order and control (Mirisola et al., 2014; Schoel et al., 2011). Third, authoritarianism resonates with the needs and desires elicited by the "threat to the social bond" (Scheff, 2000, p. 97) that shame entails (Brader & Marcus, 2013; Brandt & Henry, 2012; Henry, 2011). Individuals suffering the humiliation of poverty are likely drawn to authoritarian leaders and regimes because of the promise of intense group cohesion and "tribalism" (Teymoori et al., 2017) that addresses poor persons' deprived sense of inclusion in social bonds.

While authoritarianism frequently has been speculated to be related to feelings of inferiority or related concepts (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Wilson, 1973), to the best of our knowledge, there is no direct empirical evidence linking shame to authoritarianism. However, a number of studies have shown how experiences that are likely to entail feelings of shame are related to authoritarian reactions. For example, in an experiment by Brandt and Henry (2012), recalling an event of social exclusion led to an increase in authoritarianism among student participants. Moreover, a range of evidence from clinical psychology advances that shame is generally related to submissive behavior (Gilbert, 2000). Schoel and colleagues (2011) provided experimental evidence that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to support autocratic leaders when in an uncertain situation. In an earlier experiment, Sales and Friend (1973) showed that perceived personal failure (in a performance task) leads to heightened submission to authority figures. In another experiment (Henry, 2011), letting stigmatized minority members reaffirm their self-value in a writing task decreased their levels in authoritarianism.

In sum, several theoretical and empirical notions point toward a link between shame and support for authoritarianism. In the current article, we build on recent findings by Brandt and Henry (2012) and Henry (2011, see also Brandt et al., 2015)—namely that authoritarianism is a compensatory reaction to a threatened sense of social worth—to develop our hypothesis.

Hypothesis: The positive effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism is mediated by feelings of shame.

The Present Research

We tested our assumptions in three studies. In Study 1, we experimentally manipulated the salience of experiences of poverty (versus wealth) to test the hypothesized indirect effect, while ruling out the other two prevalent explanations (anxiety and stress). Since Study 1 can only provide causal evidence for the first path of our hypothesized model (the effect of poverty on shame), we followed recommendations (Spencer et al., 2005) and conducted a second experiment (Study 2), examining the second path of our hypothesized mediation model: the effect of shame on support for authoritarianism. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 were designed to causally examine the complete hypothesized model. However, due to the limited external validity of our experimental results, we tested our hypothesis in Study 3 featuring a large, Dutch panel dataset based on a, representative, true probability sample of Dutch households.[1]

Study 1: Experiment

In Study 1, we tested our hypothesis in an experimental setting using mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013) while aiming to rule out the other two prevalent explanations for the psychological mechanism behind the effect of poverty on authoritarianism (anxiety and stress).

Method

Participants. We recruited 401 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) who participated in the study in exchange for approximately US$1 (see Online Appendix A for additional information on the present MTurk samples). Following recommendations by Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), we determined that 377 participants were required for detecting small (Path a) to medium-small effects (Path b), but we oversampled to account for potential participant dropout. Since the experimental manipulation consisted of a writing and reading task concerning social issues in the United States, we required all participants to be native English speakers and U.S. residents. The average age was 38.9 years, $SD = 11.29$; 54% were women (46% men; one participant identified as non-binary); 58% held a university degree. See Table 1 for a complete overview of the study variables and demographics across conditions. We conducted *t* tests to assess baseline differences in demographics between conditions. As Table 1 shows, there was a significant difference between conditions in the number of Black participants, which, of course, was due to chance. Following recommendations (Goldberg, 2019), we conducted a robustness check, that is, re-running all analyses while controlling for ethnic groups. Doing so did not substantially alter the results or the conclusions drawn (see Online Appendix B).

Procedure. After agreeing to a study consent form and following a short welcome note, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (poverty versus wealth condition). The procedure followed a one-factor between-subjects design. After engaging with the experimental manipulation (a text about poverty/wealth in the United States), participants filled in the scales of the mediator variables (state shame, anxiety, and stress), followed by the dependent variable (support for authoritarianism). Afterwards, respondents reported their demographics (age, gender, education, marital status, annual household income, ethnic group, religiousness, and political leaning [left versus right wing]).

Materials

Poverty Manipulation. Building on prior research (Bratanova et al., 2016), we manipulated salience of poverty through two vignettes about poor/wealthy people in the United States (see Online Appendix C). These were introduced as "a text about [poverty/wealth] in the United States" and described characteristic aspects of the everyday life of poor/wealthy people. In line with our definition of poverty (Sen, 1983, 2000), the poverty condition highlighted the experience of

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Across Conditions for Variables Study 1.

	Wealth condition				Poverty condition					Total			
Baseline characteristic	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%	*p*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%
Support for authoritarianism	1.99	0.59	198		1.97	0.57	203		.803	1.98	0.58	401	
State shame	1.75	0.96	198		2.02	1.10	203		.009	1.89	1.04	401	
State anxiety	4.16	2.74	198		4.85	2.97	203		.015	4.51	2.88	401	
State stress	4.56	2.81	198		5.15	2.96	203		.041	4.86	2.90	401	
Household income (annual)[a]	5.92	2.94	197		6.05	2.82	199		.662	5.99	2.88	396	
Age in years	39.05	11.95	198		38.67	10.63	203		.740	38.86	11.29	401	
College degree[b]	0.58	0.49	115	58	0.57	0.50	116	57	.850	0.58	0.49	231	58
Gender													
Female	0.57	0.50	112	57	0.51	0.50	104	51	.283	0.54	0.50	216	54
Male	0.43	0.50	84	43	0.49	0.50	98	49	.240	0.45	0.50	182	46
Non-binary	0.005	0.07	1	1	0.00	0.00	0	0	.312	0.00	0.05	1	0
Ethnic group[c]													
Native American/American Indian	0.02	0.12	3	2	0.02	0.12	3	2	.985	0.02	0.12	6	2
Asian/Asian American	0.04	0.19	7	4	0.07	0.26	14	7	.126	0.05	0.22	21	5
Black/African American	0.15	0.36	30	15	0.09	0.28	17	9	.038	0.12	0.32	47	12
Hispanic/Latin(a/o/x)	0.05	0.21	9	5	0.08	0.26	15	8	.222	0.06	0.24	24	6
White	0.74	0.44	146	74	0.78	0.42	155	78	.432	0.76	0.43	301	76
Other	0.01	0.10	2	1	0.00	0.00	0	0	.154	0.005	0.07	2	1
Political ideology (right wing)[d]	3.56	1.75	198		3.65	1.81	203		.605	3.60	1.78	401	
Importance of religion[e]	2.44	1.30	196		2.48	1.28	203		.793	2.46	1.29	399	
Marital status (married)[f]	0.53	0.50	105	53	0.56	0.50	114	56	.531	0.55	0.50	219	55

Note. *p* values indicate results of *t* tests comparing the parameter estimates between the two experimental conditions.
[a]Measured in 10 categories/steps of US$10,000, ranging from 1 (less than US$15,000) to 10 (more than US$95,000). [b]No college degree = 0, college degree or higher = 1. [c]Multiple answers possible. [d]Two items measuring political leaning on social and economic issues. Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly left*) to 7 (*strongly right;* $\alpha = .88$). [e]Scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 4 (*very important*). [f]Not married = 0, married = 1.

lacking capabilities that are arguably deemed necessary for a "decent" life, such as: "These people cannot afford most of the things they like, and they often cannot take part in their community's cultural life, for example, going to concerts, movies or theaters." After reading the vignettes, participants were asked to write a few sentences on how they are similar to the people described (either (1) wealthy or (2) poor). Doing so, we increased the salience of participants' own experiences of poverty (versus wealth) through an assimilation effect (Bratanova et al., 2016).

Support for Authoritarianism. To capture support for authoritarianism, we used the Democracy–Autocracy Preference (DAP) scale (in its recommended 3-item version; see Ariely & Davidov, 2011; Magalhães, 2014), a scale widely used to measure support for authoritarianism (e.g., Ariely & Davidov, 2011; Magalhães, 2014; Oshri et al., 2016). We chose the DAP for several reasons: The DAP is ideologically neutral and therefore does not (merely) measure right-wing attitudes, like other measurements of authoritarianism (Nilsson & Jost, 2020). Moreover, the DAP measures support for authoritarianism as a political regime, making it an apt instrument for capturing an authoritarian reaction elicited by threat (e.g., Carnevale et al., 2020; Miller & Davis, 2021; Safra et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018; see also Sprong et al., 2019), as opposed to previous instruments that measure authoritarianism as a relatively stable personality predisposition (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950/2019; Altemeyer, 1996).

In the DAP, participants are presented the following descriptions of political systems. They are asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 4 whether these are ". . . . a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country." The items: "Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliaments and elections," "Having the army rule," and "Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country." All items, therefore, point to different forms of authoritarian regimes and highlight their un-democratic nature (e.g., by emphasizing that experts are ruling *instead of* an elected government). While the first two items ". . . strong leader . . ." and ". . . army rule" arguably describe a directly recognizable form of authoritarianism, the third item ". . . having experts . . ." reflects a form of authoritarianism that is subtler, yet no less important, as expert rule is a core element of authoritarian forms of government (March, 2003): Most autocrats legitimize their demand for obedience via the alleged importance of the goals they pursue. The best way of achieving these goals is decided by unelected "experts" whose opinions are not to be questioned given the alleged urgency of the nation's common goal (March, 2003).

The Cronbach alpha ($\alpha = .47$) for the three items of the DAP was lower than the normatively used threshold of .70 in psychology (e.g., Bernardi, 1994). However, this is likely due to Cronbach's alpha being inversely related to scale length and the breadth of items being assessed (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). In other words, the present value of alpha is likely to severely underestimate the instrument's reliability, due to the short length of the scale (three items) and the various facets of authoritarianism being measured (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Indeed, similar Cronbach's alphas were found in previous studies that utilized the DAP to measure authoritarianism (e.g., Magalhães, 2014; Oshri et al., 2016). Please note that a low Cronbach's alpha does not invalidate the results presented throughout the article. Rather, it signals a more conservative tests of our hypothesis because a greater number of similar, aggregated items would decrease error variance and therefore result in narrower confidence intervals (Peters, 2014).

State Shame. We applied the shame measure of the State Shame and Guilt Scale (5 items, Tangney & Dearing, 2002). A sample item: "I feel worthless, powerless." Participants were asked to indicate how they felt in that very moment, on a scale ranging from 1 (*not feeling this way at all*) to 5 (*feeling this way very strongly*) ($\alpha = .92$).

State Anxiety. We measured the current level of anxiety with a visual analog scale: a valid, efficient, and widely used instrument for measuring this factor (e.g., Hartman et al., 2021; Hornblow & Kidson, 1976). We presented participants with a bipolar line designed to measure current anxiety levels on a continuum. Participants marked a spot on the line indicating their current subjective anxiety level on a scale anchored from 1 (*not anxious at all*) to 11 (*highly anxious*).

State Stress. Building on previous research (e.g., Hellhammer & Schubert, 2012; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016), we also measured subjective state stress with a visual analog scale. Participants thus indicated their current subjective stress levels on a continuous scale anchored from 1 (*not stressed at all*) to 11 (*highly stressed*).

Analyses of variance inflation factors, Akaike's information criterion, and chi-square fits all provided evidence against multicollinearity (see Online Appendix D).

Results

For all handling of the data, we used the software package Stata 15 (StataCorp., 2017). Prior to analysis, we standardized all continuous variables by rescaling them to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. We did not detect any multivariate outliers when using the BACON (Blocked Adaptive Computationally Efficient Outlier Nominators) method (Billor et al., 2000; software by Weber, 2010).

A manipulation check indicated that the study's poverty manipulation significantly heightens salience of poverty (see Online Appendix E). Regarding our hypothesis, the results of a *t* test showed that participants in the poverty condition felt significantly more ashamed, $M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.10$, than those in the wealth condition, $M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.96$, $t(399) = -2.64$, $p = .009$. Moreover, the results from structural equation modeling (SEM) indicated a significant, positive relationship between poverty and shame ($b = 0.27$, $p = .008$), as well as between shame and support for authoritarianism ($b = 0.19$, $p < .001$). To test our hypothesis via mediation analysis, we followed the bootstrapping procedures recommended by Hayes (2013). We interpreted the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrap samples. As predicted, poverty is positively related to an increased support for authoritarianism through heightened feelings of shame ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.10]). The calculation of partially standardized effects (Hayes, 2013) indicated an effect size of 0.09, which may be interpreted as a medium-size effect (Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

To rule out possible alternative mediators, we ran a parallel mediation analysis, again using 10,000 bootstrap samples, in which we tested the indirect effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism via shame, as well as via two other possible mediators (stress and anxiety). As predicted, only the indirect effect via shame was significant ($b = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.12]); neither anxiety ($b = 0.002$, 95% CI = [–0.09, 0.10]) nor stress ($b = -0.03$, 95% CI = [–0.16, 0.02]) significantly mediated the effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism (Figure 1). In sum, the results supported our mediation hypothesis.

Study 2: Experiment

The results of Study 1 support our hypothesis, however, they only provided causal evidence for the model's first path—the effect of poverty on shame. To establish causality for the second path (the effect of shame on support for authoritarianism), and thereby substantiate the full hypothesized model, we followed recommendations (Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008) and ran a second experiment (Study 2) in which we manipulated feelings of shame. We can claim evidence for a causal mediation effect when the independent variable (*X*) has an effect on the measured mediator (M) in Study 1 and the manipulated mediator (M*) in Study 2 has an effect on the dependent variable *Y* in Study 2. Further evidence for the causal mediation effect is provided when (a) in Study 2, a manipulation check shows an effect of the manipulated mediator M* on M (as measured with the same scale as in Study 1) and (b) shame levels measured in both studies are similar (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016; Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). Together, these findings then indicate that the mediating mechanism measured in Study 1 is similar (in type and strength) to the one manipulated in Study 2 (Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008).

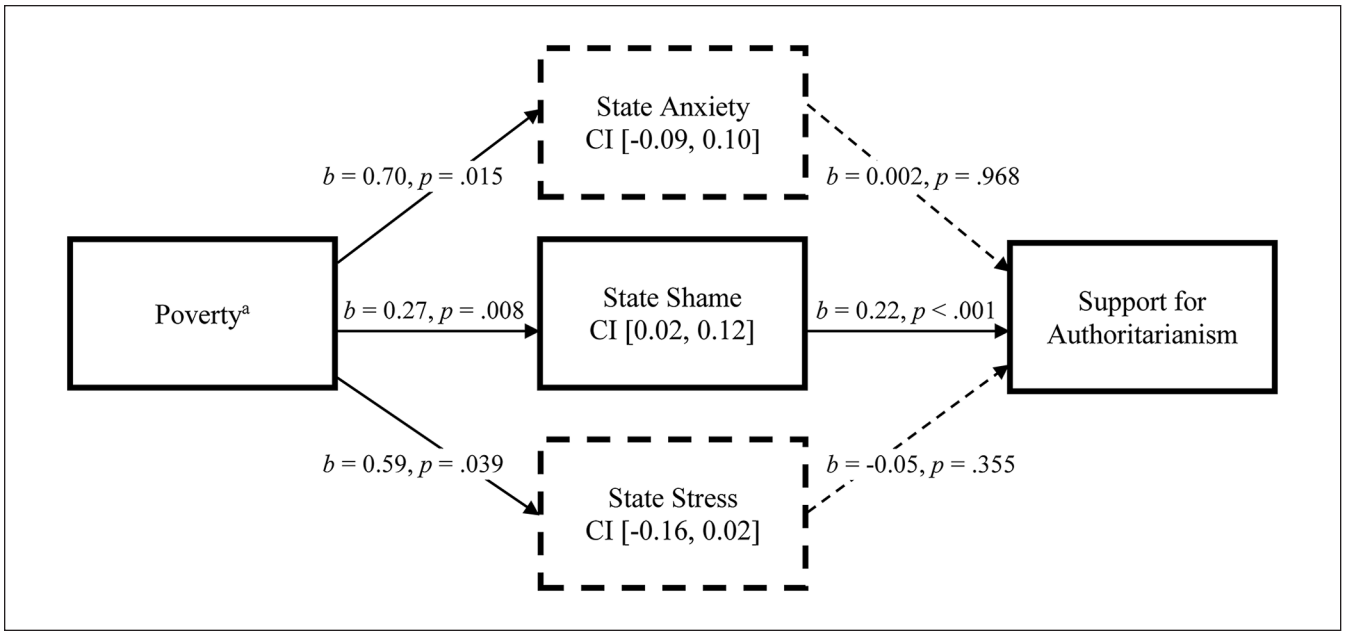


Figure 1. Study 1: Path Model Depicting the Indirect Effect of Poverty on Support for Authoritarianism Mediated by Shame and Alternative Mediators.

Note. Boxes display the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects of poverty on support for authoritarianism using bootstrapping with 10,000 replications. CI = confidence interval.

[a]Wealth condition = 1; poverty condition = 2.

Method

Participants. We recruited 259 participants via MTurk who participated in the study in exchange for US$0.60. Building on findings by Schönbrodt and Perugini (2013), we determined that the sample needed at least 212 participants to achieve a stable estimate with a power of .80. Again, we oversampled to account for potential participant dropout and required all participants to be native English speakers and the U.S. residents. Participants were slightly younger (median age: 35 years) and more likely to be female (56.4%) than the U.S. population (median age: 39 years; 50.5% women; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Moreover, participants in the present study were more likely to have a college degree (at age 25 or older: 49.6%) than the average U.S. citizen (37.9%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). See Table 2 for a complete overview of the study variables and demographics across conditions.

Procedure. After agreeing to a study consent form and following a short welcome note, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (shame condition versus control condition). The procedure utilized a one-factor (shame versus no shame) between-subjects design. After the experimental manipulation, participants completed the scale of the dependent variable (support for authoritarianism) and the manipulation check. Afterwards, respondents provided their demographic details (age, gender, education, marital status, annual household income, ethnic group, and political leaning [left versus right wing]).

Materials

Shame Manipulation. Building on prior research (Ekman et al., 1983; Tracy & Robins, 2006), we manipulated feelings of shame through a relived emotion task. In the shame condition, participants were asked to recall, and describe in writing, an event in which they had felt shame. In the control condition, participants were asked to recall and describe what they had done the previous day. The relived emotion task is widely used in the literature and has been repeatedly shown to evoke emotion-specific feelings and physiological reactions (Ekman et al., 1983; Tracy & Robins, 2006).

Support for Authoritarianism. Again, we measured support for authoritarianism with the DAP scale (three items, $\alpha = .44$).

State Shame. To provide a manipulation check, we measured shame with the same scale used in Study 1, the State Shame Scale (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; five items, $\alpha = .92$).

Manipulation Check

The results from a *t* test showed that participants in the shame condition felt significantly more shame, $M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.08$, than participants in the control condition, $M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.96$, $t(257) = -2.89$, $p = .004$, indicating a successful manipulation. Importantly, results from a one-sample *t* test indicated that the levels of shame elicited in the shame condition ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.08$) did not differ significantly

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Variables Across Conditions Study 2.

	Control condition				Shame condition					Total			
Baseline characteristic	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%	*p*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	%
Support for authoritarianism	1.89	0.53	132		2.09	0.65	127		.007	1.99	0.60	259	
Household income (annual)[a]	5.47	3.01	132		5.72	2.87	126		.491	5.59	2.94	258	
Age in years	37.56	13.61	132		38.45	11.99	127		.578	38.00	12.83	259	
College degree[b]	0.50	0.50	66	50	0.43	0.50	54	43	.229	0.46	0.50	120	46
Gender													
Female	0.58	0.50	76	58	0.56	0.50	70	56	.800	0.57	0.50	146	57
Male	0.42	0.49	55	42	0.44	0.50	55	44	.707	0.43	0.50	110	43
Non-binary	0.008	0.09	1	1	0.00	0.00	0	0	.332	0.00	0.06	1	0
Ethnic group[c]													
Native American/American Indian	0.02	0.12	2	2	0.008	0.09	1	1	.595	0.01	0.11	3	1
Asian/Asian American	0.02	0.12	2	2	0.02	0.15	3	2	.609	0.02	0.14	5	2
Black/African American	0.09	0.29	12	9	0.11	0.32	14	11	.577	0.10	0.30	26	10
Hispanic/Latin(a/o/x)	0.05	0.21	6	5	0.06	0.23	7	6	.701	0.05	0.22	13	5
White	0.84	0.37	111	84	0.80	0.40	100	80	.395	0.82	0.38	211	82
Other	0.008	0.09	1	1	0.00	0.00	0	0	.331	0.00	0.06	1	0
Political ideology (right wing)[d]	3.80	1.78	132		3.95	1.62	127		.480	3.88	1.70	259	
Marital status (married)[e]	0.59	0.49	78	59	0.54	0.50	68	54	.370	0.56	0.50	146	56

Note. p values indicate results of *t* tests comparing the parameter estimates between the two experimental conditions.
[a]Measured in 10 categories/steps of US$10,000, ranging from 1 (less than US$15,000) to 10 (more than US$95,000). [b]No college degree = 0, college degree or higher = 1. [c]Multiple answers possible. [d]Two items measuring political leaning on social and economic issues. Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly left*) to 7 (*strongly right;* $\alpha = .80$). [e] Not married = 0, married = 1.

from the shame levels in the poverty condition in Study 1, $M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.10$, $t(202) = 0.825$, $p = .410$. Thus, the shame that participants felt due to the poverty manipulation in Study 1 was comparable (regarding strength) with the feelings of shame that led participants to indicate heightened support for authoritarianism in the present Study 2. According to Stone-Romero and Rosopa (2008), this evidence further corroborates our mediation hypothesis.

Results

We detected no multivariate outliers when using the BACON method (Billor et al., 2000; software by Weber, 2010). The results from a *t* test showed that, as predicted, participants in the shame condition ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.65$) were significantly more likely to indicate support for authoritarianism, compared with the control condition, $M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.53$, $t(257) = -2.72$, $p = .007$; Cohen's $d = 0.34$. Moreover, the findings of the manipulation check (described above) provide additional evidence for the hypothesized indirect effect (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016; Spencer et al., 2005). In summary, Studies 1 and 2 jointly provide causal evidence for our hypothesized indirect effect.

Study 3: Survey Data

The results of Studies 1 and 2 support our hypothesis with a high degree of internal validity. In Study 3, our goal was to replicate the indirect effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism via shame within a large sample from a different (i.e., Dutch) population, thus adding external validity to our claims while ruling out alternative explanations (i.e., stress and anxiety).

Method

We analyzed data from the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel administered by CentERdata (2020, Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The LISS panel is based on a true probability sample of Dutch households, drawn from the country's population register Centraal Bureau Voor de Statistiek (CBS). This procedure ensures a representative, random sample of the Dutch population because every registered household technically has the same chance of being drawn for the study. At its core, the panel consists of a yearly longitudinal survey study covering various topics like health, religion, or politics. In addition, the panel can be utilized to collect data for studies from various disciplines.

The questionnaires are conducted online; households without an internet connection or computer are provided with the necessary resources to complete the survey. All questions are surveyed in Dutch; however, study materials are provided online in English (see www.lissdata.nl for more information). Data for our variables of interest were available for 2020 (CentERdata, 2020). Our total sample consisted of 1,196 participants with a mean age of 59.58 years, $SD = 15.58$. Of the participants, 48% were women, 53%

Table 3. Study 3: Comparison Between Study Demographics and Benchmarks (Centraal Bureau Voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2020) (N = 1,196).

Demographics	Study 3	Benchmarks (CBS, 2020)
Age		
20-40	13.6%	31.1%
40-65	40.1%	43.0%
65-80	40.0%	18.9%
80 and over	6.4%	6.0%
Dutch background	84.6%	75.8%
Gender		
Male	51.8%	49.7%
Female	48.1%	50.3%
Education (college degree or higher)	44.5%	41.0%

were married, and 85% reported having a Dutch background. Despite the general high representativeness of LISS data, the sample available for our analysis was older than the average Dutch population. This was due to a high dropout rate among younger participants in the original LISS study (Reeskens et al., 2021). To account for this issue, we provide some robustness checks below. See Table 3 for a comparison of the present sample with benchmarks from the Dutch population retrieved from the CBS (2020).

Measures

Support for Authoritarianism. Two items of the DAP scale used in Studies 1 and 2 were included in the LISS panel data of 2020: "Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliaments and elections" and "Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country" ($\alpha = .58$).

Poverty. To capture poverty in line with our operationalization in Study 1, we used a scale of seven items (Kalmijn et al., 2000) in which participants indicated whether, at present, they were confronted with issues that signal a shortage of basic necessities, or, in other words, a lack of capabilities to lead a decent life (Sen, 2000); 1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*. Examples: "having trouble making ends meet" or being "unable to quickly replace things that break" ($\alpha = .71$).

State Shame. Participants were asked to "indicate to what extent [they] feel, right now, that is, at the present moment . . . ashamed," on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). This and similar measurements are widely used in the literature to assess feelings of shame (e.g., Freed & D'Andrea, 2015; Gladstone et al., 2021).

State Stress. To capture feelings of stress, we used an item that asked participants to "indicate to what extent [they] feel, right now, that is, at the present moment . . . distressed" on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

State Anxiety. Three items from the widely used Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Marteau & Bekker, 1992) were included in the present data of the LISS panel and, therefore, formed our anxiety scale. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced certain feelings "right now, that is, at the present moment . . ." on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The items were "upset," "nervous," and "jittery" ($\alpha = .88$).

Covariates. We included several variables likely to be correlated with poverty and/or authoritarianism that could bias our findings. We controlled for education (measured as the highest level of education) because of its negative relationship with poverty (e.g., Carvacho et al., 2013). Furthermore, we controlled for gender because studies indicate that women are more likely to be poor (e.g., Elmelech & Lu, 2004) and, especially in societies with high gender inequality, more authoritarian (Brandt & Henry, 2012). We also included age as a covariate because of its positive relationship with both poverty (Kwan & Walsh, 2018) and authoritarianism (Ruffman et al., 2016). Finally, we controlled for political views (*left* versus *right*) as a potential predictor of support for authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996). We conducted analyses with and without these covariates and found no major influence on the magnitude or pattern of effects. Thus, with or without the inclusion of covariates, the effects of poverty on support for authoritarianism remained largely the same regarding their significance level, effect size, and direction. In the remainder of this article, we will present all results including covariates.[2]

Results

Before the analysis, we followed the same procedures as described in Study 1. See Table 4 for the correlations and descriptive statistics of unstandardized study variables. We detected no multivariate outliers when using the BACON method (Billor et al., 2000; software by Weber, 2010).

To test our hypothesis, we interpreted the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals from 10,000 bootstrapping samples, which again indicated a significant indirect relationship between poverty and support for authoritarianism via shame ($b = 0.007$, 95% CI = [0.001, 0.02]). Calculation of the completely standardized indirect effect (Hayes, 2013) indicated an effect size of 0.01—a small effect according to Preacher and Kelley (2011).

We also conducted a parallel mediation analysis to rule out possible alternative explanations. More specifically, we performed parallel tests for the three alternative mediators (shame, anxiety, and stress) with 10,000 bootstrapping samples (see Figure 2). As in Study 1, only the indirect effect via

Table 4. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Unstandardized Variables in Study 3 (N = 1,196).

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Support for authoritarianism[a]	2.31	0.71	1.000										
2. Poverty[b]	−0.10	0.13	.05	1.000									
3. State shame	1.80	1.15	.11***	.08**	1.000								
4. State anxiety	2.06	1.20	.10***	.13***	.57***	1.000							
5. State stress	3.25	1.80	.08**	.08**	.29***	.59***	1.000						
6. Age in years	59.58	15.58	−.04	−.11***	−.07*	−.06*	.05	1.000					
7. College degree[c]	0.44	0.50	−.24***	−.05	−.03	−.06*	−.09**	−.20***	1.000				
8. Gender[d]	1.48	0.50	.03	.04	−.07*	.06*	.13***	−.04	−.06	1.000			
9. Political ideology (right wing)[e]	5.47	2.27	.15***	−.08**	.04	.007	.03	−.03	−.11***	−.08**	1.000		
10. Ethnic group[f]	0.84	0.37	.01	−.12***	−.07*	−.03	.03	.12***	−.07*	.07*	.10***	1.000	
11. Religious affiliation[g]	0.27	0.45	.01	−.02	.02	−.003	.006	.21***	−.03	.004	.12***	−.04	1.000

[a]Scale ranging from 1 to 4. [b]Scale ranging from –.14 to .85 (average score divided by number of items). [c]No college degree = 0, college degree or higher = 1. [d]Female = 1, male = 2. [e]Scale ranging from 1 (*left*) to 10 (*right*). [f]Dutch background: no = 0, yes = 1. [g]Belongs to a religious group: no = 0, yes = 1. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

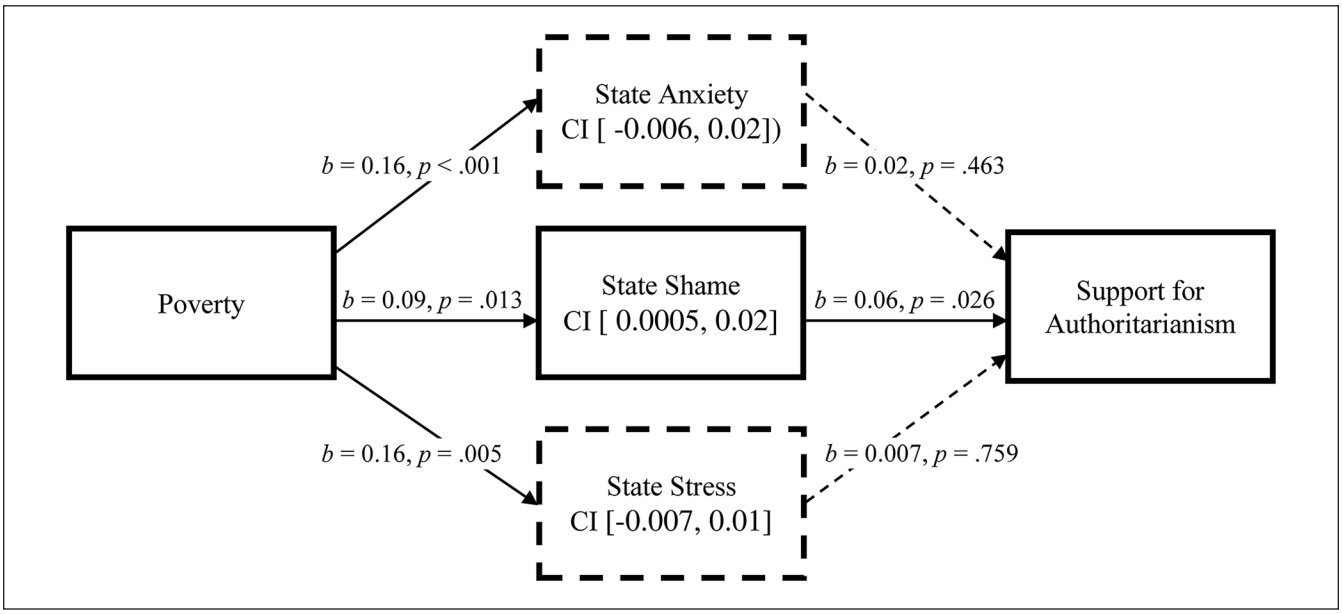


Figure 2. Study 3: Path Model Depicting the Indirect Effect of Poverty on Support for Authoritarianism Mediated by Shame and Alternative Mediators.

Note. Boxes display the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects of poverty on support for authoritarianism using bootstrapping with 10,000 replications. Poverty scale ranging from –.14 to .85 (average score divided by number of items). CI = confidence interval.

shame was significant ($b = 0.006$, 95% CI = [0.0005, 0.02]); neither stress ($b = 0.001$, 95% CI = [–0.007, 0.01]) nor anxiety ($b = 0.004$, 95% CI = [–0.006, 0.02]) significantly mediated the effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism. Due to the heightened average age, caused by a higher drop-out rate among younger participants in the original LISS study (Reeskens et al., 2021), we decided to run an additional robustness check using weights for age (note, however, that we already controlled for age; see Online Appendix G for results). Using weights did not substantially change the results or conclusions drawn. In summary, the results supported our mediation hypothesis.

General Discussion

The present article helps to clarify the effect of poverty on authoritarianism. In two experiments with U.S.-American samples, we found strong causal support for an indirect effect of poverty on support for authoritarianism, mediated by shame. These findings are robust to the inclusion of other possible psychological mechanisms proposed in the literature, that is, stress and anxiety. We replicated these findings in a different cultural setting, the Netherlands, using large-scale survey data based on a representative sample randomly drawn from the country's population register (Study 3).

By showing that the relationship between poverty and authoritarianism can be explained via shame, not stress or anxiety, as previous notions assumed, our findings not only settle a scholarly debate, but also potentially expand the way we look at authoritarianism and its psychological functioning. Authoritarian reactions may be psychologically protective because they serve an ego-enhancing function for several reasons, as we argue: First, authoritarianism provides a sense of oneness and sameness, therefore promising poor people social re-inclusion. Second, submission to authority and group norms diffuses personal responsibility, which, in the light of neoliberal ideology, exacerbates the shame of poverty. Third, a "strong leader" provides a sense of strength and control, thereby potentially alleviating feelings of worth- and powerlessness. However, future studies are needed to further explore the specific psychological mechanism behind the effect of shame on authoritarianism. Relatedly, recent developments in the study of shame and its consequences have sparked a debate about whether shame is adaptive or maladaptive and, consequentially, whether sub-forms of shame, for example, moral shame and image shame (Allpress et al., 2014; Gausel et al., 2016) should be differentiated. Building on these, it may be beneficial for future studies to look more closely at the specific feelings related to the shame of poverty. For example, one may argue for both moral shame *and* image shame as a consequence of poverty (Allpress et al., 2014). Given that aforementioned studies indicate that each subtype of shame yields different consequences, this may provide an angle to look at under which circumstances the shame of poverty leads to support for authoritarianism.

Relatedly, it may be interesting to look into what kind of leader characteristics or rhetoric may draw the most support among poor people. Recent notions (Obradović et al., 2020; Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020) have highlighted the relationship between perceived victimhood and support for populist leaders, suggesting that the latter increase support by painting their followers as victims. Regarding the present findings, it seems likely that individuals with a negative self-perception may be especially drawn to leaders who absolve them of their responsibility for their fate by framing them as victims. Accordingly, on a practical note, it seems important for scholars and practitioners to find alternative ways to reduce the negative psychological consequences of poverty by breaking the poverty shame spiral altogether, for example, by combating societies' tendency to implicitly make poor people responsible for their situation, which is also reflected in welfare and educational institutions (Sandel, 2020). Moreover, the present findings reflect the need to find "healthier," democratic answers to these feelings of shame and humiliation. The rise of authoritarian parties in most Western societies, while multifaceted, seems to be partly a result of their democratic counterparts being unable to address those feelings of shame and humiliation, leaving individuals susceptible to alternative appeals (Hochschild, 2018; Sandel, 2020). The present findings call upon democratic leaders and institutions to implement policies and role-model behaviors that communicate and cultivate feelings of strength and social cohesion without the anti-democratic stance of authoritarian leaders and groups. An exciting development in this regard is the re-discovery and forming of unions, which often allow people of a similar station to feel embedded in and represented a community, a phenomenon that can currently be observed in the United States (Sainato, 2022). For future scholars, it may be interesting to look at how (and which) social norms can increase individuals' sense of belonging and unity (and therefore mitigate the negative effects of the shame of poverty; for example, Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

In this regard, it is important to note that, while we define and operationalize poverty at the individual level, the way individuals react to their poverty is strongly influenced by intergroup processes, like the perceived permeability of social structures or the (lack of) positive distinctiveness their group membership offers (Yaffe et al., 2018). Moreover, what resources are deemed necessary for a "decent life" (Sen, 2000) is largely determined by society. Accordingly, future scholars may want to study the present mechanism while operationalizing poverty (and shame) as a group phenomenon.

Of course, the present studies possess some limitations. Although we found evidence for the hypothesized effect in samples from two different populations (the United States and the Netherlands), these studies were nonetheless conducted in Western, high-income countries. Other cultural and religious environments may yield different outcomes regarding the hypothesized effects—for example, because they perceive poverty differently. Evidence from a study among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, for example, indicates that poverty can also be source of pride (Yaffe et al., 2018). Moreover, the described neoliberal ideology, which we argue plays an essential role in linking shame to poverty, may be less salient in many, and especially non-Western, countries. In short, future studies should examine the current relationships in different religious and cultural environments.

Finally, there are limitations related to the small effect size in Study 3 and some of the instruments we used. For example, in several cases, variables, such as anxiety and stress, were measured with only one item. Also, the present scale measuring support for authoritarianism only consisted of two to three items, resulting in low Cronbach's alpha values. Therefore, future studies could add robustness to our findings by incorporating more elaborate instruments.

The present findings remind us that poverty is more than a lack of resources; rather, it is linked to extremely painful perceptions of worthlessness and social rejection, which appear to drive people toward authoritarian systems that promise group cohesion, a diffusion of responsibility, power, and strength. Thus, more than anything else, the findings call for the re-dignification and re-inclusion of disadvantaged people in democratic societies. Fighting the shame of

poverty is not only a moral obligation, but a means of safeguarding democracy.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

Notes

1. Study materials, a codebook, and data for Studies 1, 2, and the manipulation check have been made available under the following link: http://osf.io/2ktu3. The data and codebooks used in Study 3 are publicly available on the data archive website of the LISS panel: https://www.dataarchive.lissdata.nl/. The designs for Studies 1 and 2, along with the analysis plans, were not preregistered. All procedures in the present studies complied with the current APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in the reported studies.
2. The results excluding covariates are available in the Online Appendix F.

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