

An Introduction to the Article Collection “Measuring Attitudes and Tendencies of Degradation”

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Fired by a global dynamic of multiple and interrelated crises, right-wing populist movements and parties have been on the rise worldwide, advocating increasingly more anti-democratic and even extremist positions, and deepening the social divide by offering scapegoats and easy answers to complex problems. This is accompanied by wide array of attitudes, beliefs, resentments, and ideologies that call into question the core of democracy and human rights. We use the umbrella term “attitudes of degradation” to refer to all concepts and phenomena related to this development. While some attitudes of degradation have a long history (e.g., authoritarianism, right-wing extremism, xenophobia, antisemitism), and much empirical research has been dedicated to measuring and explaining trends over time, some concepts are less well-established, seem to have been forgotten and reemerged (e.g., anti-intellectualism, antifeminism), and/or developed new dynamics due to changing societies (e.g., transphobia, skepticism towards media/science).

This article collection is dedicated to issues of adequately measuring attitudes of degradation in their everchanging manifestations, as well as capturing the values and personality attributes that are connected to it.

Covering an array of topics, our contributions include novel scale developments, validations, and translations, as well as analyses of measurement invariance across time and social strata. This way, the article collection provides methodologically sound instruments to assess attitudes of degradation and their development over time, thus adding



to a solid foundation for quantitative social science research. While the measurement of right-wing extremism and authoritarianism as central concepts in research on degradation and resentment is a common thread in the topics of the contributions, other fields like trust in science, attitudes towards hate crimes, or White privilege are also explored. We provide more detailed information about each contribution in the following section and conclude with thoughts on limitations and future directions of this volume.

Contributions in This Volume

To this day, authoritarianism is theoretically and empirically one of the most central predictors of various tendencies of degradation. Previous research suggests that the concept of *right-wing authoritarianism* (RWA; [Altemeyer, 1981](#)), that is widely accepted as a standard for measuring authoritarian attitudes, may be no longer sufficient to capture attraction to contemporary right-wing movements. [Sorrentino, Prott, Hoffmann, Heidemeyer and Banse \(2025\)](#) present the *Short Modern Comprehensive F Scale* (MCF-9), a newly developed nine-item scale that integrates facets of the classic California F Scale ([Adorno et al., 1950](#)). Validated in both Germany and the United States, the scale demonstrates strong internal consistency and significant associations with right-wing-extremist and antidemocratic attitudes. Importantly, it explains additional variance beyond existing RWA measures, highlighting its value as a contemporary assessment tool.

Based on traditional research on authoritarianism and social character research, [Jäger, Knasmüller, Brunner, Dechant and Heller \(2025\)](#) develop and test a scale to measure what they call the *affirmative social character* by employing both exploratory and simultaneous¹ confirmatory factor analysis (SCFA) on a population sample of the German adult population. The scale encompasses five subdimensions: *Affirmation, optimization, flexibility/mobility, solutionism* and *libertarianism*, and it contains 17 items overall. While the authors demonstrate the scale's high reliability and sufficient external validity with RWA and sociodemographic variables, they also point to its limitations, arguing that the scale still needs further refinement and revalidation.

[Küpfer, Reinecke, Mokros and Zick \(2025\)](#) revalidate an existing scale on right-wing extremism, that has been used in various German surveys over the past 20 years. Looking at the time frame from 2014 to 2023, they provide evidence for measurement invariance of a second-order factor model with the following six subdimensions: (1) *support for a right-wing dictatorship*, (2) *national chauvinism*, (3) *trivialization of National*

1) The term Simultaneous Confirmatory Factor Analysis (SCFA) originally goes back to [Jöreskog \(1971\)](#) and is continued to be used in more recent literature (e.g., [De Roover et al., 2017](#)). Although this origin is often overlooked today, the term remains conceptually accurate: it denotes the simultaneous estimation of several factors—or entire measurement models—within a common covariance structure framework. Hence, whenever more than one factor is simultaneously tested within a CFA, it would be more precise to refer to it as an SCFA—or, in the case of measurement invariance testing, as an MG-SCFA (Multiple-Group Simultaneous Confirmatory Factor Analysis).

Socialism, (4) *xenophobia*, (5) *anti-Semitism*, and (6) *social Darwinism*. Moreover, the scale shows measurement invariance across age, sex, education, and region and shows the expected correlations with these factors as well as right/left self-assessment and voting intentions, thus providing evidence for its external validity.

Another related construct that has been used in survey research for quite some time, is that of *group-focused enmity* (GFE). Meuleman, Meeusen, Abts and Priem (2025) focus on constellations of this phenomenon as a second-order factor with several different first-order factors as its dimensions. Analyses of measurement invariance between a Belgian majority sample and a minority sample of Belgians with Turkish and Moroccan descent reveal interesting patterns: While a second-order GFE-factor can be distinguished in both groups, the constellations seem to differ in the two samples, suggesting that interrelations of the subdimensions and strengths of association with the second-order factor may differ in various social strata.

Monstadt (2025) develops a new measurement instrument for democratic values for elementary school children. The instrument encompasses 5 dimensions: *equality*, *rule adherence*, *renunciation of violence*, *participation* and *freedom*. It is tested via SCFA using a sample of elementary school children. The factor loadings of the first three dimensions are sufficient, but the last two dimensions need further refinement.

Understanding societal attitudes toward hate crimes requires reliable measurement tools that transcend specific cultural or contextual biases. Bender, Wagner and Asbrock (2025) introduce the *Hate Crime Beliefs Scale – Universal* (HCBS-U), a newly developed instrument in German and English that removes references to specific target groups to ensure broader applicability. Validated across three pre-registered studies in Germany and the U.S., the HCBS-U demonstrates a stable three-factor structure, measurement invariance over time, and cross-cultural validity. These findings highlight the scale's potential for comparative research on hate crime-related beliefs. This study aligns with the broader theme of this article collection, emphasizing the importance of refining measurement tools in the study of prejudice and tendencies of degradation.

While the issue of a White privilege has been a research topic in the U.S. for decades, race and racial identity specifically the psychological mechanisms to manage a privileged group identity have barely been studied in the German context. Schröder and Asbrock (2025) lay an important foundation by providing a translation and validation of the 4D-Scale by Shuman et al. (2025). Across three studies, they provide evidence for the measure's construct validity by analyzing its five-factor-structure (including the management strategies *defend*, *deny*, *distance from inequality*, *distance from identity* and *dismantle*) and its correlational patterns, its measurement invariance across U.S. and German samples as well as its predictive validity and test-retest reliability within two weeks. Excluding only one item compared to the English version, the scale can be recommended for the use in the German context.

Trust in science is essential for informed decision-making and societal progress, particularly in times of misinformation. However, its development and determinants remain insufficiently explored. The contribution of [Steger and Schütz \(2025\)](#) in this article collection introduces a psychometrically sound and efficient short scale designed to measure trust in science across. They validate it in two empirical studies across different age groups within a longitudinal setting. Their dyadic model demonstrates a strong intergenerational transmission pattern, while their findings also suggest that trust in science is negatively associated with conspiracy mentality and law-and-order beliefs—thus shedding light on relationships with contemporary tendencies of degradation.

[Table 1](#) provides an overview of the contributions in this article collection, their respective authors and the general topics. Moreover, it includes information on sample size, sampling design, and target group. While most contributions are based on the adult population of Germany, there are some noteworthy exceptions: [Steger and Schütz \(2025\)](#) validate a short-scale on trust in science using transgenerational data of adults and their kids, thus focusing on intrafamilial relations and processes of transgenerational transmission. [Meuleman et al. \(2025\)](#) analyze the cross-cultural validity and comparability of the concept of group focused-enmity in the Belgian majority compared to migrant minority groups. [Bender et al. \(2025\)](#), [Sorrentino et al. \(2025\)](#) as well as [Schröder and Asbrock \(2025\)](#) compare their results in Germany to U.S. samples. And [Monstadt \(2025\)](#) takes a closer look at democratic values in a sample of school children. Almost all contributions make use of non-probability, online access panels, with two exceptions: [Meuleman et al. \(2025\)](#) draw from a probability sample of Belgium (majority samples) and Antwerp (minority samples) adults eligible to vote using a mixture of personal interviews and self-completion online modes. [Küpper et al. \(2025\)](#) use telephone interviews on a probability-based sample, where respondents were selected based on a dual-frame approach (50% landline, 50% mobile phone).

Additionally, [Table 1](#) includes information on the methods that were being used to analyze the data and central results. Most studies include an analysis of the factor structure using SCFA as well as an analysis of measurement invariance using multi-group simultaneous confirmatory factor analysis (MG-SCFA). Construct validity is further tested using correlational analyses ([Jäger et al., 2025](#), and [Schröder & Asbrock, 2025](#)), hierarchical regression ([Sorrentino et al., 2025](#)) and structural equation models (SEM; [Küpper et al., 2025](#), and [Meuleman et al., 2025](#)). Predictive validity and test-retest reliability is investigated in the contributions of [Schröder and Asbrock \(2025\)](#) as well as [Bender et al. \(2025\)](#).

Table 1
Contributions of This Volume and Their Characteristics

Authors	Topic	Added value / Points of interest	Sample size	Sampling design	Target group	Methods
Sorrentino et al.	Modern Comprehensive F Scale	Reintroduction of omitted facets of the F-Scale; explaining additional Variance beyond established RWA scales	469 (Germany); 314 (U.S.)	non-probability; online access panel	Adults (Germany; U.S.)	(MG-)SCFA/ hierarchical regression analysis
Jäger et al.	Affirmative social character	Novel Aff-Scale to measure modernized forms of authoritarianism in the 21st century; bridging classic and modern authoritarianism research	Total sample 1,196 EFA Sample 608 SCFA Sample 588	non-probability; online access panel	German Population	EFA and SCFA
Küpper et al.	Right-wing extremism across time	Revalidation of a scale on right-wing extremism; construct as a 2 nd -order factor is invariant across time	About 2,000 per wave (5 waves from 2014-2023)	Probability; telephone interview	German adult population	(MG-)SCFA (across the years 2014-2024) / MG-SEM
Meuleman et al.	Group-focused enmity (GFE) in minority groups	First comparative analysis of GFE structures across majority and minority populations; GFE differs between groups, challenging assumptions of universal prejudice structures	1,129 (majority sample) / 374 (minority sample)	Probability and non-probability; mixed-mode	Belgian majority as well as migrant minorities in Belgium	(MG-)SCFA / MG-SEM
Bender et al.	Hate Crime Beliefs Scale	Provision of a definition of hate crime beliefs as well as a scale that is validated across time and two countries	Study 1: 581 Study 2: 3000 (t1), 300 (t2) Study 3: 593	non-probability; online access panel	adults (Study 1 & 2: Germany, Study 3: U.S.)	(MG-)SCFA (across time (Study 2) and countries (Study3))
Monstadt	Democratic values of school children	Novel survey instrument for democratic values in children; methodological foundation to study political socialization at an early age	429	Non-probability from 24 school classes	Third and fourth grade elementary school children in Germany	SCFA

Authors	Topic	Added value / Points of interest	Sample size	Sampling design	Target group	Methods
Steger & Schütz	Trust in Science	Validation of the Trust in Science Short Scale / Focus intrafamilial relations in the transmission of trust in science	Study 1: 449 Study 2: 298 (parent-adolescent dyads)	non-probability; online access panel	adults (Study 1) / adults and their kids (Study 2) (Germany)	(MG-)SCFA / SEM
Schröder & Asbrock	Privileged group identity (Whiteness) in Germany	Translation, validation and re-validation of the 4D-scale; All studies preregistered	Study 1: 346 Study 2: 342 Study 3: 204	non-probability; online access panel	German adult population	(MG-)SCFA / Construct validity (correlations) / predictive validity / test-retest reliability

Note. (MG-)SCFA = (multi-group) simultaneous confirmatory factor analysis, (MG-)SEM = (multi-group) structural equation model, t1 = first time point, t2 = second time point, RWA = right-wing authoritarianism

Limitations of This Volume and Future Directions

As the previous section shows, attitudes of degradation can manifest in a variety of ways. The contributions to this volume thus cover an array of different phenomena, some of them drawing from well-established concepts, some introducing new concepts that come with less of a research tradition. By trying to place new concepts in the existing nomological network, one of the most central issues of scale development becomes apparent: the issue of construct validity. With authors drawing from different theories, similar constructs may still be at odds in some respects, especially when it comes to their causal relationship. For example, there is much debate whether group-focused enmity and prejudice are a result of an authoritarian predisposition or whether there may be other, more relevant determining factors (e.g., social dominance orientation; [Duckitt & Sibley, 2016](#)). While most concepts in the realm of prejudice and attitudes of degradation are related with each other in one way or another, there is no overarching theory on their causes and their connections, and competing theories are rarely tested against each other when it comes to scale development. This makes it hard for researchers to choose the right instrument for the phenomenon they want to investigate. Seemingly similar constructs may not function the same way, leading to biased or even contradictory results, e.g., when authoritarian submission shows different correlational patterns compared to authoritarian aggression and conventionalism even though they are thought to belong to the same general construct and overall sum scores are often used. Of course, this is not an issue that is limited to the research on political attitudes, but rather a phenomenon that can be observed throughout the social sciences.

We thus plead for a theory-driven, yet comparative, approach when it comes to both developing and selecting measurement instruments. Combining measurement instruments from different lines of theory can give empirical insights on the relationship of underlying concepts, but comparisons should always be well-grounded in theory, with precise, testable hypotheses drawn from the underlying theoretical considerations – even in scale development. In reality, authors are rarely given the time and space to draw out their underlying theory or what exactly it implies with regards to their measurement instruments. The focus of most scale validation articles is usually describing the increasingly complex measurement models. While this is justifiable to keep articles short and readable, it often leads to a neglect of theoretical foundation. This also manifests in our article collection: while most contributions study attitudes, the underlying attitude theory is never explicated. One example for such an explicit theory is the classical attitude model by [Rosenberg and Hovland \(1960\)](#) as discussed in the overview by [Eagly and Chaiken \(1993\)](#). They understand attitudes towards objects to contain an evaluative, a cognitive, and a behavioral component. A lack of theoretical foundation may severely impede the process of scale development and application, especially as the social sciences become increasingly more diversified. An early but still unheard call for a more theory

driven approach instead of hundreds ad hoc exploratory factor analyses was formulated as early as 1984 by the sociologist O.D. Duncan (Duncan 1984, p. 200-219). An elaborated view, as, e.g., in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) that provides a solid theoretical foundation with testable hypotheses derived from it, is gravely needed to ensure the quality of empirical research. This is true not only for the area of attitudes of degradation, but also for attitude research in general to reach better predictions and explanations of behavior.

As insinuated above, the issue of construct validity and theory-driven scale construction is closely linked to a much broader issue, that is causality. Testing causal relationships is not just an issue on the construct level, it is also relevant in the conception of the scale itself. When looking at multi-item scales, a causal relationship between the construct and its respective items in that the construct causally governs the items is usually assumed without second thought. It is this reflective way of modelling that allows us to apply complex methods like (MG-)SCFA, that are based on the assumed covariances of the indicators (e.g. Brown, 2015). However, depending on the underlying theory and the item conception, the relationships between constructs and items might also be reverse, i.e. formative. This would imply that the items are the determinants of the constructs instead of their effects, like in the case of social status (Jöreskog & Goldberger, 1975; Brown, 2015; Riebel & Lichtenberg, 2023). As models become increasingly complex, we have to ask ourselves if the reflectivity assumption still holds, e.g. in higher-order models. Is authoritarian aggression truly interchangeable with authoritarian submission or conventionalism when it comes to measuring authoritarianism in the same way a single item of each dimension could be interchanged with another item of the same dimension? While coming with their own challenges, formative modeling approaches should be considered both in theory and practice, especially when it comes to complex, higher-order models.

Another issue related to the application of (MG-)SCFA to validate the factor structure of a construct (across groups and/or time points) is that of using rather arbitrary cut-off values for the resulting fit-indices. Most authors (including the ones in the current article collection) rely on the values provided by Hu and Bentler (1999), even though these are known to be sensitive to several factors, e.g., sample size, model complexity and even number and distribution of response options (Groskurth et al., 2024; McNeish, 2025; Chen et al., 2008). Some authors have tried to introduce dynamic cut-off values based on (some of) these factors, but these approaches are far from reaching the standard (McNeish & Wolf, 2024; Schmalbach et al., 2019; Groskurth et al., 2025).

Scale construction like most survey research is known to be a variable-centered procedure, focusing on relationships between items and constructs. Integrating results from person-centered approaches like latent class or latent profile analyses is an under-explored field of research (Woo et al., 2024; Muthén, 1989). However, these approaches may shed further light on the co-occurrence of constructs within certain groups of

people. For example, right-wing authoritarianism tends to co-occur with conspiracy mentality and superstition in some social milieus, but not in others (Dilling et al., *in press*), thus suggesting both a strong relationship but also some degree of independence of these constructs. Methods that take into account unobserved heterogeneity as a basis for a test of measurement invariance, like mixture CFA, could be used during scale construction to help shed further light on the nature of certain constructs.

One of the central challenges in the study of prejudice and tendencies of degradation using even a well-constructed and validated scale lies in the distortion caused by social desirability (Heller et al., 2024). Since openly expressing stigmatized attitudes such as antisemitism, racism, or xenophobia is often socially sanctioned, respondents tend to present themselves in a socially conforming way, even in seemingly anonymous survey contexts (Bergmann & Erb, 1986). Even though determining the extent to which answers are biased is almost impossible, it is certain that this tendency frequently leads to an underestimation of actual levels of prejudice, particularly when data are collected through interview-based modes such as telephone or face-to-face surveys (Bosnjak, 2017). While self-administered survey modes and assurances of anonymity can mitigate these effects, they cannot eliminate them entirely. To address this problem, researchers have turned to indirect approaches such as vignette experiments or implicit measures. Vignette analyses allow for the examination of prejudiced attitudes in disguised or context-dependent forms, where discriminatory evaluations may be expressed without directly admitting to socially tabooed beliefs (e.g. Beyer & Liebe, 2015). Implicit measures, in turn, aim to capture automatic associations and unconscious biases that are less controllable by the respondent and thus less prone to social desirability. Both strategies underscore the need for methodological pluralism: without such triangulation, the extent and structure of prejudice in contemporary societies is likely to remain systematically underestimated.

Most contributions in this article collection rely on samples drawn from WEIRD contexts (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic societies). While these studies indeed provide important insights into the mechanisms and concepts under investigation, they remain limited in their capacity to speak to the cross-cultural generalizability. The question of cross-cultural measurement invariance thus remains a critical gap in the present issue. At the same time, this limitation highlights a promising avenue for future research: extending the inquiry to more diverse cultural settings in order to examine whether the observed structures and relations are robust across different socio-cultural environments.

In a similar vein, we think that it is very important that all results, used data-sets, and codes are available open access. Despite growing awareness of the issue, findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR) data is still not the standard. This data would allow meta-analyses of the results of scale validations and a much better integration of existing results. Platforms like OSF, ZIS, SSOAR and open access journals like MISS, that encourage researchers to share their code, data, and results are leading the way. We are

hoping more researchers will make use of these platforms and more journals will follow these good examples.

Some of the most recent developments in scale construction will affect the process of scale validation of instruments to measure tendencies for degradation in the future: the use of artificial intelligence to form item batteries as well as the rather new approach of network analysis of multivariate data (Borsboom et al., 2021). Artificial intelligence (AI) may aid researchers at various stages in the process of scale development by automating item- and data generation as well as scale validation. Network analysis could be used to detect correlations to related constructs on an item level. While both these developments bear the potential to simplify and accelerate scale developments, they could also intensify the lack of theoretical foundation and impair transparency and reproducibility (in the case of AI usage), if applied thoughtlessly. The effects of these developments should thus be critically monitored and evaluated.

The contributions of this article collection highlight the crucial importance of precise and up-to-date measurement instruments for capturing authoritarian, far-right, and group-focused hostile attitudes as well as related phenomena. By developing, validating, and refining various scales, comparability across time, contexts and social groups is ensured and explanatory power in relation to contemporary societal challenges is enhanced. In this way, these studies provide an essential empirical foundation for understanding democracy-threatening attitudes, structures of prejudice, and the management of privilege, while opening up new perspectives for international, intergenerational and cross-context analyses. Advancing the measurement and reduction of such tendencies of degradation is of fundamental importance, as countering them directly safeguards pluralism, equality and the resilience of democratic societies.

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