

EXPERIMENTALLY EXPLORING HOW THE AWARENESS OF EXISTENTIAL  
FREEDOM INFLUENCES SUPPORT FOR AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLES AMONG  
INDIVIDUALS HIGH AND LOW IN NEUROTICISM

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ABSTRACT

The present dissertation builds on classic existential philosophy and psychological theory to suggest that personal freedom can be burdensome to the self and may, ironically, motivate people to displace their freedom to an autocratic (vs. democratic) authority who would make decisions on behalf of such individuals rather than democratically involve them in the decision-making process. The present analysis further suggests that low neurotics are especially likely to actively “escape” their freedom by displacing it, whereas high neurotics instead employ inactive strategies and are unlikely to actively displace their freedom. Three preliminary studies explore and demonstrate these processes. A fourth study then proposes that the process of displacing personal responsibility for one’s freedom is an important part of maintaining psychological equanimity, and offers an experiment designed to test whether displacement to autocratic authority helps reduce anxiety among low neurotics perceiving increased personal freedom. Results of this study did not support the hypothesis: displacement did not relieve explicit anxiety—reported anxiety was greater among low neurotics reminded of freedom whether or not they were first allowed to displace to authority. Instead, the displacement effect emerged when leadership style was measured first (replicating the preliminary studies), yet was eliminated when measured after participants reported on their explicit anxiety. The implications of these findings are considered in terms of alternative explanations, theoretical refinements, and future research efforts.