

News Framing and the Applicability of Authoritarian Values: Citizens' Reasoning on News About Societal Disorder

MATS EKSTRÖM¹

MARIA JERVELYCKE BELFRAGE

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Tensions between liberal and authoritarian values have gained increasing significance within Western democracies. This focus-group study contributes to the research on the dynamics of authoritarianism, providing in-depth analyses of the interactions between audience values and news framing of societal disorder. Contrasting authoritarian and liberal values—and related models of child-rearing—play a pivotal role in shaping divergent reasoning on news about crime and disturbances in schools and public places. Amplified news framing is consequential in making authoritarian values relevant to how people interpret the news. The implications of the news framing are analyzed by focusing on peer-group conversations on news, representing shifts from amplified to nuanced framing across three news issues.

Keywords: authoritarian, focus-group, framing, liberal, news, values

Tensions between authoritarian and liberal values have become increasingly significant across Western democracies. This is evident in polarized public discourse, a shift toward authoritarianism within mainstream political parties, and the rise of far-right populism (Mudde, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). To understand the dynamics of authoritarianism, we must consider the circumstances under which citizens are inclined to adopt the authoritarian attitudes that politicians appeal to. Extensive research suggests that societal disorders and threats promote authoritarian attitudes (Feldman, 2020; Stenner, 2005). The news media plays a potentially important role in this context (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011, p. 557) by informing the public about events beyond their direct experiences, often prioritizing amplified coverage of negative events—disorder and crisis—according to established news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 52). The impact of news media is confirmed in experimental research reporting significant effects of exposure to amplified framing of disorder-related issues on individuals' authoritarian attitudes (Ekström & Shehata, 2024).

Mats Ekström: mats.ekstrom@gu.se

Maria Jervelycke Belfrage: maria.jervelycke@jmg.gu.se

Date submitted: 2024-10-11

¹ This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council, Grant No. 2020-01915. The study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2021-03190)

Copyright © 2025 (Mats Ekström and Maria Jervelycke Belfrage). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

In this qualitative study, we shift the focus from general causal effects and explore, in more detail, individuals' authoritarian (and contrastive liberal) reasonings on news events. We adopt a cognitive and constructivist approach (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992), focusing on the interactions between individuals' values and the framing of news. This study presents two general arguments and poses research questions in relation to them. First, authoritarian and contrastive liberal cognitive frameworks are critical in *shaping different reasonings* on news about societal disorders. We apply two supplementary conceptualizations of the frameworks: values of conformism versus autonomy (Feldman, 2003) and the authoritarian versus nurturing models and moral views of child-rearing (Lakoff, 2016). In this study, the terms authoritarian and liberal thus denote values and moral views, not political ideologies. We ask:

RQ1: How do such frameworks manifest and shape individuals' reasonings on news issues related to societal disorder?

Drawing on the concept of applicability, developed in framing theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007), we argue that news framing is consequential in promoting and, more precisely, *making authoritarian (or liberal) frameworks applicable* in reasoning on the news. We ask:

RQ2: How does the applicability manifest in individuals' reasonings and conversations on news items with different framings?

This study contributes to research on the dynamics of authoritarianism (Feldman, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stenner, 2005) and to political communication research on the impact of news framing as conditioned by the congruency between individuals' cognitive framework and media coverage. We analyze this congruency, as it manifests in individuals' reasonings on news. Although extensive research acknowledges the importance of individuals' preexisting ideological and cultural beliefs (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; Zaller, 1992), the authoritarian-liberal value dimension remains under-explored (Ekström & Shehata, 2024). We argue that this dimension, increasingly evident in value conflicts within politics and public discourse across countries (Ekström, 2024; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Shehata, Ekström, & Tryggvason, 2024), uniquely shapes audience interpretations of news. While this value dimension is also integral to left- and right-wing political ideologies, it falls outside the scope of our study.

The empirical study is designed as a qualitative focus-group study, where participants strategically recruited to represent a diversity of values and political preferences were asked to read and discuss authentic news representing contrasting framings on issues related to societal disorder. Leveraging the rich empirical data, we investigate the interaction between authoritarian reasoning and news framing through three distinct analyses. First, we focus on how contrastive authoritarian-liberal frameworks shape different reasonings on amplified news across three issues (RQ1). Second, we analyze how the applicability/nonapplicability of the amplified news manifests in interpretations and conversations (RQ2). Third, we further develop the analysis of applicability (RQ2) by focusing on participants' responses to a frameshift, from amplified to nuanced news framing of the three issues. In the following sections, we present our theoretical approach and the study's design and data. The results are then presented in three sections, corresponding to the mentioned focus of analyses.

Theoretical Approach

In making sense of news stories, individuals use prior knowledge, beliefs, and modes of reasoning (Neuman et al., 1992). We analyze the authoritarian/liberal dimension of these cognitive frameworks, which are believed to shape individuals' reasonings about the news. This is not a deterministic process. Reasonings are shaped in interaction with interpretations of news stories. Although beliefs deeply rooted in social and political identities tend to resist change (Slater, 2015), individuals may also employ varying beliefs and modes of reasoning across different issues and in response to different framings of the same issue (Feinberg, Wehling, Chung, Saslow, & Melvaer, 2020; Feldman, 2020; Lakoff, 2016).

We understand the interaction between cognitive frameworks and news media as a process in which applicability plays a key role. Psychological accounts of framing argue that for certain considerations (such as values) to be used for information processing and judgments in attitude formation, they must be available, accessible, and applicable to the specific judgmental task (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2018). Thus, how individuals process and evaluate news depends not only on the considerations they bring but also on how relevant they perceive them to be in the situation. The outcome of this process involves an interaction between the news frame and preexisting cognitions.

The study relies on two theories of authoritarian cognitive frameworks: Feldman and colleagues' theory of authoritarianism as *pre-political values* (Feldman, 2003, 2020) and Lakoff's (2016) theory explaining moral and political reasonings through contrastive *models and metaphors of the family*. Feldman's theory adds to a long tradition of theorizing authoritarianism as a psychological disposition (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 2019; Altemeyer, 1981; Duckitt, 2015; Feldman, Mérola, & Dollman, 2021; Stenner, 2005). Authoritarianism is defined by a strong belief in conformity and a strictly morally ordered society, emphasizing uniform norms and obedience to authority. Conversely, autonomy is the core of liberal values, prioritizing independence, progressive ideas, and diversity. The theory suggests that individuals who highly value conformity are particularly provoked by social disruptions and threats to social order, often responding with intolerance and advocating harsh measures (Feldman, 2003, 2020; Stenner, 2005). *Conformism*, *submission*, and *aggressive measures* are thus recognized as key components of authoritarian values. In empirical research, *child-rearing values* are used as a measure of authoritarian dispositions. Preferences for qualities like respect for elders and obedience over independence and self-reliance predict support for authoritarian policies (Feldman et al., 2021). However, in this research, child-rearing is primarily presented as a reliable indicator of general values.

To further understand reasonings related to child-rearing values, we draw on Lakoff's (2016) theory, emphasizing the role of family models and metaphors in shaping individuals' moral reasoning on social and political issues. In the strict father model (referred to as the authoritarian model), children must learn to follow norms and rules and respect adults (conformism and submission). Parents enforce this through clear rules and punishments (aggressive measures), believed to instill self-discipline and respect. Failure in this upbringing is seen as leading to norm-breaking and criminality. The nurturant model suggests that children develop into responsible, independent individuals through parental care and support. It emphasizes compassion and empathy, arguing that fear creates insecurity and potential violence. This model

views social problems as complex, often requiring structural solutions. Notably, the two models are based on different values and moral views, with almost opposite ideas about the effects of child-rearing methods.

In theorizing the models as *metaphors for modes of reasoning*, the theory explains the dynamics in authoritarianism and how parenting ideals are translated into beliefs in loyalty and authority in other contexts (Lakoff, 2016, p. 4). Experiences of family relations are a strong mediating metaphor in reasoning on social and political issues, including abstract relations between citizens and the state, and help explain the political preferences for harsher punishment versus preventive social interventions as solutions to social problems (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 779; Lakoff, 2016, p. 17).

Methods and Data

We used focus-group interviews to explore participants' reasoning in conversations about the news. Conducted in two metropolitan areas in Sweden from 2022 to 2023, the study includes 10 focus groups with three or four participants (totally 38), each interviewed twice for approximately two hours. Participants discussed authentic news on four topics, with three analyzed in this study, resulting in more than 40 hours of recorded and transcribed conversations.

We recruited peer groups to foster everyday-like conversations (Gamson, 1992). An initial participant, recruited through associations or social networks independent of the researchers, was asked to invite two to four friends. To enable comparative analysis, we aimed to recruit groups with liberal, conservative, and mixed preferences. In a presurvey, participants were asked to answer questions on pre-political (child-rearing) values (Feldman, 2003) and to rate their support for all Swedish parliamentary parties on a 10-point scale. This allowed us to adjust recruitment to achieve a balanced distribution. The 10 groups consist of three predominantly liberal, four predominantly conservative, and three mixed groups, with a balanced representation of gender and age within each category.²

The selected news topics represent current events on social disturbances and crime in Sweden, including (1) disturbances in primary schools, involving reports of unruly students; (2) disturbances in public libraries, focusing on social anxiety and a new law allowing public facilities to ban certain visitors; and (3) youth involvement in gang crime.

For each topic, participants were presented with news items featuring what we refer to as amplified versus nuanced framing. Amplified framings represented disturbances as extensive, alarming, and indicative of increasing societal disorder, highlighting the actors threatening the order. Nuanced framings were less alarmist and presented different views on the problems. We used news items from both the press and the web (radio and TV) to make the sessions more engaging.

To investigate the effects of framing on participants' reasoning on news, the two interview sessions (each covering two topics) were organized chronologically into four phases: (1) amplified news

² Information about the groups in appendix:
https://osf.io/2wcem/?view_only=812542713aae4c66ac85ea910735bd30

on the first topic; (2) amplified news on the second topic; (3) nuanced news on the first topic; and (4) nuanced news on the second topic. In each phase, participants first read or watched the news, then answered questions and discussed.

On the topic of *disturbances in school*, amplified news framing is represented by two news items. The first foregrounds the unruly students, frames the problem as alarming, and provides an example of a general development toward increased disorder in schools. The second item frames a report of a teacher's violation of students as unreasonable and problematic. The news headline foregrounds the compensation paid to a student for what is presented as mild behavior: "Unruly Student Carried Out From Classroom—Got 25,000" (Ekström, 2019). The news informs about an extensive increase in reports and quotes a politician who believes that the increase risks making teachers so afraid that they cannot do a good job. The news items representing a *frameshift* (nuanced framing) also highlight the importance of having more adults in schools to reduce disturbances. Another report covers what is described as a serious case of abuse by a teacher. The headline reads: "Teacher Allegedly Punished Students: Risking His Credentials" (Bornlid, 2021). The lead paragraph reports that the teacher punished and insulted students. Hence, while the amplified news tends to place blame on unruly students and suggests that teachers be allowed to take measures to maintain order in the classroom, the contrasting news emphasizes adults' responsibilities for the school environment and frames a teacher's punishment of students as serious misconduct.

On the topic of *disorder in public libraries*, the amplified news highlights a growing problem with unruly youth creating anxiety in libraries. Young people are represented as "gangs" who are "completely wild" and who "take over" libraries and other public places. A new law enabling bans on people from visiting places is presented to solve this problem. The news representing a *frameshift* focuses on a critique of this law in the headline: "The Library Warns of Access Bans" (Göteborgsposten, 2022). Quoted librarians say that libraries have a democratic function and are public places that should be accessible to everyone. The problem with those who disturb is downplayed and referred to as "messy visitors." While the moral judgment in the amplified news tends to blame young people for constituting a serious social threat, the contrasting news is less alarming, focusing on discussions about the legitimacy of the new law.

The amplified news on *young people's involvement in gang crime* is represented by a news item about young people who commit serious crimes. The headline presents an alarming quote: "The Police on the Children With Heavy Weapons: 'It's Fucked up'" (Sundbeck, 2023). The news story presents concrete examples of violent, reckless criminality increasingly committed by "extremely" young people. We also included a news item explicitly relating crime to immigration, with the headline "New Brå-report: Children of Immigrants More Often Suspected of Crime" (Zangana, 2021). The news presents statistics from a government agency. The *frameshift* of this topic is represented by a news story that gives voice to a single mother who tells about her difficult situation in a suburb, how she studied to learn Swedish, worked, and struggled to raise her boys, who have now both become involved in crime. The news depicts the specific situation of a family, presenting the mother and her boys as victims of circumstances—contrasting with the alarming news about the category of young criminals.

The interviews were conducted by a researcher based on a structured interview guide. After the participants read/watched the respective news, they were asked a series of questions—beginning with more

open-ended ones (e.g., "What thoughts does this news evoke?"), followed by more thematically focused questions on how they understood the problems, solutions, etc. To ensure everyone's participation, the interviewer directed the first question in each session to each participant. The questions were then addressed to the group. In addition to the questions in the form, the interviewer used probes such as "can you elaborate on that." However, this was often not needed. The conversations are mainly characterized by engaged discussions, with 5–20, and in some cases more than 30, turns of talk without the interviewer's involvement.

Following the principle of abduction (Danermark, Ekström, & Karlsson, 2019), our analysis is based on an interaction between theoretically informed close reading of the data, abstractions, and refinements of analytical categories. Two researchers initially coded all interviews, focusing on the articulation of values in the conversation on the news. Subsequently, all interviews were reviewed multiple times, with additional notes made to develop analytical categories.

This article presents selected examples from the conversations to illustrate and substantiate our analyses and findings (translated from Swedish to English). Examples are marked with letters referring to the respective focus groups in the three categories: Liberal (Groups L1–L3), Conservative (C1–C4), and Mixed (M1–M3). Participants are anonymized. The study received approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

The Authoritarian and Liberal Reasonings on Amplified News About Societal Disorder

Overall, the study shows that contrastive authoritarian/liberal values and models shape the reasoning about amplified news on societal disorder. In this section, we describe how this manifests in conversations across the three news topics.

Contrastive Reasonings on the Amplified News

The News on Disturbances in School

In the authoritarian reasonings on the news, students' disobedience and lack of respect for authority are interpreted as the main problem. The disturbances are discussed as an indication of a general development in a society where the rights of the individual have gained too much influence. In the example below, note how love and individual's rights (liberal values) are contrasted with unequivocal demands that students must do what they are told.

I think that this problem that we see, it's not only in school, but the whole society is developing toward becoming like—there should be so much love and that you should have such strong rights. . . . In school, you must listen to the teacher, and do as you are told, and that is about to disappear, I think. (C2)

The problems indicated in the news are attributed to the dominance of liberal values in society: "It reflects a norm that exists in the Swedish public, it is very soft values . . . It is a result of this liberalization

of our rights . . ." (C4). Actions related to liberal values are even ridiculed. Participants created caricatures of individuals who "feel offended all the time" and believe they can always do what they want (C1).

The news is interpreted as evidence that children are overly spoiled and granted too much freedom at home, in school, and in other social contexts. The reasoning thus relies on the authoritarian model of child-rearing, explaining causes and effects: "They've grown up their whole lives without being retaliated against for their bad behavior, and so they continue it into adulthood and crime" (C4).

Participants' belief in conformism is reflected in their moral representations and emotional stance toward the students. They are blamed for wrongful acts and attributed negative traits. They are rude, disrespectful, and spoiled. Participants construct a distance from the other, most clearly expressed through anger directed at students and their parents.

Finally, punishment (or threats of) is discussed as an important solution to the problems reported in the news. Harsh measures are justified through different logics. Participants enact an ethical logic where punishment serves as deserved retribution. Whoever breaks the norms and causes disruption must pay a price, such as being suspended from school. Participants justify punishment as an effective way for individuals to learn to follow rules: "Treating those who don't behave with warmth and love instead of punishment, I don't think you'll get very far in the long run . . . they can't learn that way." (C2)

Authoritarian values and models of child-rearing are actualized and form similar responses to the news about the teachers reported for having offended students. Participants describe it as outrageous that the students who cause the problems can report the teachers and receive compensation, even when the teachers are simply trying to maintain order in the classroom.

The liberal reasoning on the news issue marks a clear contrast. Participants not only adopt liberal values—for example, interpreting the reporting of teachers as a positive example of children's increased rights in school—but their reasoning about problems, solutions, causes, and effects follow a different logic corresponding to the nurturing model of child-rearing. The disorder in school is not because children have become increasingly disobedient or because the school has become too liberal. It is mainly explained as an outcome of limited resources, too big classes, and too few teachers. Children do not receive the help and support they need and should be entitled to. Values of autonomy and a nurturant model are expressed in reasonings questioning the solution of introducing tougher measures: "Well, the school is supposed to educate students to think for themselves, to make us democratic citizens, I think . . . the solution isn't just getting tougher, there must be commitment, and enough staff" (L2).

The News on the Disturbances in Public Libraries

Authoritarian reasoning manifests in interpretations of the news as indicative of a decline in respect and obedience among young people in contemporary (Swedish) society: "There is no respect among the younger people anymore. They can get up to anything, there are no consequences for what they do. They are told and, well, they shrug and leave. Nothing happens" (C1).

The cause of these problems is mainly related to upbringing. The news shows that "there are many people who have not been brought up well enough . . . and have not learned that there are rules to follow" (C4). Participants construct exaggerated and derisive images of bad upbringing and negative attitudes toward children, invoking them almost as a liberal demon in responses to what the news is assumed to illustrate: "Today you can decide how much two plus two is. 'Do you say five, yes, but little Kalle, yes, how good of you'" (C1). "It's like 'oh, little you, you poor thing', instead of saying what rules apply" (C1).

The solution to the situation presented in the news is quick and tough measures against troublemakers. They must be warned, removed from the site, and prohibited from entering: Those who don't listen must be "thrown out with their ears first, it's as simple as that" (M1); "Now this happened in a library, then it could be that they take over a square . . . it is necessary to quickly nip this in the bud" (M1). One participant (M3) refers to the news headline ("They have taken over the libraries") and says that it is "amazingly stupid of society." It should be obvious that there must be order in the libraries.

In contrastive liberal reasonings, participants articulate understanding and tolerance of the troublemakers. They object to the tendency of the news to exaggerate the problem and blame the youth. Young people have always been rowdy and rebellious. Breaking norms is part of being young, one participant argues. Participants talk about their own experiences of being young and relate to, rather than distance from, the young people reported in the news.

The reasoning about the causes and solutions of the problem follows a nurturing model. The news is interpreted as an example of young people today lacking places where they can gather. Compassion and not anger is the primary emotional response: "Young people, like all other people, want to socialize. Become human, simply. And I think they become better people if they are allowed to be together in youth clubs . . . where adults can be role models" (L2).

The News on Young People's Involvement in Gang Crime

In authoritarian reasonings, the news is perceived as an example of an alarming criminality linked to immigration, threatening order, and security in society. Criminality is explained as an outcome of an overly liberal society. Politicians are held responsible for a situation shaped by "the combination of uncontrolled mass immigration and a very lax criminal policy" (C4). Some participants express outright racism, for example, describing the problem as "imported from other cultures" (C2).

Authoritarian repressive measures against immigrants are suggested as primary solutions. Immigration must be limited, and tougher penalties must be introduced. Far-reaching aggressive measures are motivated by what is perceived as an acute crisis, as confirmed in the news reports. Preventive efforts are entirely dismissed, citing the acute situation or tied to tougher requirements for offenders: ". . . it should not necessarily be this *juice and bun mentality*" (C2). This metaphor is repeatedly invoked in the conversation to describe a devastating, overly friendly approach assumed to characterize Swedish society. Anger is directed at the liberal policies creating a system of rights that criminal immigrants tend to exploit: "They have allowed all immigrant groups to have their own culture, they have

state subsidized it . . . you can come from any damn country, and you have free school, you have free books . . .” (M2).

In contrastive reasoning, the news is interpreted as a sad example of how society has failed in the care of children. Participants express empathy for the children involved in crime. Structural causes are emphasized by referring to segregation. A main solution to this problem is preventive work. A nurturing model is implied in arguments about the responsibility of society to provide better support to parents and vulnerable children. The children have not been given a reasonable chance in life. The children’s behaviors are explained in terms of general human needs, and society’s caring responsibility is emphasized:

I think that it is about people wanting to be seen, wanting to feel belonging. We all want that. And maybe they get some kind of security in the gang anyway. And I think that we are so damn bad at taking care of people who come from other countries who are, for example, traumatized. (L2)

In conclusion, our analysis demonstrates that authoritarian beliefs in conformism, submission, and harsh measures, and the related model of child-rearing, shape distinct reasonings on the news, in clear contrast to liberal reasonings. While the contrasting frameworks permeate much of the conversations, it is important to acknowledge that they manifest in a broader range of radical and moderate forms than are captured in this presentation. Additionally, these values are sometimes balanced; for instance, participants interpret the news about the reported teacher as a positive example of children’s rights, yet simultaneously express concern that limiting teachers’ ability to impose discipline undermines classroom order.

Relations Between Prereported Values and Authoritarian Reasonings on Amplified News

Using the peer groups as the unit of analysis, the conversational patterns further confirm the significance of preexisting values. Authoritarian reasoning in response to the news clearly correlates with the participants’ previously reported values and political preferences (Table 1).

Table 1. Authoritarian Reasoning in Groups With Different Prereported Values and Political Preferences.

Groups	Auth reasoning School issue	Auth reasoning Library issue	Auth reasoning Crime issue
C1	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant
C2	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant
C3	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant
C4	Predominant	Predominant	Predominant
L1	Occasional	Rejected	Rejected
L2	Occasional	Rejected	Rejected
L3	Rejected	Rejected	Rejected
M1	Recurrent	Recurrent	Occasional
M2	Recurrent	Recurrent	Recurrent
M3	Recurrent	Predominant	Recurrent

In the liberal groups, authoritarian reasoning is, with few exceptions, *collaboratively rejected*. Participants confirm each other in their consistently liberal reasoning and criticize the authoritarian values that they believe the news tends to promote (see the next section).

In the conservative groups, authoritarian reasoning *predominates*. This is *confirmed and elaborated* in the conversations. The example below (from C4) shows how participants (P), in answers to the interviewer's question, develop a cooperative response about the norms in society. Note how the first speaker refers to a common view in the group, how they align and confirm each other, and how they articulate a moral view in negative representations of nurturing, care, and liberal rights. Child-rearing is invoked as a metaphor.

I: If you look at these two news items (on school), what does it tell you about norms and values in Swedish society?

P4: We've been into that . . . That it should always be very, very kind, you are afraid of having authority, of setting boundaries, and so on. It reflects a norm that exists in the Swedish public . . .

P2: And it is a result of this liberalization of our rights . . . that individuals should be allowed to behave how they want because they are special. But you never talk about obligations . . .

P1: Yea, I think this freedom that you talk about is reflected in how many parents are raising their children . . . I think a very big—maybe the only reason for the problems is the way you raise a child these days—to let them do a little bit of whatever . . .

P4: Exactly . . .

In mixed groups, authoritarian reasoning is *recurrently* activated and *negotiated* with liberal reasoning. For example, in discussing the news on disturbances in libraries, participants in one group had different opinions about whether librarians should try to "create relationships" with the troublemakers (nurturing model) or "just throw them out" (authoritarian model).

Amplified News Framing and the Applicability of Authoritarian Reasonings

The amplified news of societal disorder is interpreted through authoritarian reasoning in some groups but not others. But what is the relationship between news frames and authoritarian values? We address this question by building on the concept of consideration *applicability* (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In the analyses above, the applicability of cognitive frameworks is illustrated in how the values and models are expressed, invoked, and shape reasoning about the news. Here, we develop the analysis in two steps. First, we illustrate how the mismatch between amplified news frames and liberal values (lack of applicability) manifests in oppositional interpretations of news. Second, we examine the applicability of authoritarian

values, focusing on both conversational practices around news and which aspects of the news frame resonate with authoritarian reasoning.

Oppositional Interpretations of Amplified Framings of Societal Disorder

In the group discussions, some comments articulate a general skepticism about the credibility of the news media. Criticism also takes the form of *oppositional interpretations*. We use the concept to refer to interpretations in which the audience identifies a preferred meaning in the news but rejects it based on alternative values (cf. Hall, 1980). This is distinguished from a *dominant interpretation*, following the values encoded in the news.

A comparison of the conversations in the groups shows a clear pattern. Critical oppositional interpretations of the amplified news almost exclusively appear in the predominantly liberal groups (see Table 2 below), thus indicating a dissonance between the framing of the issues and the shared values in the group.

To illustrate the articulation of oppositional liberal interpretation, we present examples from the discussion on the school issue in one of the groups (L3). When the interviewer opens the discussion by asking, "What thoughts does this news evoke in you?" a participant criticizes the message of the news, the arguments that it was better in the past, and what the participant perceives as the blame being placed on the children's behavior when instead it is structural and political circumstances that should be paid attention to. The participant interprets the news as a sign of general arguments:

. . . they use the same old-fashioned arguments. "It wasn't like this back when I was young. It was much calmer." When it really is—that a hell of a lot less part of the GDP goes to the school, and the classes are bigger. Is it the case that all children have been genetically altered to become whiners? Pretty incredible though. (L3)

Other participants agree with the critique and describe the news as superficial, simplified, and alarmist. Oppositional reasonings are likewise enacted in discussions on the news about the student who received financial compensation after he was "carried out from the classroom." The wording of the headline is criticized, arguing that it constructs the reports of teachers as unjustified. One participant recounts a narrative in the news from which he distances himself: "It's that simple, this is all we need to do. The kids must stop complaining, stop reporting a teacher, and we will deal with it with hard gloves." What is rejected in the oppositional interpretations are thus aspects of the news framing that underpin authoritarian reasoning and conflict with their own values and moral views.

The Applicability of Authoritarian Values

The applicability of authoritarian values and models to the amplified news manifests in the conversations in three related ways: *In moral and emotional responses; in stories that validate the news frame; and in generalization*. In these *forms of applicability*, the framing of the three topics is uncritically accepted and elaborated upon.

Moral Judgments and Emotional Responses

The participants expressing authoritarian values tend to be particularly upset about the social disturbances and crime reported in the news. They even respond with strong feelings of indignation and anger. With words like terrible, insane, and frustrating, they condemn what is interpreted as an increased disorder, young people's bad behavior, and a lack of respect. The moral judgments in the news framing are further amplified in participants' responses. The crime-related news arouses strong feelings about serious crimes assumed to be caused by an increase in immigration enabled by governments: "You can hardly bear to be angry anymore . . . it's just exhausting to read" (C2); "I'm pissed off but not surprised . . ." (C4).

Our observations align with Feldman (2020), who argues that individuals with a strong belief in conformity are likely to become intolerant of societal disorder. As Nussbaum (2018) argues, anger is typically expressed in response to damage related to one's own values and what one really cares about (p. 73).

Stories That Validate the News Frame

The applicability of authoritarian values manifests in the stories participants tell, which validates the news framing. As Gamson (1992) shows, people often "make their points" in conversations by telling stories, referring to experiential knowledge (p. 122). The participants frequently presented stories to make moral points that align with what the news is supposed to show.

In the stories, participants highlight young people's lack of respect. In the example below, experiential knowledge is referenced through a collective "we," and "our generation," contrasted with the younger generation, presenting both a narrative and moral view on family. Like the news item, the story (briefly illustrated here) tends to construct simple narratives about the problems in school: "The disrespect, I think that is the worst . . . In our generation, we had respect for our parents. But now it seems that it is not necessary, there is no need for respect for the elderly" (M3).

In stories, participants make points about the superiority of authoritarian methods of child-rearing (although not labeled as such). In this example, the participant tells a story about her grandchildren's school, indicating that "slavish discipline" is a good solution to the problems at school: "I have two grandchildren in Stockholm who go to a school where they first get to greet the teachers before entering the classroom, where there is slavish discipline . . . and there such problems do not exist" (C1).

Others recount their own experiences with teachers and parents who fostered relationships of fear, yet indicate that this was preferable to today's school environment.

Everything has gone terribly wrong. I was terrified of my teachers. And if you got a remark home, you got a reprimand at home too. . . . Today there is offense here and offense there . . . It is madness that has become. (C1)

Generalization

Applicability is indicated in generalizations where the scope of the news frame is expanded to other events and general trends in society. The framing of the problems in school is generalized in moral reasonings about the problems in society. "It's not just the school but the whole society has evolved toward becoming like this . . . so much love . . . and rights" (C2). Generalizations express a belief in conformism, obedience, and disciplinary methods consistent with the authoritarian model of child-rearing. In the example below, the moral view is articulated in generalized negative representations of children ("all . . ."), intensifiers of the bad qualities ("very"), and the softened description of the disciplinary methods.

I would say that all children and people have been very spoiled. I think of something my grandmother said, if she had done something bad, a look from her mother said "now you're in trouble." She didn't have to be beaten or shouted at, but you had respect for adults. (C4)

In conclusion, the analyses of participants' *emotional responses*, *stories referring to experiential knowledge*, and *generalizations* show how aspects of the amplified news tend to make reasonings based on authoritarian values and models highly applicable. The *alarming disturbances and developments* indicated in the news items confirm a conformist view of the *threat to the moral order* in society. The foregrounding and *representations of wrongdoers* confirm authoritarian beliefs in submission, obedience, and respect for authorities. The news framing makes an authoritarian metaphor of child-rearing applicable in participants' moral judgments and arguments, suggesting that a main problem in society is that children are allowed to do far too much as they please. Finally, *the simplified framing* of the issues in news items resonates with a simplified framing of problems and solutions in the authoritarian reasonings, manifested in participants' remarks about tougher measures as the solution to the problems.

Authoritarian Reasoning and the Shift in the Framing of News

To develop the analysis of the interaction between authoritarian reasoning and news framing, participants in the second section of the interviews were asked to read and discuss news items selected to represent a shift in framing. The news items present alternative perspectives on the problems, remedies, and moral judgments (Method and Data). Overall, the study reveals that participants, particularly those in the predominantly conservative groups, tend to adhere to authoritarian reasoning, while other participants demonstrate a propensity to reconsider such reasoning. We explore how this *maintaining* and *altering* of authoritarian reasoning is performed in conversations about news items.

Authoritarian Reasonings Maintained in Response to a News Frameshift

Authoritarian reasonings are maintained and expanded even when the news frame does not match, thus indicating a resilience of beliefs and conceptual models. This happens in conversations where participants *move beyond* and ignore the presented news, referring to other examples from one's own experiences or public wisdom. In this analysis, we focus on two major strategies in which participants handle

the lack of congruence in discussing the news: (1) the *downplaying and renegotiating* of the message in the news; and (2) *the critical rejection*, questioning the credibility of the news and the voices reported.

In *downplaying* the message, participants mainly accept the information presented but *renegotiate the moral judgments*. We illustrate this with examples from the conversations on news about the reports of the teacher's violations of students. In one of the groups, this is the first response to the interviewer's opening question ("what thoughts does this news evoke?"): "That the teacher is supposed to have punished his students and so on, it's quite disturbing. But I feel some sympathy for the teacher, because I have seen and I know how badly students can treat teachers . . ." (C3). Note the participant's epistemic stance, marking some doubt about what the news shows ("supposed to") without explicitly questioning that the teacher made a mistake, while also expressing some understanding of the teacher referring to his experiences of students' bad behavior, assuming that these are relevant in this case. In the conversation that follows, the other participants agree and downplay the moral message. They are not upset with the teacher, as they are with the children and parents after reading the amplified news.

In another group (C4), participants distanced themselves from the teacher's actions, however, describing this as an "extreme case." The main problem in school is still students' lack of respect. The interpretation of the news as an extreme case is opposite to the generalizations of messages when the authoritarian values apply.

Another strategy recurrently applied when the message in the news does not match is to *critically reject* the message and the credibility of the news. The strongest critical rejection of the news is articulated in the authoritarian response to the news, with the mother telling about her sons being drawn into crime. The article is called a "sob article" (C2), indicating that it is presented to arouse unjustified sympathy with the mother and her sons, while hiding part of the truth. In one group (C1), the mother is made the object of condemnation and anger, and is attributed bad qualities. She is blamed for presenting a "sob story," trying to get sympathy that is not deserved. One participant expresses an authoritarian logic of upbringing, arguing that "It's just about telling" children what rules apply. She refers to her own experiences and expresses anger at the mother for not taking responsibility for raising her children: "I have been alone with my daughters. They have not become criminal people. I get so tired when I read. 'I've been working.' Yes, sure, it's your damned duty to work and take care of your children" (C1).

Other participants affiliate and add to the oppositional interpretation. Notably, the critical rejection of the mother's story and the related news framing of the topic are not primarily about facts but moral judgments. The news framing of the mother as innocent and her sons as victims of circumstances, rather than guilty of crimes, conflicts with the authoritarian intolerance of troublemakers and the moral concepts of the family invoked as a general metaphor.

The critical oppositional interpretation of news is central to the performance of authoritarian reasoning. This is indicated in the overall pattern of interpretations in the groups (see Table 2). The news frameshift results in a shift in conservative groups from a *dominant to an oppositional authoritarian interpretation*. The opposite applies in the predominantly liberal groups, where there is a shift from *oppositional to a dominant liberal interpretation* of the news. Notably, in the mixed groups, there is no such

clear shift. As will be illustrated in the next section, the conversations in these groups demonstrate how frameshifts may result in reconsiderations of authoritarian reasonings.

Table 2. Critical Oppositional Interpretations of the News on Amplified Versus Nuanced News on Societal Disorder.

Groups	Amplified news			Nuanced news		
	School	Library	Crime	School	Library	Crime
C1	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
C2	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
C3	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
C4	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
L1	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
L2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
L3	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
M1	No	No	No	No	No	No
M2	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
M3	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note. Critical oppositional interpretation is operationalized as the occurrence of a discussion in which at least two participants question the news and present alternatives to what is interpreted as the messages in the news report.

Altering an Authoritarian Reasoning in Response to a Frameshift

When news coverage of teachers' abusive behavior shifted, so did moral judgment and the distribution of blame in several conversations. Some participants explicitly commented on this: "Yes, I get as upset about that teacher as I get about the student who was in the first news. The teacher has misbehaved with the students here. I think that is just as terrible" (M3).

In another group (M1), a conversation on children's lack of respect and obedience as a major problem in school (in response to the amplified news) shifted into a conversation emphasizing liberal values. Anger at "the others" is replaced with empathy when the children's needs, integrity, and security are said to be what "we all need." The solution is more adults in school, not punishment.

P1: It's about never offending other people . . . then of course he shouldn't be allowed to continue as a teacher. . . . It's clear that we need more adults in school, it's about seeing the students, there are so many of them, and that's probably also why it gets so messy, I think.

P4: What you say about seeing—there are probably many who are insecure too, no one sees them at home, no one sees them at school, no one sees them anywhere.

P1: No, and you know that, it's scientifically proven that being seen is one of the most important things for a child.

P4: Mm, and get confirmation. Which we all need sometimes.

In response to the news item on gang crime featuring the single mother story, participants changed their moral judgment, indicating that authoritarian values were treated as nonapplicable. In one of the groups (M3), participants transition from a discussion (in Part One) emphasizing harsher punishment as a solution to crimes to a discussion where they express understanding and sympathy for the mother and her sons. A general negative stereotype of "immigrants" is not applicable when the news is supposed to show a mother who has "done the right thing . . . what she could" (M3). When the interviewer asks what the news tells about norms and values in society, the participants respond by self-critically reflecting on their own values and prejudices: "We value people differently, although we pretend, we don't, I think" (M3).

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on authoritarianism by examining how authoritarian (as opposed to liberal) frameworks shape individuals' reasonings about news related to societal disorder. Drawing on theories in political psychology (Feldman, 2003, 2020; Lakoff, 2016), we defined the authoritarian/liberal dimension of cognitive frameworks as related to beliefs in conformism and submission versus diversity and autonomy, and to contrasting models of child-rearing. In-depth analyses of the news discussions demonstrate the centrality of these values and models, shaping different reasonings across the three news topics on youth crime, disturbances in school and in public libraries.

Authoritarian reasonings manifest in interpretations and evaluations of news events, reflecting a strong belief in conformity and submission. More specifically, disturbances and crime were perceived as signs of profound moral disorder, primarily attributed to the bad behavior of individuals who fail to obey and respect authority or immigrants who do not assimilate into Swedish culture. Judgments based on authoritarian values, participants' related emotional reactions (condemnation and anger), and general preferences for harsh measures fundamentally diverged from liberal interpretations of the news.

The qualitative focus-group study enabled an in-depth analysis of the interactions between authoritarian values and the amplified news framing of societal disorder, specifically examining how *the mechanism of applicability*, as theorized in framing effects theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007), manifests in reasonings on the news issues. The analysis of the different aspects of applicability constitutes an important contribution of this study. First, the applicability of cognitive frameworks manifests in how individuals' reasoning reflects and invokes authoritarian (and contrastive liberal) values and relies on related models of child-rearing. Second, applicability manifests in dominant versus oppositional interpretations of the news, showing how the amplified framing of societal disorder resonates with authoritarian values while generating cognitive dissonance for those with liberal dispositions. Third, the applicability of authoritarian frameworks is evident in evaluative discourse and narratives; in participants' moral judgments and emotional responses to the societal disorder; in their stories referring to experiential knowledge; and in the broader generalization of the moral points of the news stories.

The implications of news framing are further demonstrated in the analysis of participants' responses to a shift from amplified to nuanced framings of societal disorders. In the predominately liberal groups, the news frameshift resulted in a shift from *oppositional* to *dominant liberal interpretations* across the three news issues. Conversely, in the conservative groups, the shift prompted a reversal from *dominant* to *oppositional authoritarian interpretations*. Reasonings grounded in authoritarian values were maintained and elaborated upon when the noncongruent messages were downplayed, ignored, or critically rejected. The study also demonstrates how shifts in framing motivated participants, especially in heterogeneous groups, to modify or reconsider previous authoritarian responses, activating more liberal values and endorsing a nurturing model of child-rearing.

This study presents important areas for further research. First, speaking to the long-standing research in political psychology on authoritarianism as pre-political values, this study suggests that amplified news framing of societal disorder is a significant factor in making authoritarian values applicable, even among groups who express liberal values in their reasoning about other news items. More research, large-scale quantitative and in-depth qualitative, is needed to understand how these media-related mechanisms function in different contexts.

Second, while extensive research demonstrates that media effects and news interpretations are conditioned by an individual's political beliefs and identities, this study highlights the implications of individuals' values on the authoritarian/liberal dimension. The frequent references to models and metaphors of child-rearing in reasoning across the news topics present an original and intriguing finding, warranting further exploration in other contexts. Moreover, the observed contrastive interpretations of the news, according to the participants' prior values, suggest that different news framings potentially mobilize different groups, with implications for political polarization.

Finally, this study calls for further news journalism research focusing on the political implications of amplified reporting on societal disorder. Although the tendency of news media to prioritize such reporting is well-known, the connections to the rise of authoritarianism within societal and political contexts largely remain to be investigated.

This study has several limitations. It was conducted within a particular national context (Sweden). Given the study's focus on values, it is worth noting that Sweden (along with other Nordic countries) is distinguished by strong liberal values, but like many nations, it experiences significant polarization along a conservative/liberal value dimension in politics and public discourse (Shehata et al., 2024).

The interviews with strategically recruited focus groups facilitated in-depth analyses of reasonings within peer groups with different values. We have identified qualitatively different reasonings shaped by the interactions between individuals' values and the news framing. However, this study did not thoroughly examine the strength of an individual's preexisting values and inclinations toward particular reasonings. Nor did it fully explore the dynamics of engagement within peer groups. The analyses revealed a clearer tendency in mixed groups to balance values and reconsider reasoning in response to frameshifts. Nonetheless, it remains to further analyze the conditions under which individuals are willing to reconsider their reasonings on news.

This study examined the implications of a shift in news framing using a design where participants first discussed an amplified framing, then a nuanced one. Although these framings were not presented immediately after each other, responses to the latter were likely influenced by exposure to the former. An alternative design could have been to divide the discussions on different news framings into sessions separated in time. However, the design employed revealed how some groups, but not others, revised their reasoning in response to the frameshift and, importantly, identified strategies employed to maintain authoritarian reasoning in response to news that conflicted with the group's values.

References

- Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D., & R. Sanford. (2019). *The authoritarian personality*. New York, NY: Verso. (Original work published 1950)
- Altemeyer, B. (1981). *Right-wing authoritarianism*. Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press.
- Bednarek, M., & Caple, H. (2014). Why do news values matter? *Discourse & Society*, 25(2), 35–158. doi:10.1177/0957926513516041
- Bornlid, R. (2021, July 9). Lärare ska ha straffat elever – riskerar sin legitimation [Teacher allegedly punished students – Risking his credentials]. *Expressen*. Retrieved from <https://www.expressen.se/kvallsposten/larare-ska-ha-straffat-elever-riskerar-sin-legitimation/>
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103–126. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054
- Danermark, B., Ekström, M., & Karlsson, J. (2019). *Explaining society: Critical realism in the social sciences*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Duckitt, J. (2015). Authoritarian personality. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of social and behavioral science* (2nd ed., pp. 255–261). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier.
- Ekström, A. (2019, March 19). Stökig elev lyftes ut ur klassrum – fick 25,000 [Unruly student carried out from classroom – Got 25,000]. *Expressen*. Retrieved from <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/stokig-elev-lyftes-ut-ur-klassrum-fick-25000/>
- Ekström, M. (2024). Authoritarianism in the discourse of online forums. *Nordicom Review*, 44(2), 194–216. doi:10.2478/nor-2023-0011
- Ekström, M., & Shehata, A. (2024). Amplified news framing of social disturbances and its impact on authoritarian attitudes: An experimental study of main effects and activation of predispositions. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/10776990241284797

- Feinberg, M., Wehling, E., Chung, J., Saslow, L., & Melvaer, I. (2020). Measuring moral politics: How strict and nurturant family values explain individual differences in conservatism, liberalism, and the political middle. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(4), 777–804. doi:10.1037/pspp0000255
- Feldman, S. (2003). Enforcing social conformity: A theory of authoritarianism. *Political Psychology*, 24(1), 41–74. doi:10.1111/0162-895X.00316
- Feldman, S. (2020). Authoritarianism, threat and intolerance. In E. Borgida, C. Federico, & J. Miller (Eds.), *At the forefront of political psychology* (pp. 35–54). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Feldman, S., Mérola, V., & Dollman, J. (2021). The psychology of authoritarianism and support for illiberal policies and parties. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 635–654). London, UK: Routledge.
- Gamson, W. (1992). *Talking politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Göteborgsposten. (2022, January 14). Biblioteken varnar för tillträdesförbud [The library warns of access bans]. Retrieved from <https://www.gp.se/kultur-noje/noje-kultur/biblioteken-varnar-for-tilltradesforbud.95d0c3fc-1809-5cb4-8b0a-f3906508a9fe>
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). London, UK: Hutchinson.
- Hetherington, M., & Suhay, E. (2011). Authoritarianism, threat and Americans' support for the war on terror. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(3), 546–560. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00514.x
- Lakoff, G. (2016). *Moral politics: How liberals and conservatives think*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lecheler, S., & De Vreese, C. (2019). *News framing effects*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Neuman, R., Just, M., & Crigler, A. (1992). *Common knowledge: News and the construction of political meaning*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2018). *The monarchy of fear*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Shehata, A., Ekström, M., & Tryggvason, P. (2024). Selective exposure and new political cleavages: Media use and ideological reinforcement over time. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 29(3), 733–754. doi:10.1177/19401612221112003
- Slater, M. (2015). Reinforcing spirals model: Conceptualizing the relationship between media content exposure and the development and maintenance of attitudes. *Media Psychology*, 18(3), 370–395. doi:10.1080/15213269.2014.897236
- Stenner, K. (2005). *The authoritarian dynamic*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sundbeck, J. (2023, January 24). Barnen som grips med automatvapen: "Det är åt helvete" [The children caught with automatic weapons: 'It's fucked up']. *Aftonbladet*. Retrieved from <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/WR7QEK/barnen-som-grips-med-automatvapen-det-ar-at-helvete>
- Zaller, J. R. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Zangana, B. (2021, August 25). Ny Brå-rapport: Barn till invandrare oftare brottsmisstänkta [New Brå-report: Children of immigrants more often suspected of crime]. *Aftonbladet*. Retrieved from <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/oWMJdB/ny-bra-rapport-barn-till-invandrare-oftare-brottsmisstankta>