

ROKEACH DOGMATISM SCALE

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October 12, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed loot (2025). *ROKEACH DOGMATISM SCALE*. Encyclopedia of psychology.
Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=13512>

The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale (RDS)

The Core Definition of Dogmatism and the RDS

The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale (RDS) is a seminal psychometric instrument designed to measure the degree of dogmatism, defined by its creator, Dr. Milton Rokeach, as a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality. Unlike measures of specific political or religious doctrines, the RDS focuses exclusively on the structural properties of a belief system--that is, **how** a person holds their beliefs, rather than **what** those beliefs are. This focus on structure means that an individual scoring high on the RDS tends to possess an inflexible, rigid, and impenetrable mindset, regardless of whether their specific ideological content leans left, right, or centers on non-political matters like science or lifestyle choices. The fundamental mechanism being assessed is the degree of openness or closedness of the individual's mind toward new information and competing viewpoints, which is foundational to understanding resistance to change and rational discourse.

A key idea underlying the RDS is the concept of the "closed mind." According to Rokeach's theory, a highly dogmatic individual maintains a rigid separation between their "belief system" (accepted truths and authorities) and their "disbelief system" (rejected notions and opposing authorities). This isolation prevents the integration of contradictory evidence, allowing the individual to hold conflicting ideas simultaneously without experiencing significant cognitive dissonance. The scale seeks to quantify characteristics such as intolerance toward those with opposing views, reliance on authority figures, and a fear of the unknown or existential threat, all of which contribute to the maintenance of this closed cognitive structure. Consequently, the RDS provides a valuable tool for behavioral scientists seeking to understand the psychological mechanisms that underpin ideological extremism and communication barriers.

Historical Foundations and Theoretical Origins

The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale was developed primarily by the Polish-American social psychologist Milton Rokeach during the 1950s, a period marked by intense global ideological conflict and the psychological aftermath of World War II. Rokeach was heavily influenced by the work on the authoritarian personality conducted by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues, who developed the F-Scale. However, Rokeach recognized a significant limitation in the F-Scale: it was inherently biased toward measuring right-wing authoritarianism and often conflated specific political content with the underlying psychological structure of rigidity. He sought to create a more universally applicable measure that could identify the same closed-mindedness in individuals across the entire political and ideological spectrum, including those on the extreme left.

The origin of the RDS stemmed from Rokeach's desire to isolate the non-ideological, generalized

authoritarianism that dictates the style of thinking, independent of the ideological content. His seminal work, *The Open and Closed Mind* (1960), detailed his findings and theoretical framework, proposing that dogmatism is a deep-seated personality variable rather than a superficial manifestation of political preference. This theoretical shift was crucial because it allowed researchers to study the psychology of rigidity in contexts ranging from religious cults and scientific conservatism to cross-cultural communication, providing a much broader scope than previous measures tied strictly to political fascism. The development of the scale involved rigorous testing to ensure that the items measured generalized intolerance and rigidity rather than agreement with specific political platforms or policy statements.

Structure and Measurement of the Rokeach Scale

The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale typically consists of 40 items, although shorter versions (e.g., D-Scale Form E, 20 items) are often used in contemporary research. Respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a standard six-point or seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "disagree very strongly" to "agree very strongly." The statements themselves are designed to tap into several distinct yet related dimensions of the closed mind. These dimensions include intolerance toward those with opposing viewpoints, reliance on absolute authority, perception of the world as a threatening place, and a tendency toward either extreme pessimism or utopian idealism.

A high score on the RDS signifies a person who exhibits intellectual rigidity, finds comfort in clear-cut binaries (good vs. evil, right vs. wrong), and demonstrates an inability to distinguish clearly between the informational source (the person speaking) and the information content (what is being said). The scale measures the extent to which a person is willing to rely on their own internal judgment versus external, often arbitrary, authority figures. Furthermore, the phrasing of the items often reveals a generalized anxiety or threat perception, suggesting that the closed-mindedness serves a defensive function, protecting the ego from unsettling or complex truths that challenge the established, secure worldview. Items frequently focus on themes of isolation of systems, party loyalty, and the perceived inevitability of future conflict.

Practical Application: Identifying Closed Belief Systems

To illustrate the application of the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale, consider a real-world scenario involving a community group attempting to implement a complex, data-driven solution to a local environmental problem, such as water conservation. The proposed solution requires residents to adopt new technologies and fundamentally change long-held habits regarding resource use.

In this setting, the RDS can be used to predict which members of the community will exhibit the strongest resistance to change, regardless of their political affiliation or socioeconomic status. A

high-scoring dogmatic individual might express resistance not by arguing against the scientific data (the content), but by attacking the credibility of the researchers (the source) or by relying on long-standing, unverified traditional methods simply because they represent the established authority. For example, they might reject overwhelming statistical evidence about water depletion, instead clinging rigidly to the belief that "things have always been done this way, and they always will be," demonstrating a strong reliance on past authority and a refusal to integrate new, threatening information into their existing worldview.

The application steps reveal the psychological principle at work:

Identify the Threat: The new water conservation plan is perceived as a threat to the established order and personal security.

Invoke Authority: The dogmatic person dismisses the new plan by invoking an arbitrary, highly trusted authority (e.g., a community elder or an historical text) whose pronouncements are taken as absolute truth, overriding scientific consensus.

Isolate the System: They refuse to allow the new, contradictory data to interact with their existing belief system, maintaining the integrity of their "closed mind" by treating the data as fundamentally flawed or malicious, thus reinforcing the rigid separation between belief and disbelief.

Significance in Social and Political Psychology

The Rokeach Dogmatism Scale holds profound significance for the field of psychology, particularly in the subfields of social and political psychology, because it provided one of the first reliable, non-ideological measures of rigidity. Before the RDS, much of the research on authoritarianism was constrained by its focus on fascism; Rokeach's work liberated this line of inquiry, allowing researchers to study the psychological roots of closed-mindedness in any context where strongly held beliefs govern behavior. This made it possible to conduct cross-cultural comparisons of cognitive rigidity and to analyze how belief systems are maintained under varying levels of perceived threat.

Today, the concept measured by the RDS is critically important in several applied areas. In **communication studies**, it helps predict how susceptible individuals are to propaganda, persuasion, and misinformation; highly dogmatic individuals tend to be easier to persuade if the message comes from a perceived ingroup authority, but almost impossible to persuade if the message comes from an opposing outgroup source, regardless of the validity of the information. In **educational psychology**, it is used to understand resistance to learning complex or contradictory material. Furthermore, in the study of **political polarization**, the RDS framework helps explain why individuals, even when presented with identical factual information, often retreat further into their respective ideological camps, as the information is filtered through a structurally rigid lens that

prioritizes source loyalty over factual accuracy.

Connections and Relations to Other Concepts

The concept of dogmatism, as operationalized by Rokeach, is deeply embedded within the broader category of **Social Psychology** and intersects heavily with theories from Cognitive Psychology. Its most direct predecessor is the F-Scale (Authoritarian Personality Scale), developed by Adorno et al. The primary difference lies in the breadth of application: while the F-Scale focused on submission to authority, conventionalism, and aggression, often associated with right-wing political views, the RDS attempts to capture a more generalized rigidity of thought, divorced from specific political content. Rokeach argued that dogmatism is a higher-order construct encompassing authoritarianism but applying equally to any ideology.

Dogmatism is also closely related to concepts such as **Need for Closure (NFC)**, which describes an individual's desire for a firm answer to a question, and an aversion to ambiguity. While both NFC and dogmatism involve a preference for certainty and simplicity, dogmatism specifically emphasizes the closed nature of the belief system and the intolerance toward competing systems. Furthermore, dogmatism relates to **Intolerance of Ambiguity**, the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as threatening and uncomfortable. High scorers on the RDS are often low in cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to switch between different concepts or tasks. Thus, the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale serves as a crucial bridge between personality theory, which examines enduring traits, and cognitive processing models, which analyze how information is structured, filtered, and defended against external challenge.

Critiques and Modern Revisions of the RDS

Despite its significant impact, the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale has faced several methodological and theoretical critiques over the decades. One persistent criticism centers on the potential for remaining **political bias**. Although Rokeach intended the scale to be politically neutral, critics argue that many items still implicitly capture attitudes more common among conservatives or those resistant to social change, potentially failing to equally identify ideological rigidity in extreme liberal or leftist groups. This argument suggests that achieving true ideological neutrality in a measure of cognitive rigidity is inherently difficult when dealing with real-world political expressions.

Another major critique involves its **psychometric properties**. Some researchers have found issues with the factor structure of the scale, suggesting that the 40 items do not consistently measure a single, unified construct of dogmatism across different populations and cultures. Furthermore, the reliance on self-report measures means that the scale is susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents may consciously or unconsciously choose answers that make them appear more open-minded than they genuinely are. In response to these issues, several

shorter, revised versions of the scale have been developed, alongside alternative measures like the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale by Bob Altemeyer, which specifically refined the measurement of authoritarianism while acknowledging Rokeach's structural approach to understanding closed belief systems.

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