Pre-analysis plan for "Peer effects on authoritarianism – Evidence from the Norwegian Armed Forces"

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Abstract

We study how peer effects shape authoritarianism using a field experiment in the Norwegian Armed Forces. In particular, we ask: Does random assignment to people with different levels of authoritarian orientations make soldiers more or less authoritarian? In addition, we hope to answer the following questions: How does authoritarianism change during military service? Does information about peers' authoritarian preference change individual beliefs and orientations? In this plan we describe the hypotheses to be tested as well as our research design, including coding of treatment, control, and outcome variables, how we will deal with missing values, and the specification of the estimating equations. All deviations from the plan will be highlighted in the final paper.

1 Introduction

The recent rise of authoritarian leaders, parties and movements in many countries have brought attention to spread of authoritarian attitudes among ordinary citizens - here understood as the favoring of obedience over liberty, which entails an emphasis on authority and strong leadership (e.g., Foa and Mounk, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Most explanations for why many citizens value strong leaders and authority - even when this is at odds with democracy - assume that these preferences are relatively stable and deeply engrained, developed during formative years or experiences, such as upbringing or economic hardship. We propose a different pathway that gives rise to authoritarian tendencies. We argue that preferences for strong leadership may be also be triggered by social influence, as citizens adapt to the orientations of peers, potentially updating their authoritarian preferences in response to even short-term changes in social environment. We study how and to what extent authoritarian attitudes is driven by social influence. In particular, we will study peer effects in authoritarian attitudes as well as the causal effects of manipulating individual beliefs about the preferences of peers' on strong leadership.

Peer effects, while ubiquitous, are difficult to study in general as people self-select into networks and social environments. We overcome this by randomly assigning individuals to rooms in the Norwegian Armed Forces (NAF) for a period of eight weeks during bootcamp. In particular, people arrive to the camp of the Navy and Air Force recruit school on day one. On this day, they go through a series of checks and posts. We control one of these posts and have the recruits fill out a survey. At the end of day one we randomly assign individuals to rooms in which they will live for the duration of eight weeks. In these rooms the recruits solve tasks together and collaborate on tasks such as cleaning. After eight weeks, we go to the camp again and conduct the endline survey. Previous studies have found strong peer effects in the bootcamp of the NAF on gender attitudes (Dahl, Kotsadam and Rooth, 2021;

Finseraas et al., 2016) and attitudes towards immigrants (Finseraas and Kotsadam, 2017; Finseraas et al., 2019), while Johnsen et al. (2022) do not find peer effects in competitive preferences.

In addition to the field experiment to identify peer effects, we also conduct a survey experiment by providing information about other soldiers' baseline attitudes. Information provision experiments, where individuals are randomly given information about a topic, have become increasingly popular in the past decade (Haaland, Roth and Wohlfart, 2022). In our experiment, we will truthfully inform the recruits either that only a minority disagrees *or* that more people disagree than agree with a statement about the importance of having a strong leader. This is possible because the baseline survey's modal response on the respective survey question is "neither agree nor disagree".

This set-up allows us to better understand the malleability of authoritarianism, both to repeated interactions with peers in the tight environment of military dorms, using field-experimental methods, as well as to information provision about the views of peers, using survey-experimental methods with maximal researcher control. As authoritarian preferences have been linked to support for anti-democratic movements and leaders across the world, our study should have implications for our understanding of how democracies erode, by shedding light on how authoritarianism emerges and persists.

We will also investigate how the first weeks of military service change authoritarian attitudes. Previous studies have found that serving in the military leads to a more authoritarian personality (Ertola Navajas et al., 2022), lower institutional trust (Bove, Di Leo and Giani, 2022), more sexist attitudes and domestic violence (Amelia Gibbons and Rossi, 2022), but the results on political attitudes are mixed (Erikson and Stoker, 2011; Green, Davenport and Hanson, 2019).

2 Context

Norway has compulsory universal conscription. Universal conscription was introduced in Norway in 2014 and women born in 1997 or later have the same conscription duty as men. The screening process usually takes place in the last year of upper secondary high school. In the first step, all individuals in the cohort (approximately 60 000) fill in a self-declaration form from the Armed Forces. Based on this information, approximately 17 500 of these individuals go on to conduct physical, medical, and cognitive tests in ten test centers across the country. At the end, the conscripts are interviewed about their interest and what type of service they wish to pursue. About half of those who are screened (approximately 8 000 since 2014) are then recruited for service based on ability and motivation (https://www.forsvaret.no/krav). Most conscripts who serve in the Armed Forces declare that they serve voluntarily (Køber, 2020).

The duration of military service is normally one year, and it starts with an eight-week basic training camp. Our data collection is conducted in close collaboration with the Basic Training Establishment at the KNM Harald Haarfagre camp outside of Stavanger in Norway. The camp hosts basic bootcamp training for military conscripts doing service in the Air force and the Navy.

During bootcamp individuals are assigned to a troop, and then to a room within the barrack of that troop. The individuals conduct most of their training together as a troop but there are also many tasks that they need to solve as a team at the room level, such as room cleaning. Qualitative data from the same camp shows that individuals are more likely to spend time with people in their room and in their own troop rather than with people in other troops during bootcamp (Hellum, 2020). After bootcamp, the soldiers apply for different positions and are spread to different camps around Norway.

2.1 Main hypotheses

We will test three main hypotheses. The first pertains to how peer effects may operate in military dorms. Living with and interacting closely with roommates over 8 weeks, individuals may adapt their preferences to those of their peers. Preferences for strong leaders may diffuse across peers after conversations about politics and society. But such inclinations may also spread due to everyday discussions, including about situations that may come up during the training, such as questions related to chain-of-command and discipline. One may also argue that peers change their attitudes in opposition to their peers, and while we view this as less likely we retain a double sided test of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Recruits change their authoritarian orientation in response to peers' orientation*

The second hypothesis speaks to how the eight-week military experience may alter preferences, regardless of peer effects. We have no strong expectation on the direction of this relationship, however. Being directly exposed to the hierarchical structure of the military, and the norms in favor of strong leadership and chain-of-command, individuals may become more positively oriented towards strong leadership. Yet, this experience may also trigger more aversion towards strong leadership so we have a double sided test of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *Recruits change their authoritarian orientations during military service*

Our third main hypothesis pertains to how authoritarian orientations may be updated due to information (and perhaps changes in perceptions) about peers' authoritarian orientations. Again, there may be opposition reactions to information about peer attitudes so we use a double sided test of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. *Recruits change their authoritarian orientation after receiving updated information about peers' authoritarian orientation.*

3 Data and coding of main variables

We collected baseline data on the first day of the military service, in September 2022. When recruits arrived at the camp they went through various posts, such as the military police checking for drugs and a dental control, and one of these posts is a room where we administered a baseline survey. Groups of around 45 recruits enter the room where they are provided with a link to the survey, which they fill out using their phones. The survey is voluntary but everyone has to sit in the room and be quiet until everyone who wants to has finished the survey, which takes between 15-25 minutes. The survey questions are broad and relates to their preferences, attitudes, and behavior on a range of issues. Importantly, we measure baseline values of some our our outcome variables, which we discuss below. This is used to estimate whether recruits change their answers during military service, and to estimate any peer effects.

We will collect follow up data on November 13 2022.

3.1 Main variables for studying peer effects

Our field experimental intervention consists of randomizing individuals to live in different rooms for the duration of the recruit period. This generates exogenous peer effects and we can analyze the effect of being assigned to rooms with different baseline attitudes.

Authoritarian orientation: Our main dependent variable is an individual's orientation towards authoritarianism. There are many different ways of defining and operationalizing authoritarianism. Here, we focus on one particular aspect of authoritarianism, namely the *favoring of obedience over authority*, which is again linked to an emphasis on strong leaders and authority. This is also the focus in classical understandings of authoritarianism, such as those offered by Adorno et al. (2019) and Fromm (1957). In addition to implying respect for authorities and preferences for strong leadership, this orientation involves a preference for

societal order rather than disruption (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Stenner, 2005). According to Norris and Inglehart (2019), those who favor obedience therefore tend to support political institutions that promise to preserve social stability and enforce law and order, such as the military and the police.

Other contributions to the study of authoritarianism have introduced the concept of right-wing authoritarianism, conceptualised as a three-dimensional concept, consisting of an emphasis on 1) Willingness to *submit to authority*, 2) *cultural conformity* and 3) *aggression towards out-groups* (Altemeyer, 1988; Altemeyer and Altemeyer, 1996). Our study does not attempt to capture all the components that go into this latter concept. Rather, we mainly focus on the first sub-component, often referred to as submission.

Our main measure of authoritarianism is based on the following survey question: "For each of the following statements below, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each. Do you strongly agree (1), agree (2), neither agree or disagree (3) disagree (4), strongly disagree (5)?" "It is important to have a strong leader who gets things done, even if this sometimes means bypassing parliament and elections." We reverse code the variable. The variable will be treated as a continuous variable unless otherwise stated.

Beliefs about others' authoritarian orientations: We also measure beliefs about the authoritarian orientations of others with the following survey text: "If you were to guess, what do you think is the most common response to the former question (about strong leaders) among other respondents in the room where you lived during the recruit period?" The answer categories are the same as in the question for authoritarian orientations and this variable will also be reverse coded.

Both of these outcome variables are measured early in the endline survey.

Attitudes in the room: The main independent variable for measuring peer effects is *Attitudes in room* which is the average score on the authoritarian orientations for all others in the room (excluding the person herself) as measured in the baseline survey. We later

discuss alternative measures of peer exposure and alternative outcome variables.

In Figure 1 we show the distribution of authoritarian orientations from the baseline survey. We see that there is a lot of variation across respondents on this variable, and that the modal response is to neither agree nor disagree. We also see that more people disagree than agree with the statement. In Figure 2 we show the distribution of beliefs about the orientations of others, and note that the modal response is that recruits think that the other recruits agree with the statement. Hence, the recruits believe that their peers are more authoritarian than they really are. In Figure 3 we see the differences between orientations and beliefs more clearly in an overlaid histogram.

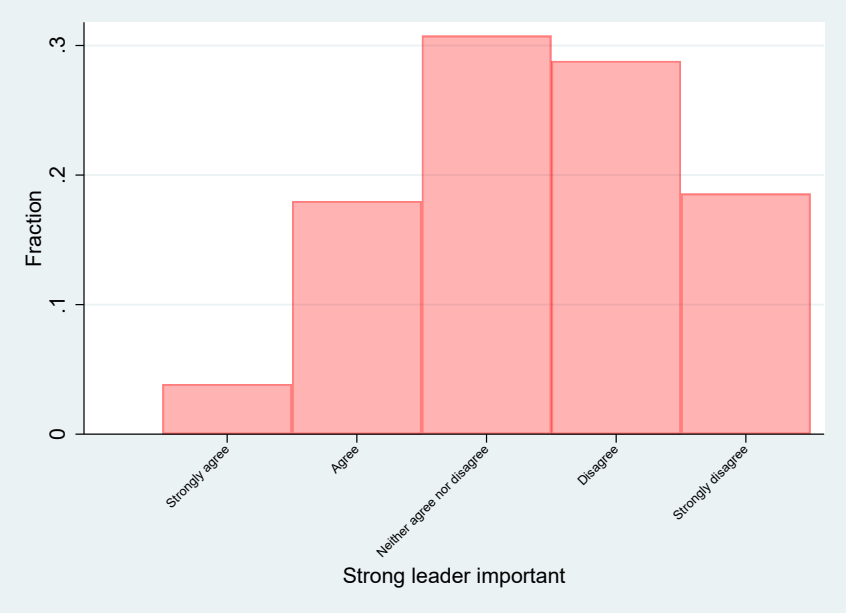

Figure 1: Distribution of authoritarian orientations.
Notes: The sample consists of all recruits that answered the survey at baseline.

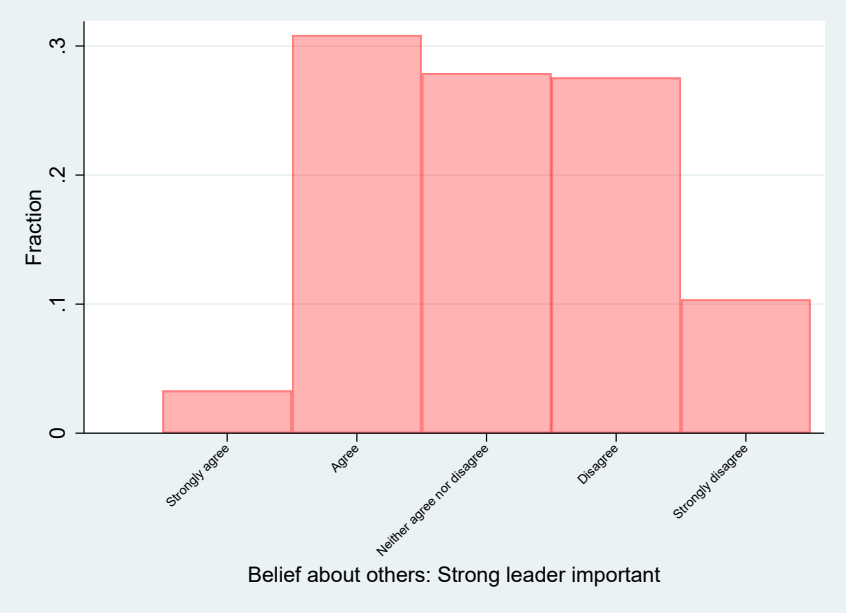

Figure 2: Distribution of beliefs.

Notes: The sample consists of all recruits that answered the survey at baseline.

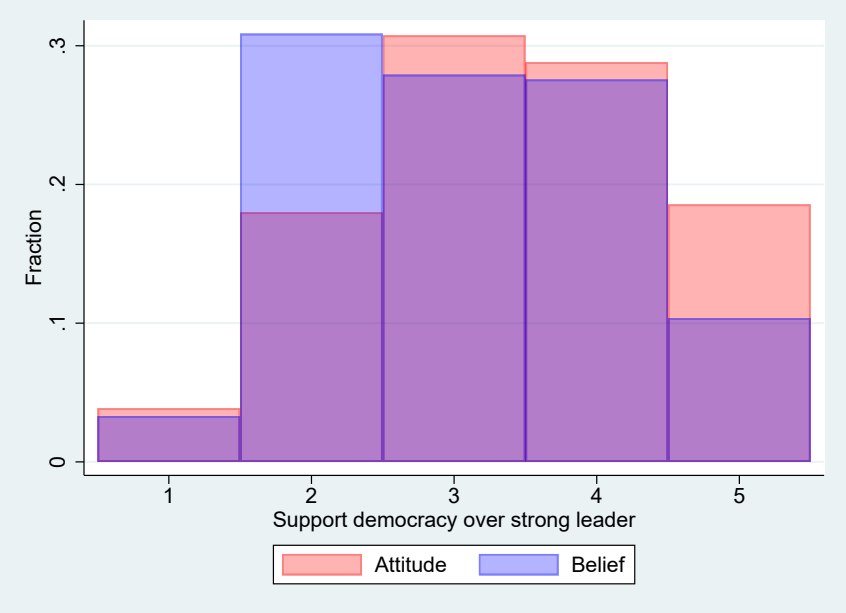

Figure 3: Orientations and beliefs.

Notes: The sample consists of all recruits that answered the survey at baseline.

3.1.1 Other outcome variables for the peer effects analysis

There are many different ways of operationalizing authoritarianism, understood as an emphasis on obedience and authority. We also include other survey questions, that may tap into our concept in different ways, to explore whether effects differ across various measures.

Political order: As discussed above, an essential aspect of authoritarianism is a desire for social and political order, as opposed to disruption. To measure preferences for political and social order we draw on the following question: "If you had to choose, which two of the things on this list would you say are most important as national priorities? Please choose two. Maintaining order in the nation; Giving people more say in important government decisions; Fighting rising prices; Protecting freedom of speech." The order of the priorities is randomized. We create a dummy variable equal to 1 if "Maintaining order in the nation" is chosen.

Child-rearing values: Recent literature has suggested that authoritarianism can be understood as a personality trait, that can be captured drawing on a battery of questions on principles for child-rearing (e.g., Engelhardt, Feldman and Hetherington, 2021). We use an extended list of pair matched child rearing questions that has been shown to tap authoritarianism very well by Engelhardt, Feldman and Hetherington (2021). We code each of the authoritarian leaning items within each pair to be one and then we create a measure summing all components together into a a measure of ***Authoritarian preferences*** running from zero to eight. The questions are as follows:

"Although there are a number of qualities that people think children should have, every person thinks that some are *more important* than others. You will now be presented with a list of choices between qualities, and asked to choose which of the qualities you think are most important. For children it is most important to be..."

1. (A) INDEPENDENT or (B) RESPECTFUL OF THEIR ELDERS?
2. (A) OBEDIENT or (B) SELF-RELIANT?
3. (A) WELL-BEHAVED or (B) CONSIDERATE?

4. (A) CURIOUS or (B) GOOD MANNERED?
5. (A) FREE-SPIRITED or (B) POLITE?
6. (A) ORDERLY or (B) IMAGINATIVE?
7. (A) ADAPTABLE or (B) DISCIPLINED?
8. (A) LOYAL or (B) OPEN-MINDED?

Military rule: Finally, we also use a measure that taps into preferences for strong institutions that promise to enforce social order, with a focus on the military. We measure this based on a statement that it is added to the list of statements that the respondent can agree or disagree with (1-5) and the statement reads: "It is OK that the military takes over when the government is incompetent".

3.2 Main variables for the survey experiment

Our survey experiment consists of randomly providing information about the answers of all recruits to the same question at baseline. As we have seen, the modal answer at baseline was "neither agree nor disagree" and depending on where we put those respondents we can make two true statements after the following prompt:

Also at the first day of the recruit period you were all asked whether you agreed or disagreed with the statement "It is important to have a strong leader who gets things done, even if this sometimes means bypassing parliament and elections." [Treatment 1 or 2]

1. Authoritarian treatment: "This statement was somewhat popular among the recruits, as only a minority disagreed or strongly disagreed with it."
2. Anti-authoritarian treatment: "This statement was somewhat unpopular among the recruits, as more respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed than agreed or strongly agreed with it."

This information is given at the end of the survey in order not to dilute our main outcome variable for the peer effects treatment. After the information is given we again ask respondents about their attitudes and beliefs. The belief question is no longer about the people

they shared room with, but rather about the beliefs about all other respondents taking the survey at the same time. Querying responses to the same question twice in one survey wave runs the risk of demand or anchoring effects but experimental evidence suggest that repeated measures designs tend to yield the same results as design that split responses across survey waves (Clifford, Sheagley and Piston, 2021). Using these outcomes, we can analyse the effect of information about others' authoritarian attitudes on a person's own authoritarian attitudes. This evidence will give us deeper insights into how social norms shape democratic and authoritarian attitudes.

To minimize the risk of any harm, at the end of the survey we will provide additional information to individuals who received the authoritarian treatment. We will inform them that, actually, the most common answer was neither disagree nor agree and that there were in fact more people that disagreed than agreed with the statement. We do this to reduce the possibility of any updated authoritarian beliefs in the longer term.

3.3 Controls

We have many independent variables from the baseline survey that can enter as control variables (to potentially increase power) and to test for balance across rooms and treatments. These are:

Authoritarian orientation and ***Beliefs about others' authoritarian orientations*** of others, measured at baseline (same coding as for endline, see Section 3.1, except that the belief question was not about the people they shared room with, but rather about the beliefs about all other respondents taking the survey at the same time).

High trust: Answer to the question "Generally, would you say that most people can be trusted or that one cannot be careful enough?". 1= Cannot be careful enough to 10=Most people can be trusted. High trust are those answering high on this variable. We will transform this into a binary variable by splitting it in a way that retains the ordering while it

minimizes the difference in number of observations between the two categories.

Vote: Answer to the question "If there was a municipal election today, would you have voted?", where we code vote=1 if the respondents answer yes and zero otherwise.

Party choice: Dummy variables for party choice based on the answer to the question "If there was an election today, which party would you have voted for?". Parties with less than 5 percent of the answers are coded as "other".

High political interest: A dummy variable for answering high on the question: "How interested are you in politics". Answer categories range from 1=very little interest to 7=Very interested. We will transform this into a binary variable by splitting it in a way that retains the ordering while it minimizes the difference in number of observations between the two categories.

Female: A dummy variable equal to one if the respondent is female.

High GPA: Self reported grades from high school at baseline, equal to 1 if grades are high and zero otherwise. We will transform this into a binary variable by splitting it in a way that retains the ordering while it minimizes the difference in number of observations between the two categories.

High risk aversion: Answer to the question "In general, how willing are you to take risks?" The answer categories are from 1 to 10 where 1 is labeled "not willing to take risk at all", and 10 is labeled "very willing to take risk". We will transform this into a binary variable by splitting it in a way that retains the ordering while it minimizes the difference in number of observations between the two categories. The ones with higher risk aversion are coded as one.

Mother and Father with high education (2 variables): Based on the question: "Do your parents have higher education (university/college)?". Original: 1= Yes, both have higher education, 2=My mother has higher education, my father has not, 3= My father has higher education, my mother has not, 4=No, neither of them have higher education. We

recode the answers into two variables: Mother with high education (1/2=1, 3/4= 0) and Father with high education (1 and 3=1, 2 and 4=0)

Plan higher education: Based on the question: "Do you plan to take higher education?" Original: 1=Yes, 2=Don't know, 3=No. We recode the answers such that 2 and 3 equal 0.

4 Empirical strategy and hypotheses

To test our first main hypothesis, about peer effects in authoritarian orientations, we run the following regression:

(1) $Y_{i,t0,r} = \alpha Y_{i,t0} + \beta Attitudes\ in\ room_{i,t0,r-i} + \gamma X_{i,t0} + \delta Troop_{itr} + \epsilon_{itr}$,

where i is individual, t is time (t=0 indicates baseline and t=1 is endline), and r is room. The main outcome variable in this regression is *authoritarian orientations* and we study effects on beliefs and on the outcomes in Section 3.1.1 as secondary outcomes. The *Attitudes in the room* are measured as the attitudes of the other people, i.e. excluding the individual herself. The vector **X** will contain the controls listed in Section 3.3. Troop fixed effects are strata variables as individuals are randomly assigned within troops.

To test our second main hypothesis, that authoritarian orientations change during military service, we will stack the data in long format (panel) and run the following regression

(4) $Y_{i,t} = \delta Wave2_{i,t1} + \gamma X_{i,t0} + \epsilon_{it}$,

where Wave2 is a dummy variable for answering the survey at endline.

To test our third main hypothesis, that providing information about the baseline answers of others affect authoritarian orientations, we estimate the following regression:

(2) $Y_{i,t1} = \alpha Y_{i,t0} + \beta Authoritarian\ Treatment_{i,t1} + \gamma X_{i,t0} + \epsilon_{it}$,

where Y is either attitudes or beliefs, but this time from the second time we measure the variable in the endline survey. The vector **X** now also includes the troop fixed effects. We use robust standard errors in these regressions. The effect on beliefs is seen as a secondary

hypothesis. We will also explore effects of the information using a within person design comparing the two times the respondent answers in the endline survey.

We will present results from estimations without other control variables than the troops and with the full set of controls. Our main estimation will however be one with optimal controls being chosen from the total list of controls using a post-double LASSO selection approach of Belloni, Chernozhukov and Hansen (2014). The LASSO selection approach selects those variables that are correlated with both treatment and the outcomes which may improve precision in the estimates (especially including the baseline values of attitudes and beliefs) and it also helps to correct for imbalances across groups.

If we have missing values on explanatory variables, we will code the variables as zero and include dummy variables controlling for missing status so that we do not lose observations. To make the models fully saturated, we partition the covariate space and add control variables as indicator variables rather than using their multi-valued codings (Athey and Imbens, 2017). If cells are too small, with less than 5 percent of the observations, adjacent cells are combined. When using interaction terms and in tests of balance we will retain the continuous coding of the variables. We cluster the standard errors at the room level when estimating peer effects.

4.1 Balance and attrition

To test for balance, we will regress treatment on the main independent variables described in section 3.3, both individually and together, while controlling for the troop fixed effects in the peer effects analyses. With many variables tested, some of them are likely to be different and we will conduct an F-test of whether the control variables jointly predict treatment status. The LASSO procedure will also select variables that are imbalanced and control for them.

We will not manage to reach all the respondents initially sampled since many people quit during bootcamp. We will check whether attrition and missing outcomes are correlated with treatment. If there are statistically significant differences in attrition or non-response

between treatment and control (controlling for the troop fixed effects), we will follow the correction proposed by Lee (2009).

5 Exploratory analyses

There are many choices and possibilities in our data collection to learn from the data. We feel the need to reduce the number of main hypotheses for the analysis to be informative as one is likely to find support for some hypotheses if many are tested. At the same time, we want to learn from the data and we here sketch some exploratory analyses that we will conduct. Any effects on these variables will be clearly delineated as exploratory findings and we hope that future studies can test them or that we ourselves can test them in later iterations of the experiment.

Our main peer effect hypothesis is about the average attitudes in the room. It is not obvious, however, that it is the average that matters most. One can make the case for individuals with strong opinions likely being more influential. As such, we will explore the effects of the share and number of people in the room answering 1 and 5 as well. We will further explore effects of the distribution of attitudes. Dimant et al. (2022) argue that several aspects of the distribution may be important: Whether the distribution is tight or loose (the variance); and whether it is polarized. In addition, one can also make hypotheses that all of the effects are also moderated by baseline attitudes and risk aversion. It is clear that the number of hypotheses are many and we believe that the average attitudes is a good start to investigate peer effects.

The baseline beliefs may also play an important role in the information treatment analysis since there may be heterogeneous effects depending on the direction of updating. This is important as we would expect different effects based on whether the prior overestimated, correctly estimated, or underestimated authoritarian support as compared to the posterior

signal received. We will therefore also interact treatment with the two dummies for baseline overestimation (1 and 2) and underestimation (4 and 5), with 3 being the reference category leading to the following regression:

(3) $Y_{i,t1} = \beta Authoritarian\ Treatment_{i,t1} + \gamma X_{i,t0} + \delta overestimation_{i,t0} + \theta overestimation_{i,t0} * Authoritarian\ Treatment_{i,t1} + \eta underestimation_{i,t0} + \psi underestimation_{i,t0} * Authoritarian\ Treatment_{i,t1} + \epsilon_{it}$

We use this as exploratory checks to test for directional predictions. Conducting the same analysis with endline beliefs as outcome is also argued to be important to differentiate between genuine belief changes and priming (Haaland, Roth and Wohlfart, 2022).

In general, heterogeneity analyses will be conducted by interacting the treatments with the various baseline covariates and possibly also by conducting honest causal forest estimations (Athey, Tibshirani and Wager, 2019; Wager and Athey, 2018).

6 Power calculation, reporting, and discussion of null findings

We have three main hypotheses and in the simplest case where treatment is assigned at the individual level, assuming an endline sample of 600 individuals and 80 percent power, we can detect effects as small as 0.23 standard deviations.

We will also adjust the p-values for the fact that we are testing the impact of three main treatments. We follow the recommendations developed by Benjamini and Hochberg (1995) to minimize the false non-discovery rate. The main advantage of the method is that it is limiting the risk of false discoveries while only adjusting the critical values based on other true hypotheses. The false discovery rate method implies that the m p-values of the i hypotheses are ordered from low to high and that the critical value of the p-value is then p(i) = a*i/m. To illustrate, with 3 hypotheses and a significance level (a) of 0.05, the critical

p-value would be 0.017 for the one with the lowest p-value (0.05* 1/3, which is the same as a Bonferroni correction). For the second hypothesis, the critical p-value is 0.033 (0.05*2/3) and for the third it is 0.05 (0.05*3/3). As we have 3 main hypotheses, the most significant effect would have to have a p-value of less than 0.017 and the minimum detectable effect becomes 0.27 with 600 individuals. These calculations does not account for the fact that we have baseline data with variables that likely explain a large share of the variation in the outcomes. In the baseline data for attitudes, our set of control variables (including beliefs) yield an R-square of over 0.4. Assuming at least such a high R-squared in the endline data, where we also control for baseline values of the outcome, our minimum detectable effect is 0.2 also when adjusting for testing three hypotheses.

For the clustered treatment in testing peer effects the power will be lower and it is less clear what the minimum detectable effect is as it will depend on the intraclass correlation within rooms. We will therefore be explicit ex-post about the magnitudes we can reject.

Some of our findings are likely to be null results. It is often difficult to judge whether such results are showing a meaningful lack of effect or whether they arise due to low power. To investigate if the effects are meaningful null findings we will conduct equivalence tests with two one-sided t-tests (TOST) and show how large positive and negative effects we can reject. The tests are one sided in equivalence testing as one tests whether effects are larger than a highest value and lower than a lowest value. In practice, the procedure is equivalent to presenting the bounds of a 90 percent confidence interval.

7 IRB approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the IRB officer at the Frisch center. Informed consent for storing and combining the data is given by the participants.

8 Registration

The pre-analysis plan is archived before any data is collected. We archive it at the registry for randomized controlled trials in economics held by The American Economic Association: https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/ on November 11 2022. We will start the endline data collection on November 13 2022.

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