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(Article begins on next page)

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Meaning buffers right-wing authoritarian responses to societal threat via the mediation of loss of  
perceived control

Abstract

The literature shows that exposure to societal threat stemming from criminality can elicit an increase in right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) via the mediation of the loss of perceived control. In this study, we investigated whether the perception of meaning can act as a buffering factor for such process, performing an experiment with 316 Italian university students (67.8% women; mean age = 25.81,  $SD = 9.18$ ). A moderated mediation model showed that the loss of perceived control mediated the relation between societal threat stemming from criminality and RWA, but that the second link was significant only among people low in meaning. Limitations, implications and possible developments of this research are discussed.

Key words: Right-wing Authoritarianism, Meaning, Threat, Compensatory control, Mediation, Moderation, DPTE

## 1. Introduction

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is the covariation of three attitudinal clusters: (a) *authoritarian submission* (a strong tendency to submit to authorities, perceived as established and legitimate); (b) *authoritarian aggression* (a general aggressiveness directed against various people, and perceived to be positively sanctioned by established authorities); and (c) *conventionalism* (a strong tendency to adhere to the social conventions, perceived as endorsed by the established authorities) (Altemeyer, 1996). RWA positively correlates with prejudice, support of death penalty, punitive attitudes towards unconventional persons, religiousness, approval of the injustice perpetrated by governing authorities, and obedience in Milgram-style experiments (Altemeyer, 1996).

### 1.1 Societal threat, loss of perceived control, and RWA

In the literature, consistent with the first publications on the topic (e.g., Fromm, 1941), there is converging evidence showing that actual and perceived societal threat is one of the strongest predictors of RWA (Onraet, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Pattyn, 2013). Authoritarianism and a bulk of correlated constructs, such as negative attitude toward minority groups, intolerance, and tendency to discriminate deviant outgroups, spread particularly during periods of high societal threat. This result stems from analyses performed at the ecological (e.g., McCann, 1999; Peterson & Gerstein, 2005; Sales, 1973), at the individual level (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Nagoshi, Terrell, & Nagoshi, 2007; Rickert, 1998; Russo, Mirisola, & Rocco, 2014), and even in multilevel studies (Rocco, Vieno, & Russo, 2014).

These results have been recently extended and fine-tuned. Social threat might affect different psychological needs (Jonas et al., 2014). People share a basic existential motivation to perceive themselves as being able to control their environment, to avoid high arousal and anxiety (Luck, Pearson, Madden, & Hewett, 1999). Threat impairs perceived control (Fritsche, Jonas, & Kessler, 2011), and people may cope with the existential threat coming from having low levels of perceived control over their environment by endorsing external systems that impose structure and order. The

most efficient strategy people can rely on— whenever their attempts to control directly their world fail—is to submit to powerful others (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009). According to the literature on authoritarianism, RWA accounts for people's tendency to do so (Altemeyer, 1996).

Linking these results with those showing that RWA increases as a function of low control (Fritsche et al., 2011), Mirisola, Roccato, Russo, Spagna, and Vieno (2014, Study 2) showed experimentally that societal threat stemming from criminality induced a loss in perceived control which, in turn, fostered an increase in RWA only among low RWA scorers. Thus, under criminal threat, differences between low and high RWA scores disappeared. It remains to analyze if there are factors that may hinder the impact of societal threat on RWA. This might help to understand why some socially threatened people do not become authoritarian, and give interesting insight on how authoritarian responses could be controlled. In this study, we investigated the role of meaning as potential buffer of the relation between societal threat stemming from criminality, the loss of perceived control, and RWA.

### **1.2 Meaning as a buffer for the elicitation of RWA responses**

Meaning is conceptualized as the need to find significance or purpose in one's existence (Baumeister, 1991). Many scholars consider it as a fundamental need that guides identity processes (Hogg, 2000; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollé, & Scabini, 2006): A successful outcome of this search—perceiving life as meaningful—has been conceived as the core component of psychological well-being (Vignoles, 2011).

Meaning may buffer the negative effects of threat (Henry et al., 2014). Seeing oneself as a meaningful part of a meaningful world is especially important when people face threatening, traumatic, or unpredictable events, such as military combat, terminal illness, and bereavement (Vignoles, 2011). Having a meaningful life and identity gives a particular benefit in threatening situations, because actions become significant beyond their contingent physical context (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Thus, the social world and one's role within it become relatively predictable and it is easier for the individual to plan effective action, avoid harm, and know whom to trust. On

the contrary, individuals who do not have a meaningful perception of their life and identity are more easily lost into immediate threatening situations and tend to react by endorsing external systems that impose structure and order. In this line, Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos (2013) found that threatened individuals with low levels of meaning tend to identify with radical groups. Moreover, Adelman, Hogg, and Levin (2009) showed that, among Palestinian Muslims, the support for the use of suicide bombs was notably stronger among those who identified strongly as Palestinian and reported lower levels of meaning.

However, there are no studies testing the idea that meaning could buffer authoritarian responses to societal threat. In this study we proposed that exposure to societal threat may not lead to an increase of RWA among people reporting high levels of meaning. Having high levels of meaning should help them to react to threatening situations and to the loss of perceived control by relying upon their own meaningful world more than on a strong authoritarian power, i.e. increasing their RWA.

## **2. Goals and hypothesis**

The aim of this study was to test whether the individual level of meaning moderates the relationship between threat, loss of perceived control, and RWA. Based on previous research (Mirisola et al., 2014), we expected societal threat to foster an increase in RWA via the mediation of the loss of perceived control. Most importantly, we hypothesized a buffering effect of meaning on the relationship between the loss of perceived control and RWA: We expected meaning to undermine the process through which societal threat foster RWA.

## **3. Materials and method**

To investigate the buffering role of meaning, we used the procedure and measures used by Mirisola et al.(2014, Study 2), adding the measure of meaning in the pre-experimental questionnaire. Here we briefly summarize method and measures; more methodological details can be found in Mirisola and colleagues' article. We performed an experiment by simulating an electoral campaign using the Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (DPTE, Lau & Redlawsk,

2001). The DPTE is a computer-based dynamic-information board developed to study decision making in complex social situations by mimicking the flow of information. The experimental procedure included four main stages: (a) a pre-experimental questionnaire; (b) a two-minute practice session; (c) a nine-minute mock electoral campaign; and (d) a post-experimental questionnaire. On average, participants completed the simulation in about 30 minutes.

Three hundred and sixteen Italian undergraduates (67.8% women; mean age = 25.81,  $SD = 9.18$ ) participated in this study. All participants were recruited during university classes and their participation in the study was voluntary. They completed the task individually.

### **3.1 Pre-experimental questionnaire**

We assessed meaning through the Presence of Life Meaning subscale of Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler' (2006) Meaning of Life Questionnaire (five seven-category items,  $\alpha = .91$ ). This and all the following scores have been computed by averaging the single items into a mean index. High scores expressed high meaning. Pre-experimental perceived control ( $\alpha = .74$ ) was assessed by the six five-category items used by Kay et al. (2008). High scores expressed high perceived control.

### **3.2 Experimental session**

We created a mock electoral campaign with four candidates competing for the role of Italian Prime minister in the 2025 general election. At the beginning of the simulation, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the hypothetical situation of coming back to Italy in 2025 after some years spent abroad. They were told that the Election Day was approaching and that they had to get a sense of what the country and the parties had become in order to cast a vote at the end of the campaign. After this instruction and a two-minute practice session, participants experienced the mock electoral campaign, during which titles of information regarding the election scrolled down on the computer screen. Participants could read the information they were interested in by clicking on its title. While reading the detailed information, the titles continued scrolling in the background. During the campaign, information about the candidates running for the election and generic nonpolitical information (such as information about the country) was available. In the middle of the

campaign, we introduced the experimental manipulation: A randomly selected group of participants ( $n = 155$ ) read a secure scenario, while the others ( $n = 161$ ) read an insecure scenario. In the first case Italy was presented as one of the most secure nations in the world, in the second case as a very dangerous place (see Appendix). Right after the experimental manipulation, the electoral campaign continued and at its end participants cast their vote.

### 3.3 Post-experimental questionnaire

RWA was assessed using 10 four-category items from Giampaglia and Roccato's (2002) Italian version of Altemeyer's (1996) RWA Scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Participants' post-experimental perceived control on their life was measured using the same six items administered in the pre-experimental session ( $\alpha = .81$ ). We examined the mediating effect of the loss of perceived control using perceived control's residual gain score estimate, i.e., the residual of a regression, with perceived pre-experimental control as predictor variable and perceived post-experimental control as dependent variable (Williams, Zimmerman, Rich, & Steed, 1984). As manipulation check, we asked our participants to answer 10 four-category items randomly chosen from the Italian version of Altemeyer's Dangerous World Beliefs (DWB) Scale (Mirisola, Di Stefano, & Falgares, 2007) ( $\alpha = .88$ ). For all the above measures, participants were asked to answer imagining themselves back to Italy in 2025. Finally, participants filled in a standard socio-demographic form.

## 4. Results

Preliminary analyses performed to check the variables distributions for univariate and multivariate normality showed no problems concerning skewness or kurtosis. We also found normalized estimates of Mardia's coefficient to be acceptable ( $< 3$ ). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are reported in Table 1. To check whether the experimental manipulation was effective, we compared the DWB scores of participants that were exposed to the secure vs. insecure scenario. As expected, participants in the threatening condition reported higher DWB scores,  $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = .48$ , than those in the secure condition,  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = .53$ ,  $t(314) = -4.619$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ .



To test our hypotheses, we used EQS and carried out a series of path analyses aimed to predict post-experimental RWA. First, we tested our theoretical model, in which the effect of threat on RWA was fully mediated by loss of perceived control. This model showed adequate fit to the data,  $\chi^2(1) = .768$ ,  $p = .42$ ,  $CFI = 1.00$ ,  $RMSEA = .00$  (95%  $CI$ : .00, .04). A relatively conservative criterion for evaluating mediated effects in structural equation modelling is the significance of indirect effect estimates, calculated by EQS based on the Sobel method (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). As expected, RWA was predicted directly by loss of perceived control, and indirectly, through loss of perceived control, by threat ( $SIEE = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

To test whether there was a moderation effect of meaning, we performed a series of multigroup path analyses. A median split on meaning was used to distinguish between high and low scorers. Then, based on Byrne (2004), we assessed model invariance between the two groups. As a first step, all of the hypothesized paths were constrained to be equal across the two groups. This model did not show adequate fit indices,  $\chi^2(4) = 8.036$ ,  $p = .09$ ,  $CFI = .81$ ,  $RMSEA = .06$  (95%  $CI = .00, .12$ ). Modification indices revealed that the path between loss of perceived control and RWA was significantly different across groups. Constraint on this path was relaxed and the model was re-estimated, improving the fit indices,  $\chi^2(3) = 1.382$ ,  $p = .70$ ;  $CFI = 1.00$ ;  $RMSEA = .00$  (95%  $CI .00, .07$ ). The  $\chi^2$  difference test was significant, confirming that this model fitted the data better than the previous one,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 6.654$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results from the revised model are shown in Figure 1. We explained the 11.3 % of RWA variance in condition of low meaning and the 0.1% in condition of high meaning. As hypothesized, the loss of perceived control had a positive effect on RWA for participants with low levels of life meaning only.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Parallel analyses performed using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) method for the estimation of mediated and moderated effects led to analogous results (results available upon request). In this model, we included both the interaction between meaning and threat and the interaction between meaning and loss of perceived control. In line with the results from the SEM (results available upon request), only the interaction between meaning and loss of perceived

## 5. Discussion

Since the 1930s, psychologists theorized and showed a positive link between societal threat and authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1933; Rickert, 1998). However, only recently empirical studies focused on the identification of mediators and moderators of this relationship. On the one hand, it has been shown that societal threat fosters RWA via the mediation of the loss of perceived control (Mirisola et al., 2014). On the other, this increase has been observed—especially or exclusively—among low RWA scorers (Mirisola et al., 2014) and, consistently, among people low in Openness to Experience, a trait that consistently show negative correlations with RWA (Dallago & Roccato, 2010; Dallago, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2011, 2012). These results are consistent with Fromm’s (1941) conceptualization of RWA as a psychopolitical mechanism people can resort to in order to compensate for the loss of personal control over their social world. Most importantly, they sound particularly worrisome in that they show that, under threatening societal conditions, authoritarianism differences between low and high RWA scorers tend to disappear and both groups would be inclined to support extreme right-wing parties (Cornelis & Van Hiel, in press).

In this study, we have contributed to this recent theoretical development by identifying a buffer of the threat-authoritarianism link. We showed that meaning hinders authoritarian responses to the loss of perceived control provoked by societal threat: Societal threat fostered RWA only among people scoring low in meaning. We obtained these results by replicating Mirisola and colleagues’ experimental study (2014, Study 2). This methodological strategy had two main strong points. On one hand, we could collect data directly comparable with theirs and we observed the same increase of authoritarianism as a response to societal threat. This choice not only allowed us to provide additional support to the idea that people increase their level of authoritarianism under socially threatening conditions via the mediation of the loss of perceived control, but also to identify

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control significantly influenced RWA,  $b = -.05$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ . The indirect relation was estimated to lie between .1286 and .5508, with a 95% confidence interval.

a new buffer of the same coping strategy. On the other hand, by using the DPTE to simulate an ongoing electoral campaign, we could include the manipulation of the study into a complex and dynamic environment, disguising adequately the goals of the study and increasing external validity.

Our findings have been relevant to both the literature on RWA and on meaning. As concerns the first, only a few studies have shown that the societal threat-RWA link may be moderated by other variables. These variables are Openness to experience—a construct negatively linked to RWA—and RWA itself. In this paper, we introduced for the first time a moderator that is not strictly related to RWA, and showed that RWA might be influenced by individual difference variables other than personality. The search for meaning has been conceived as a universal need that drives individual identity processes (Vignoles, 2011). The moderating effect this variable showed in this study was particularly relevant, because it highlighted how the rise in RWA may be deeply influenced by socially constructed psychological aspects, such as individual identity and individual needs.

Our results suggested new interesting avenues for future research on the relations between societal conditions, personality, and ideological attitudes, improve our knowledge of the role of social-psychological process in the raise of RWA. For example, recent studies have underlined how parental styles and parental goal promotion may affect children RWA (e.g. Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007). We could argue that these aspects could also explain individual variation in RWA as a response to threat. Moreover, our results allowed an important step forward in order to shed light on the nature of RWA. Indeed, they have been consistent with Duckitt's (2001) conception of RWA as an ideological variable liable to change as a function of the interaction between the individual and his/her context. At present, results consistent with a dynamic conception of RWA have become more and more spread (e.g., Dallago, Cima, Roccato, Ricolfi, & Mirisola, 2008; Russo et al., 2014; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). Thus, we feel like concluding that the classic conception of RWA as a stable personality trait (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1996) should be dismissed.

Our results have been important also for a better understanding of the role of meaning in individual functioning. According to MacKanzie and Baumaister (2014), having meaning has several positive consequences: It helps people to discern patterns in the environment, enhances communication, and facilitates self-control. Yet, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how meaning could act as a buffer not only for the rise in individual distress under threatening situation for the individual, but also for the rise in authoritarian and radical responses under the condition of loss of perceived control due to threatening situations for the society. A single attempt to shed light on this process can be found in Diederik and Marret's (2011), where a buffering effect of meaning has been found in the link between threat and stereotyping. In this study it has been shown that the impact of system threat on stereotyping disappears when the desire to justify the system is satisfied through an alternative route (i.e. when the individual meaning remains high). Our results have been consistent with this result, and may be used as bases for enhancing our knowledge in this field.

As often happens, our studies led us to answer some research questions and raised some other questions. First, we do not have information about the duration of the effect we observed. Given the nature of the study, it would not be surprising to find that the increase in authoritarianism has a short life. However, societal threats in the real world are much more persistent and salient as compared to the simple scenarios that we used in this study. Therefore, it is likely that being constantly exposed to societal threats could affect people's RWA level even more, in terms of both magnitude and duration of the effect. Longitudinal studies are needed to address this issue. Second, future studies could investigate more in depth how other aspects of individual identity may buffer this effect and in relation with different types of threat (societal, symbolic, etc.).

To conclude, besides stimulating new questions to be addressed in future research, we believe the present study shed light on psychological processes underling RWA changes, leading to a better understanding of this complex construct, and on the role meaning has in influencing socially relevant variables such as authoritarianism.

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Table 1

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Post-experimental RWA	1			
2. Loss of perceived control	.13*	1		
3. Threatening scenario	.08*	.18**	1	
4. Meaning	.13*	-.15**	.05	1
<i>Mean</i>	2.03	.01	.01	
<i>SD</i>	.51	.92	1.00	

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . The point-biserial correlations are displayed for the threatening scenario.

Figure 1.

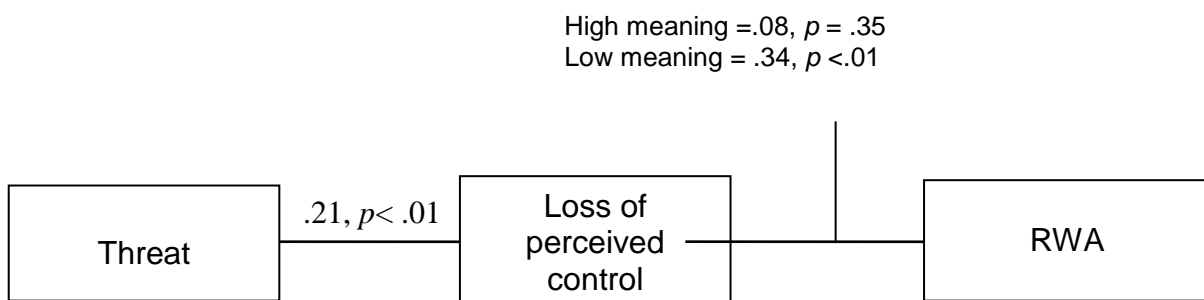


Figure and table's captions

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations (SD) and Pearson's Correlations among the variables in the model.

Figure 1. Moderated mediation model tested. Reported values are standardized betas.