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Self-concept clarity buffers the impact of societal threat to safety on right-wing authoritarianism

Original Citation:	
Availability:	
This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1633876	since 2020-04-23T11:13:10Z
Published version:	
DOI:10.1080/00224545.2016.1229255	
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(Article begins on next page)

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2	Self-concept clarity buffers the impact of societal threat to safety on right-wing authoritarianism
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5	Abstract
6	In an Italian community sample ($N = 86$, men = 31.4%, mean age = 38.30, $SD = 14.27$), we
7	performed a quasi-experimental vignette study on the link between societal threat to safety and
8	right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), focused on the moderating role of self-concept clarity (SCC).
9	A moderated regression showed that manipulated societal threat to safety fostered RWA only
10	among low SCC scorers.
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16	Key words: Self-concept clarity, Right-wing authoritarianism, Societal threat to safety,
17	Moderation, DPTE
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Self-concept clarity buffers the impact of societal threat to safety on right-wing

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Spencer, 1997).

authoritarianism The image people hold of themselves is an important determinant of how they think, feel, and act at the individual, relational, and societal levels (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007). In this study, we focused on participants' self-concept clarity (SCC: Campbell, 1990) and analyzed how it may moderate the relation between societal threat to safety and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). SCC is the degree to which the self-concept of an individual is clearly defined and consistent across situations and times. It is an important identity outcome, because it facilitates adjustment and optimal psychological functioning (Ritchie, Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Gidron, 2011). SCC is related to positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes because it promotes effective self-regulation and increases perceived control over components of the self-concept (Ritchie et al., 2011). High SCC scores correlate negatively with neuroticism and the probability to react aggressively to threat and mediate the stress-subjective well-being link (Streamer & Seery, 2015). Most interestingly for our scopes, SCC (in combination with narcissism) moderates the relationship between negative feedback and aggressive behavior (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). Moreover, in Cerully (2011) threatened participants showed defensive reactions to threat mainly if low in SCC. Finally, Sherman and Cohen (2006) argued that both individual and societal threats undermine self-integrity. According to them, people perceiving themselves as having high vs. low resources and abilities experience a potentially threatening situation in a less taxing manner because their overall feelings of selfintegrity hinge less on the threatened domain. Similarly, we argued that individuals high vs. low in SCC, being more aware and having a clearer knowledge of their self and their resources, should face threatening situation in more positive way, because they are more able to promote effective self-regulation. Thus, they should be less prone to restore self-integrity via the affirmation of secondary sources, such as discrimination, prejudice, and right-wing authoritarianism (e.g. Fein &

Altemeyer (1996) conceptualized RWA as 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). According to Mirisola, Roccato, Russo, Spagna, and Vieno (2014), people may react to societal threat by defensively increasing their RWA level, trying to gain a compensatory control over their societal world by rigidly submitting to established authorities. Recent research showed that the threat-RWA link is moderated by a number of psychological variables, being positive only (or especially) among people high in Openness to experience (Dallago & Roccato, 2010) and in Meaning (Manzi, Roccato, & Russo, 2015), and low in pre-experimental RWA (Mirisola et al., 2014; Russo, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2014). In the wake of the literature above, we hypothesized SCC to moderate the relation between societal threat to safety and RWA, expecting such relation to be positive and significant only among people low SCC scorers.

15 Method

As previously done by Mirisola et al. (2014), working with a community sample of 86 Italian adults (31.4% men, mean age = 38.30, SD = 14.27), we performed a quasi-experimental vignette study by simulating an electoral campaign with the Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), a computer-based dynamic-information board developed to study decision making in complex social situations. The study was divided into four 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. The study took about 30 minutes to be completed. All participants were recruited with a snowball procedure from her social network by a student research assistant, asked to include in the sample both students and non-students, completed the task individually and were debriefed. Due to space limitations, here we briefly summarize our method

and measures; more methodological details (included the scenarios used as experimental

2 manipulation) are available in Mirisola et al. (2014).¹

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In the pre-experimental questionnaire we assessed pre-experimental RWA using Roccato and Russo's (2015) Italian short RWA scale, form A (10 items, four categories), α = .88 and SCC with the Italian version of Campbell and colleagues' (1996) SCC Scale (12 items, five categories),

validated by Manzi, Parise, Iafrate, Sedikides, and Vignoles (2015), $\alpha = .89$.

Participants were then asked to imagine themselves in the situation of coming back to Italy in 2025 after some years spent abroad. After being told that the Election Day was approaching, they experienced a mock political campaign during which information about the candidates (four candidates running for the role of Prime Minister) and generic non-political information was available. During the campaign, the titles of the information scrolled down on the computer screen and participants could access the information they were interested in by clicking on the title. In the middle of the campaign we introduced the experimental manipulation. Based on Mirisola et al. (2014), a randomly allocated group of participants (n = 48) read a secure scenario depicting Italy as one of the most secure nations in the world and the Italians as believing to live in one of the best periods of the human history. The remaining participants (n = 38) read an insecure scenario presenting Italy as a very dangerous place, with widespread criminality and armed squads controlling many city districts. After the exposure to the scenarios, the electoral campaign continued and, at the end of it, participants completed the Italian short RWA scale, form B (10 items, four categories, cf. Roccato & Russo, 2015), $\alpha = .90$, and Mirisola, Di Stefano, and Falgares' (2007) Italian version of Altemeyer's (1988) dangerous world beliefs (DWB) scale, $\alpha = .95$. We computed all the scales' scores by averaging their items.

23 Results

Preliminary analyses showed that our manipulation was effective: The participants exposed to the threatening scenario, M = 2.98, SD = .68, showed higher DWB scores than those exposed to the

¹ The results reported here are from a sample independent from Mirisola et al.'s (2014).

- secure scenario, M = 2.11, SD = .67, t(84) = -5.92, p < .001, $\eta^2 = .30$. Moreover, the secure and the
- insecure group showed the same RWA, t(84) = 1.17. p = .24, and SCC scores, t(84) = .39. p = .70.
- 3 A moderated regression, in which—using pre-experimental RWA as covariate—we entered the
- 4 experimental manipulation, participants' SCC and their interaction, showed that post-experimental
- 5 RWA (Adj. $R^2 = .74$), controlling for pre-experimental RWA, B = .96, SE = .07, p < .001, was
- fostered by exposure to the threatening scenario, B = .10, SE = .04, p = .01, while was not
- associated with SCC, B = .04, SE = .05, p = .42. Most interestingly, the interaction between
- 8 exposure to the threatening scenario (coded as -1 for low threat and 1 for high threat) and SCC
- 9 (mean-centered) showed a significant association with post-experimental RWA, B = -.10, SE = .05,
- 10 p = .04: The societal threat to safety-RWA link was significant among participants with low (-1 SD)
- SCC scores, simple slope = .17, SE = .05, p < .001, but not among those with high (+ 1 SD) SCC
- 12 scores, *simple slope* = .02, SE = .05, p = .70 (see Figure 1).

individual levels of RWA only for participants low in SCC.

13 Discussion

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Threat fosters RWA (Duckitt, 2001). We tried to help understand the processes lying under this link, focusing on the role played by identity; in particular, we predicted that high levels of SCC could buffer the rise of RWA under threatening situations. As hypothesized: Threat increased

Our results are important because they underline how the focus on self-concept is important for advancing the understanding of individual responses to threat. SCC, promoting effective self-regulation and increasing perceived control, is an important resource for individuals facing threat conditions. Further research could better clarify how this buffering effect works under specific environmental conditions. In particular, SCC has been conceptualized both as a trait and a state (Campbell et al., 1996). Indeed, even though SCC evidences remarkable temporal stability, it also fluctuates with environmental influences. In future research participants' state SCC may be manipulated together with societal treat to safety, in a 2X2 experimental design. Moreover SCC is a characteristic of people's beliefs about themselves (i.e., their self-concepts). It is mute with respect

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- 1 to the accuracy of those beliefs or the complexity of the self-concept structure. Future studies
- 2 should investigate the positive effects of SCC also in relation to these and other identity
- 3 dimensions.

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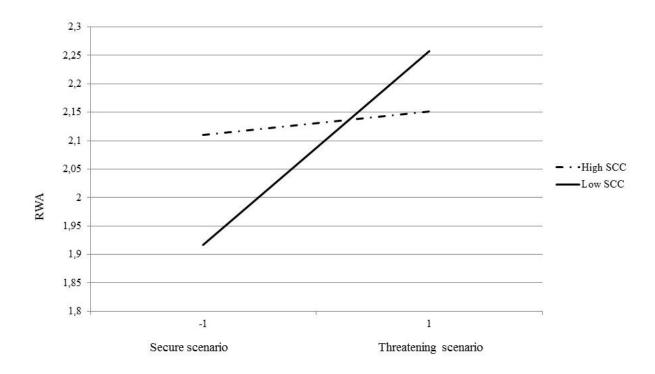
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1 Figure 1. Conditional impact of societal threat to safety on RWA



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