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Right-wing authoritarianism, societal threat to safety, and psychological distress

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1 Running head: Threat, RWA, and distress

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4 Right-wing authoritarianism, societal threat to safety, and psychological distress

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Abstract

1
2 In two quasi-experimental vignette studies, we have analysed how societal threat to safety
3 moderates the relation between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and psychological distress. In
4 Study 1 (Italian community sample, $N = 343$) we focused on depressive symptoms (measured with
5 the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale and the General Health Questionnaire). Two
6 moderated regressions showed that the relation between RWA and both measures of depressive
7 symptoms was positive and significant only among people exposed to a socially threatening
8 scenario. In Study 2 (Italian student sample, $N = 219$) we focused on state anxiety, and replicated
9 Study 1's results. The findings indicated that, in conditions of societal threat to safety, RWA is a
10 risk factor for psychological distress. Strengths, limitations and possible developments of this
11 research are discussed.

12

13 Keywords: Authoritarianism, Threat, Wellbeing, Depression, Anxiety, Distress, Moderation

14

1 Psychologists began to study authoritarianism in the 1930s to understand people's tendency to
2 support anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and even the fascist and Nazi regimes that were plaguing a
3 wide part of Europe at that time (Ackerman & Jahoda, 1950; Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson,
4 & Sanford, 1950; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1933). After decades of theoretical and methodological
5 debate, at present the standard approach to authoritarianism conceives it in terms of right-wing
6 authoritarianism (RWA), i.e., of the covariation of *authoritarian submission* (a strong tendency to
7 submit to authorities, which are perceived as established and legitimate in the society in which one
8 lives); (b) *authoritarian aggression* (a general aggressiveness, directed against various persons,
9 perceived to be positively sanctioned by established authorities); and (c) *conventionalism* (a strong
10 tendency to adhere to the social conventions which are perceived as endorsed by the society and its
11 established authorities) (Altemeyer, 1996). Hundreds of empirical studies confirmed the “bad for
12 the others” (Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009) nature of authoritarianism, showing that, among others,
13 this construct is consistently and positively related to prejudice (mainly toward socially threatening
14 groups), support of the death penalty, punitive attitudes towards unconventional people, approval of
15 the injustice perpetrated by governing authorities, and even obedience in Milgram-style experiments
16 (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996).

17 However, from the theoretical point of view, whether authoritarianism is bad *for the self* (Van
18 Hiel & De Clercq, 2009), i.e., a risk factor for psychological distress, is still an unsolved issue.
19 According to the first studies on this topic (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950), the “authoritarian syndrome”
20 should be inevitably characterised by a mix of superstition, self-deception, and destructiveness, i.e.,
21 by a bulk of psychological traits systematically linked to psychological maladjustment. Indeed, the
22 classic view of authoritarianism suggests that authoritarian attitudes and beliefs should shield
23 awareness from the psychological world, leading people to self-deception and self-estrangement,
24 i.e., conditions that characterize many forms of psychopathology (Crouse & Stalker, 2007). In this
25 view, authoritarianism should be considered a risk factor for psychological distress.

1 Based on other approaches, however, one could argue that authoritarianism plays a
2 self-protective role from psychological distress. First, the terror management theory (Greenberg,
3 Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1996) holds that people may successfully cope with death anxiety by
4 adhering to the values and views that dominate in their society, i.e., raising their conventionalism,
5 which is one of the attitudinal clusters defining RWA. Second, the social identity theory (Tajfel,
6 1981) proposes that people may express prejudice—that is consistently linked with authoritarianism
7 (e.g. Whitley, 1999)—to successfully protect or raise a weak self-esteem. Third, based on the
8 classic frustration-aggression theory (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), it is possible
9 to argue that authoritarian aggression—another of the RWA attitudinal clusters—may be used
10 successfully to satisfy one’s aggressive drives and to relieve the negative affect stemming from
11 frustration. Fourth, Napier and Jost (2008) showed a positive link between conservatism (a
12 construct positively linked with authoritarianism: see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003)
13 and happiness, mainly because conservatives resort more than liberals do to an ideological buffer
14 against the negative psychological consequences of economic inequality. Finally, according to
15 Kessler and Cohrs (2008), RWA should foster cooperation and coordination of activities in groups
16 and communities, helping people to react to external threats. In conclusion, all these approaches
17 suggest that authoritarianism could be beneficial when dealing with a variety of vulnerability
18 factors. In other words, RWA should protect from psychological distress, exerting positive effects
19 on positive emotions and negative effects on negative emotions.

20 The empirical studies on the links between authoritarianism and psychological distress led to
21 diverging results. Some suggested that authoritarianism is “bad for the self” (e.g., Duriez, Klimstra,
22 Luyckx, & Beyers, 2012; Lippa & Arad, 1999; Schlachter & Duckitt, 2002; Van Hiel, Mervielde, &
23 De Fruyt, 2004) while some others that it is “good for the self”, both when people are exposed to
24 an internal (Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009) and to an external (Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012)
25 threat. A recent meta-analysis revealed indeed that the relations between RWA and psychological
26 wellbeing are weak and nonsignificant (Onraet, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2013; total $N = 69,211$).

1 Should we close the book on the relations between RWA and psychological distress? We
2 believe we should not. The absence of consistent, direct links between the two constructs does not
3 exclude the possibility that links between RWA and psychological distress could be determined by
4 specific conditions or circumstances. For example, Onraet and colleagues (2013) found that the
5 relations between RWA and self-esteem, intrinsic goal pursuit, and life satisfaction are significant
6 among the elderly but not among youths. In this paper, building on Duckitt's (2001; see also
7 Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) Dual-process motivational model, we focussed on societal threat to safety
8 and analysed if and how it moderates the relation between RWA and psychological distress,
9 operationalised in terms of depressive symptoms (Study 1) and state anxiety (Study 2).

10 **RWA, societal threat to safety, and psychological distress**

11 The literature converges in showing that societal threat to safety fosters psychological
12 distress. Generally speaking, Dupéré and Perkins (2008; see also Haines, Beggs, & Hurlbert, 2011)
13 showed that living in a socially disadvantaged community fosters residents' psychological distress.
14 For example, living in a neighbourhood characterized by high crime rates (Curry, Latkin, & Davey-
15 Rothwell, 2008) or by social and physical disorder (Latkin & Curry, 2003; Zhang, Eamon, & Zhan,
16 2015) fosters residents' depression. However, it is well known that people's perception of their
17 environments is at least as important as the environments actual characteristics for people's
18 wellbeing (Ornaet, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Pattyn, 2013).

19 According to the literature, authoritarians tend to perceive the world as a dangerous place
20 (Altemeyer, 1988). This result may be explained based on Duckitt (2001), according to whom
21 RWA is the attitudinal expression of the motivational goal of establishing and maintaining societal
22 security, social order, social stability and cohesion (as opposed to individual freedom, autonomy
23 and free self-expression). In this view, authoritarians have a strong identification with the existing
24 social order, and they are particularly sensitive to what threatens it. Consistent with this, high
25 authoritarians showed to be more sensitive to threat than low authoritarians. For example, Cohrs
26 and Ibler (2009) found high vs. low RWA scorers to be more prone to accept threatening arguments

1 and more influenced by threatening messages. Similarly, Lavine, Lodge, Polichak and Taber (2002)
2 found that high vs. low authoritarians were more sensitive to threatening words at an automatic
3 level. Given their high sensitivity to threat, exposure to dangerous, threatening, and unpredictable
4 social environments is likely to undermine authoritarians' core motivational goal for security and
5 order and, consequently, to be a cause of psychological distress. In other words, based on this
6 literature, we should expect authoritarians to experience psychological distress especially in the
7 condition of societal threat to safety. In this paper, we explicitly tested this hypothesis in two
8 quasi-experimental vignette studies.

9 **The Present Studies**

10 We aimed to contribute to the debate about the relation between RWA and psychological
11 distress, focusing on the role of the interaction between RWA and societal threat to safety.¹ We
12 aimed at expanding the extant literature in two ways. First, from the substantive point of view, we
13 examined the conditional effect of RWA on different measures of distress, i.e., two scales of
14 depressive symptoms (Study 1) and one of state anxiety (Study 2). Second, from the
15 methodological point of view, we adopted a quasi-experimental vignette design, aimed at analysing
16 the strength of the relation between RWA and psychological distress, with the moderation of
17 experimentally manipulated societal threat to safety. The approach we used allowed us to avoid
18 potential confounding associations between the independent variable and the moderator.

19 Overall, our main aim was to study the relations between RWA, societal threat to safety, and
20 psychological distress. We hypothesised that, because authoritarians are more sensitive to threat
21 (Cohrs & Ibler, 2009; Lavine et al., 2002), they would report higher psychological distress under
22 the condition of societal threat to safety than under the condition of societal security. In other
23 words, the relation between RWA and psychological distress should be significant only among

¹ Our focus on societal threat to safety made our results directly comparable with those focused on external threat (i.e., on a threat stemming from the society, with a remarkable societal relevance: e.g., see Schlenker et al., 2012), and not with those focussed on internal threat (i.e., on a threat stemming from the private life of an individual, without a direct societal relevance: e.g., see Duriez et al., 2012; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009).

1 people subject to societal threat to safety. In Study 1 we used depressive symptoms as indicator of
2 psychological distress, whereas in Study 2 we focussed on state anxiety.²

3 Study 1

4 Method

5 **Participants.** We recruited our sample thanks to two research students, who, starting from
6 their social network, contacted a snowball community sample composed of 343 Italians (men =
7 30.9%, mean age = 28.96 years, $SD = 12.07$, min = 18, max = 75). We did not exclude any
8 participant from the dataset.

9 **Procedure.** We asked participants to take part in an online study about electoral campaigns.
10 Following a web link, they accessed and completed the experiment, which included four phases: (a)
11 a pre-experimental questionnaire assessing a set of political and societal attitudes, including right-
12 wing authoritarianism; (b) a 2-minutes practice session, during which participants had the chance to
13 see how the electoral campaign simulation worked; (c) a 9-minutes mock electoral campaign with
14 four candidates competing for the role of Italian Prime minister; and (d) a post-experimental
15 questionnaire assessing participants' opinions about the campaign as well as their psychological
16 distress (details on measures are provided below). The entire experiment was created using the
17 Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (DPTE, Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), a computer-based
18 dynamic-information board developed to study decision making in complex social situations.
19 Widely used to study electoral campaigns (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2002; Redlawsk, 2001, 2002), the
20 DPTE was recently used also in studies focused on the relations between societal threat to safety
21 and RWA (see Manzi, Roccato, & Russo, 2015; Mirisola, Roccato, Russo, Spagna, & Vieno, 2014;
22 Russo, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2014).

23 Right after completing the pre-experimental questionnaire, participants were asked to imagine
24 themselves in the hypothetical situation of coming back to Italy in 2025 after some years spent

² The raw data from Study 1 and 2 are available at <https://goo.gl/DdBiWq>

1 abroad. They were told that the Election Day was approaching and that they had to get a sense of
2 what the country and the parties had become in order to cast a vote at the end of the campaign.
3 After this instruction, participants experienced the political campaign during which information
4 about the candidates and generic non-political information (such as information about the country)
5 was available.³ In the middle of the campaign, we introduced the experimental manipulation. A
6 randomly selected group of participants ($n = 173$) read a secure scenario depicting Italy as one of
7 the most secure nations in the world and the Italians as believing to live in one of the best periods of
8 the human history. The remaining participants ($n = 170$) read an insecure scenario presenting the
9 country as a very dangerous place, in which criminality is widespread and armed squads control
10 many cities districts. The scenarios are presented in the Appendix. Right after the experimental
11 manipulation, the electoral campaign continued and by the end, after asking participants to cast their
12 vote, we measured our dependent variables. Participants were asked to answer the questions of the
13 post-experimental questionnaire as they imagined they would do in 2025. At the end of the
14 experiment, the participants were debriefed and provided with a text presenting the actual goals and
15 hypotheses of the study. The email of the corresponding author was provided, and the participants
16 were warmly encouraged to contact him if interested in having more details on the research.

17 **Measures.**⁴ Right-wing authoritarianism was assessed in the pre-experimental questionnaire
18 using the 10-item short, balanced Italian version of the RWA scale, Form A (Roccatto & Russo,
19 2015). Based on $\alpha = .77$ we computed a mean RWA score, with higher values indicating high
20 RWA. To assess psychological distress in the post-experimental phase, we used two measures of
21 depressive symptoms, previously used in studies on the relations between personal risk factors for
22 mental distress, RWA, and depressive symptoms (Duriez et al. 2012; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009).
23 The first one was a reduced version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ, Goldberg, 1972)

³ During the mock electoral campaign, titles of information regarding the election scrolled down on the computer screen: A limited number of titles was visible at any time. Participants could access the information they were interested in by clicking on the title. While reading the detailed information the scrolling continued in the background. In other words, the DPTE mimicked the ebb and flow of information in a real world social context.

⁴ In both studies missing values have been replaced with the item mean value.

1 that includes 12 items. In its standard version, participants are requested to answer items such as:
2 “Have you recently been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?” and “Have you recently felt
3 that you are playing a useful part in things”? (con-trait). The second one was the 10-item Center for
4 Epidemiologic Studies short Depression Scale (CES-D: Radloff, 1997). In its original version,
5 participants are requested to describe how often—compared to their usual standard— they felt or
6 behaved in the few weeks preceding the survey, as reported in items such as “I felt hopeful about
7 the future” and “I was happy” (con-trait). As stated above, for both scales we slightly rearranged the
8 instruction we gave our participants, asking them to respond as they imagined they would do in
9 2025. Both measures showed a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .84$ respectively); we
10 computed a mean score for each scale, with higher scores indicating high levels of depressive
11 symptoms. Finally, as manipulation check, in the post-experimental stage we asked participants to
12 answer the item used by Dallago and Roccato (2010) to measure perceived societal threat stemming
13 from criminality (“Think of micro-criminality. How would you define the situation regarding this
14 problem in Italy?”). Table 1 shows the means for the variables we used and their correlations.

15 **Results and Discussion**

16 As a first step, we checked if our experimental manipulation was effective. The experimental
17 manipulation (after recoding the formerly 0-1 variable, assigning -1 to secure scenario and 1 to
18 threatening scenario) had a positive effect on the perception of societal threat ($\beta = .35, p < .001$).
19 Interestingly, this effect was moderated by RWA, $\beta = .12, p < .05$. The simple slope analysis
20 indicated that the manipulation was more effective on participants with high level of RWA (*simple*
21 *slope* = .72, *SE* = .11, $p < .001$) than on participants with low levels of RWA (*simple slope* = .35, *SE*
22 = .11, $p < .01$).

23 To test our hypotheses we performed two moderated regressions, respectively aimed at
24 predicting participants’ CES-D and GHQ scores as a function of the experimental manipulation, of
25 RWA (mean centred), and of their interaction. Results are reported in Table 2. Among the direct
26 effects, we found that societal threat to safety significantly fostered both measures of depressive

1 symptoms, while the association between RWA and depressive symptoms did not reach statistical
 2 significance ($p = .06$ as concerns *CES-D*, and $p = .08$ as concerns *GHQ*). Hence, we found that
 3 RWA did not influence psychological distress directly. More interestingly for our aims, the
 4 interaction between societal threat and RWA significantly predicted our dependent variables. In line
 5 with our hypothesis, the simple slope analysis (cf. Figure 1) showed that the relation between RWA
 6 and depressive symptoms was significant among participants exposed to the threatening scenario
 7 (*simple slope* = .26, *SE* = .07, $p < .001$ for *CES-D* and *simple slope* = .20, *SE* = .06, $p < .01$ for
 8 *GHQ*), but not among participants exposed to the secure scenario (*simple slope* = -.09, *SE* = .06, $p =$
 9 .16 for *CES-D* and *simple slope* = -.04, *SE* = .06, $p = .48$ for *GHQ*).⁵ Thus, our findings provided
 10 support to the idea that societal threat to safety may trigger the “bad for the self” nature of RWA.

11 However, we do not know if RWA, interacting with societal threat to safety, is a booster of
 12 depressive symptoms only or if it can affect other manifestations of psychological distress. In Study
 13 2, we addressed this question by focusing on the effects of the societal threat to safety-RWA
 14 interaction on state anxiety. We decided to focus on anxiety for a twofold reason. On the one hand
 15 because it is the core symptom in the group of anxiety disorders and has been widely recognized as
 16 an important affective variable influencing people’s wellbeing (Doornbos, Zandee, & DeGroot,
 17 2012; Endler & Kocovski, 2001; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). On the other hand, because the literature
 18 shows that attentional bias toward threatening information—such as that of high RWA scorers—is
 19 an important factor in the development and persistence of anxiety disorders (e.g., Nelson, Purdon,
 20 Quigley, Carriere, & Smilek, 2015). Anxiety has been sometimes considered as an internal threat,
 21 “originating from the private life of an individual and... only experienced by the individual”
 22 (Onraet et al., p. 233). However, we focussed on *state* anxiety, which is the expected psychological
 23 response to an external threat (Gold, Morey, & McCarthy, 2015; Robinson, Charney, Overstreet,
 24 Vytal, & Grillon, 2012).

⁵ Parallel analyses showed that the interaction between age and RWA did not show a significant relation either with *CES-D* ($b = -.00$, *SE* = .00, *beta* = -.07, $p = .26$) or with *GHQ* ($b = -.00$, *SE* = .00, *beta* = -.04, $p = .49$).

Study 2

Method

Participants. Two hundred and nineteen undergraduates from the University of Torino, Italy (men = 26.5%, mean age = 20.24, $SD = 3.48$, min = 19, max = 51), participated in this study. Participants completed the questionnaire in their class, and subsequently were fully debriefed. As in Study 1, we did not exclude any participant from the dataset.

Procedure. We ran a paper-and-pencil experiment using the same cover story, the same measures (but we substituted depressive symptoms with state anxiety), and the same experimental manipulation we used in Study 1. We first asked participants to fill out a section of the questionnaire containing the 10 RWA items ($\alpha = .65$).⁶ After the experimental manipulation (109 participants were randomly exposed to the secure scenario, and 110 to the insecure scenario), we asked participants to complete a distractor task consisting in answering a 20-item semantic differential on their evaluation of their university.⁷ We then administered the item we used as manipulation check, and measured state anxiety using eleven items randomly chosen from the subsection focussed on state anxiety of the Italian version of Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, and Jacobs' (1983) State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, form Y (Pedrabissi & Santinello, 1989), $\alpha = .97$. In its standard version, participants are asked to report how they feel when answering the questionnaires, using items such as “I feel jittery” and “I feel calm” (con-trait). Again, we slightly reframed the stem question and asked participants to answer as they would do in 2025. The scores of the variables were computed as mean scores. After they filled in the questionnaire, participants were accurately debriefed. Table 3 shows the means for the variables we used and their correlations.

Results and Discussion

⁶ This α was lower than that stemmed from Study 1. However, it was based on a mean correlation among the items of the scale (mean $r = .15$) statistically equal to those from previous administrations of this battery, ranging from mean $r = .18$, $N = 200$ (Arrigo, 2012), $z = .31$, $p = .757$ to mean $r = .21$, $N = 131$ (Mirisola et al., 2014, Study 2), $z = .56$, $p = .576$.
⁷ We decided to introduce a distractor task because a pilot study performed on 247 students from the University of Torino showed that the effect of the manipulation—as measured right after the exposure to the scenarios—was too strong, $\eta^2 = .91$.

1 A preliminary analysis showed that our manipulation was successful. The experimental
 2 manipulation (recoded into -1 = secure scenario and 1 = threatening scenario) had a positive effect
 3 on the perception of societal threat ($\beta = .88, p < .001$). We also found that the interaction between
 4 the manipulation and RWA just approached statistical significance, $\beta = .06, p = .06$. Nonetheless, as
 5 in Study 1, the simple slope analysis indicated that the manipulation was slightly more effective on
 6 participants with high level of RWA (*simple slope* = 1.89, *SE* = .09, $p < .001$) than on participants
 7 with low levels of RWA (*simple slope* = 1.64, *SE* = .09, $p < .001$).

8 Table 4 shows the results of a moderated regression aimed at predicting participants' state
 9 anxiety as a function of societal threat to safety and mean-centred RWA. Both being exposed to
 10 societal threat to safety and RWA showed a significant relation with state anxiety. More
 11 interestingly as concerns our aims, the interaction between societal threat and RWA reached
 12 statistical significance. The simple slope analysis showed that, in line with our hypothesis and with
 13 the results from Study 1, the association between RWA and state anxiety was significant among
 14 people exposed to the socially threatening scenario (*simple slope* = .37, *ES* = .14, $p < .05$), but not
 15 among those exposed to the secure scenario (*simple slope* = .02, *ES* = .13, $p = .86$) (see Figure 2).⁸

16 Thus, the results from this study nicely confirmed those from Study 1. We have found that
 17 scoring high on RWA had a positive association with psychological distress, operationalised as
 18 state anxiety, but only among people exposed to a socially threatening scenario. Like in Study 1,
 19 this result witnessed the conditional “badness for the self” of RWA.

20 **General Discussion**

21 After more than eighty years of theorisation and empirical study, the “bad for the others”
 22 nature of RWA is ascertained solidly (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996). However, at present, the literature on
 23 the effects that authoritarianism exerts on the psychological distress of the authoritarian him/herself
 24 is inconclusive. Based on theoretical and on empirical studies, both a “good for the self” (e.g.,

⁸ Like in Study 1, the interaction between RWA and age did not show a significant relation with anxiety ($b = -.07, SE = .05, beta = .07, p = .14$).

1 Napier & Jost, 2008; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009) and a “bad for the self” (e.g., Crouse & Stalker,
2 2007; Duriez et al., 2012) nature of authoritarianism may be postulated. In fact, Onraet and
3 colleagues’ (2013) meta-analysis showed weak, nonsignificant direct links between RWA and
4 psychological wellbeing.

5 In this research, we argued that RWA might lead to psychological distress in conditions of
6 societal threat to safety. We tested this idea in two quasi-experimental vignette studies, respectively
7 aimed at predicting depressive symptoms and anxiety via the interaction between societal threat to
8 safety and RWA. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that the relation between RWA and
9 psychological distress was significant when our participants were exposed to societal threat to
10 safety. These results proved to be nicely robust, in that they did not depend on the technique we
11 used to collect our data—Lau and Redlawsk’s (2001) DPTE in Study 1 and a standard paper-and-
12 pencil questionnaire in Study 2⁹—and on the dependent variable we predicted (two measures of
13 depressive symptoms in Study 1 and state anxiety in Study 2). Thus, using Van Hiel and De
14 Clercq’s (2009) terminology, we conclude that under threatening societal conditions—beyond being
15 “bad for the others”—RWA may also be bad for the self.

16 This study had some strong points. First, its quasi-experimental vignette approach allowed us
17 to focus on the moderation of societal threat to safety on the association between RWA and
18 psychological distress with a methodologically sound approach. Beyond the main results of the
19 studies, the results of the analyses we performed as a manipulation check nicely confirmed the idea
20 that high authoritarians are more sensitive to threat than low authoritarians are (Cohrs & Ibler,
21 2009; Lavine et al., 2002). In fact, it should be noted that we could not manipulate RWA; thus, the
22 conditional effect we detected could depend, at least in part, on other variables correlated with
23 RWA, such as national identification. Moreover, we focused on how participants believed they

⁹ From the methodological point of view, it should be noted that our experimental manipulation was much more effective in Study 2 than in Study 1. This is not surprising, given that in Study 1 the experimental manipulation was followed by 4 minutes of participation in the mock political campaign, while in Study 2 the distractor task was much shorter and less demanding.

1 would have felt if living in a hypothetical future, and not on how they actually felt. However,
2 according to the literature, even when aimed at predicting participants' feelings in hypothetical
3 situations, vignette studies maximise both internal and external validity of quasi-experimental and
4 experimental studies (e.g., Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Moreover, the scenarios presented were
5 sufficiently realistic, and have been used successfully in previous research on RWA (e.g., Mirisola
6 et al., 2014, Study 2; Roccato et al., 2015). Thus, as a whole, compared to the standard methods
7 used in the literature on the relation between threat, RWA and psychological distress, we consider
8 our methodological approach as a strength of this research. Second, the dependent variables we
9 predicted helped us to develop a multifaceted picture on the relations we analysed, linking
10 depressive symptoms and anxiety. Third, our focus on the interaction between societal threat to
11 safety and RWA allowed us to increase our knowledge on the nature and role of RWA and to fine
12 tune our vision of this construct. Indeed, our choice to use societal threat as a moderator helped us
13 to discover new and consistent relations between RWA and psychological distress.

14 According to Lavine et al. (2002), the effects of psychological variables do not occur in a
15 contextual vacuum, but instead are magnified by the presence of key precipitating or “activating”
16 features of the social environment. This claim is consistent with Lewin’s (1936) classic ideas,
17 according to which every event is the consequence of the interaction between the state of the person
18 and, at the same time, the state of the environment in which s/he lives. In this light, differences in
19 people’s psychological variables lead them to respond differently when exposed to the same
20 environmental stimuli, and, correspondingly, the expression of psychological variables varies by
21 situation (Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010). This conception has been
22 recently applied to the study of authoritarianism using multilevel analyses. For instance, Kauff,
23 Asbrock, Thörner and Wagner (2013) showed that the degree of multiculturalism of participants’
24 society boosts the negative effects exerted by RWA on positive diversity beliefs, and Roccato,
25 Vieno, and Russo (2014) showed that the crime rate boosts the effects exerted on manifestations of
26 authoritarianism by people’s authoritarian predispositions.

1 Consistent with the literature above, as social psychologists we believe that the strongest point
2 of our research was that we could show how a very private state such as psychological distress
3 depends on the interaction of individual and contextual variables, with the latter showing to be able
4 to de-latentise the effect of the former. For the reasons we discussed above, the methodological
5 approach we used was a plus of our study. However, it would be also interesting to go on
6 researching in this field of investigation resorting to multilevel research, and focusing on the cross-
7 level interaction between actual societal threats to safety (e.g., crime rate of the area participants
8 live in) and authoritarianism. Unfortunately, multilevel analyses of primary data is much expensive,
9 and those of secondary data are almost inevitably based on not completely satisfactory variables.¹⁰
10 An *ad hoc* multilevel extension of this research would be very interesting, and would help to
11 overcome a limitation of our study, i.e., the fact that it has been performed in an artificial setting.
12 Another limitation of our research was the non-representativeness of samples that made our results
13 not generalizable to any population. This is a common feature of research in social psychology. For
14 instance, nearly 10 years ago Roccato (2008) showed that, in mainstream social psychology, less
15 than the 5% of the studies was performed on representative samples, and that more than half of the
16 research was performed on student samples (for older, but consistent data, see Gordon, Slade, &
17 Schmitt, 1986; Sears, 1986). Our results converged across different kinds of samples (a community
18 sample in Study 1 and a classic student sample in Study 2). However, a replication of our research
19 performed on representative samples of the general population could be interesting.

20 As it often happens, our research helped to answer some research questions and showed some
21 space for future research. First, based on the literature, it is plausible that the “bad for the self”
22 nature of RWA we have shown with this research may depend on the self-deception and self-
23 estrangement fostered by authoritarianism (Crouse & Stalker, 2007). This idea sounds plausible.

¹⁰ Consistent with this, preliminary multilevel analyses on the European Social Survey (waves 4 and 6) datasets led to unsatisfactory results. However, the level-1 variables we could use were far from satisfactory. Thus, we believe that, before closing the book on a multilevel extension of this research, a study performed using more adequate variables should be conducted.

1 However, it has never been tested empirically. Thus, a development of this study could consist in
2 detecting the mediators of the moderated relation we have analysed, by focussing explicitly on these
3 two constructs. Moreover, in this research, based on the literature, we chose to focus on depressive
4 symptoms and on anxiety as dependent variables. New research aimed at extending our results to
5 other manifestations of psychological distress could be interesting. Moreover, in future studies it
6 would be interesting to investigate if the effects of RWA on positive emotions are also moderated
7 by societal threat to safety. According to Onraet et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis, RWA does not show
8 direct links with negative (nor positive) affect, life satisfaction, self-esteem and intrinsic goal
9 pursuit. Moreover, Van Hiel and Brebels (2011) showed that age moderates the relation between
10 RWA and self-esteem (while in our research it did not influence the link between RWA and our
11 dependent variables). The prediction of such indicator of psychological distress via the interaction
12 between RWA, societal threat to safety, and age could be a development of our research. Finally,
13 our data did not allow us to quantify the length of the effect we have detected. Longitudinal
14 analyses aimed to do so will be interesting.

15 Even before performing these new studies, however, we believe the present research shed a
16 new and interesting light on psychological processes linking societal threat to safety, RWA, and
17 psychological distress, leading to a better and deeper understanding of this complex chain of
18 relations and of the very nature of RWA.

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Appendix

2 Secure scenario

3 Breaking news: latest Istat¹¹ research results

4 A recent Istat research showed that Italy deeply changed in the last ten years. Crime and
5 delinquency are still present, but decreased so much that every year Italy is becoming more secure
6 than ever. The immigration tension that used to be high at the beginning of the III millennium is
7 over, thanks to some legislative changes approved by a large majority. Today Italy is looked at as
8 an example of harmony and racial integration: Italians and immigrants live and work together
9 contributing to increase social wellbeing. In the world, these are peaceful and flourishing times. For
10 the most part, polls show that Italians feel to live in one of the best periods of the human history,
11 with security, progress, and success spread all over. Tourists are impressed by Italian friendliness,
12 worthiness, integrity, and kindness and by the nice, clean and neat country.

13

14 Insecure scenario

15 Breaking news: latest Istat research results

16 A recent Istat research showed that Italy deeply changed in the last ten years. Crime and
17 delinquency are all over and violent assaults take place everywhere. Whenever they can, people
18 avoid walking alone at night because armed squads control many cities districts and go around
19 assaulting and robbing. The huge number of immigrants arrived in Italy in the last years made the
20 situation worse by increasing the crime rates. Home burglaries, especially at night, are today a

¹¹ Istat is the Italian National Institute of Statistics, the main Italian producer of official statistics in the service of citizens and policy-makers.

1 common experience and are more violent than ever. The police is unable to handle the situation and
2 it seems they are not implementing strategies to fight crime anymore. From the beginning of the III
3 millennium, different governments succeeded, but none of them was able to manage these serious
4 problems.

5

6

Table 1.

Study 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Variables We Used and Correlations among Them

	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1. RWA	-	-.02	.07	.07	2.09	.47	1	3.70
2. Threatening scenario		-	.44**	.28**	.50	.50	0	1
3. CES-D			-	.77**	2.48	.45	1	3.90
4. GHQ				-	2.35	.40	1	3.58

Note. When the scenario (0 = secure, 1 = threatening) was involved, the point-biserial correlation with the other variables is displayed, and the “mean” represent the proportion, on a 0-1 scale, of the participants exposed to the threatening scenario. RWA = Right-wing authoritarianism. CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies short Depression Scale. GHQ = General Health Questionnaire. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2.

Study 1. Predictors of Depressive Symptoms

	Depressive symptoms: CES-D			Depressive symptoms: GHQ		
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Beta	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Beta
Intercept	2.48***	.02		2.35***	.02	
Threatening scenario	.20***	.02	.44	.11***	.02	.29
RWA	.09	.05	.09	.08	.04	.09
Threatening scenario* RWA	.17***	.05	.18	.12**	.04	.14
Explained variance	Adj. $R^2 = .23$			Adj. $R^2 = .10$		

Note. RWA = Right-wing authoritarianism. CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies short Depression Scale. GHQ = General Health

Questionnaire. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$

Table 3.

Study 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Variables We Used and Correlations among Them

	1	2	3	Mean	SD	Min	Max
1. RWA	-	-.04	.05	1.96	.37	1.10	3.20
2. Threatening scenario		-	.84**	.50	.50	0	1
3. State anxiety				2.51	.89	1	4

Note. When the scenario (0 = Secure, 1 = threatening) was involved, the point-biserial correlation with the other variables is displayed, and the “mean” represent the proportion, on a 0-1 scale, of the participants exposed to the threatening scenario. RWA = Right-wing authoritarianism. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4.

Study 2. Predictors of State Anxiety

	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Beta
Intercept	2.52***	.03	
Threatening scenario	.74***	.03	.84
RWA	.22*	.09	.09
Threatening scenario* RWA	.20*	.09	.08
Explained variance	Adj. $R^2 = .71$		

Note. RWA = Right-wing authoritarianism. *** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$

Figure captions

Figure 1. Study 1: Moderating Effect of Societal Threat to Safety on the Relation between RWA and Depressive Symptoms.

Figure 2. Study 2: Moderating Effect of Societal Threat to Safety on the Relation between RWA and State Anxiety.

Figure 1.

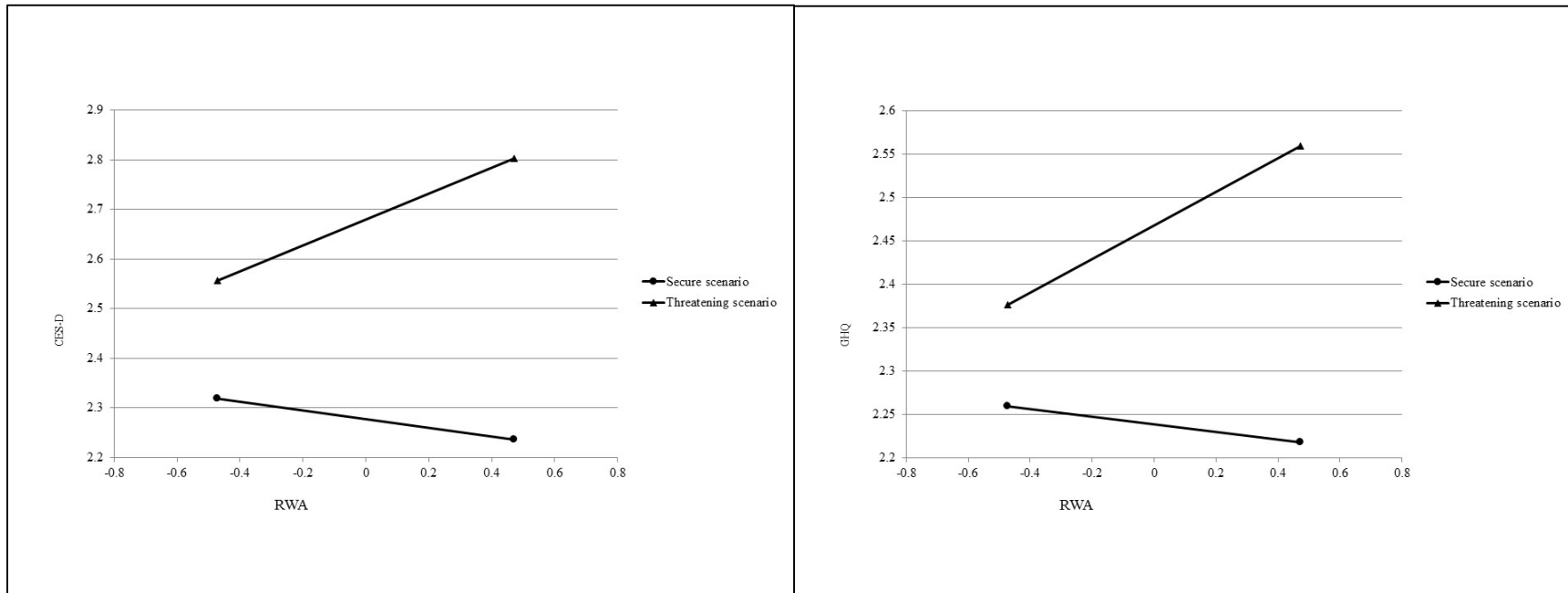


Figure 2.

