

SYMBOLIC THREAT FOSTERS RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM ONLY AMONG LOW AUTHORITARIANS

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In a sample of 95 U.S. undergraduates (49.5% women, $M_{age} = 20.99$ years, $SD = 3.48$), we analyzed the effects of symbolic threat on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). We used data from an experimental study in which negative political attacks on one's own favorite candidate were considered as symbolic threats. A hierachic moderated regression showed that, as with societal threat, symbolic threat fostered an increase in RWA only among participants with low initial scores on RWA. This increase did not depend on the persuasive effect of being exposed to negative campaigning. The implications, limitations, and possible developments of the research are discussed.

Key words: Authoritarianism; Symbolic threat; Politics; Moderation; Negative campaigns.

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Consistent with the original psychoanalytic approach (Ackermann & Jahoda, 1950; Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Reich, 1933), the literature has traditionally referred to authoritarianism as an epiphenomenon of psychological maladjustment, or even of psychopathology. Currently, the most widely adopted approach to authoritarianism is Altemeyer's (1981, 1988, 1996), which focuses on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). RWA is conceived as the covariation of three attitudinal clusters: a) authoritarian submission (i.e., a strong tendency to submit to the authorities that are perceived as established and legitimate in the society in which one lives); b) authoritarian aggression (i.e., a general aggressiveness directed at various people who are perceived as being positively sanctioned by established authorities); and c) conventionalism (i.e., a strong tendency to adhere to the social conventions that are perceived as endorsed by one's society and its established authorities). Although Altemeyer's approach is based on a social learning perspective, not on a psychoanalytic one, RWA is still regarded as a negative trait both among authoritarians (since they often trust in untrustworthy leaders, reject new ideas and points of view, hold strong contradictory beliefs, make many incorrect inferences from evidence, and avoid learning about their personal failings) and among other people (in that

RWA is one of the bases from which to legitimize prejudice against minorities, punitiveness, support for “gay-bashing,” and mean-spiritedness toward people who have made mistakes).

Yet, this inevitably “bad for the self” conception of authoritarianism has not been robustly confirmed in the few studies that have examined the relation between authoritarianism and psychological maladjustment (e.g., Freedman, Webster, & Sanford, 1956; Van Hiel, Mervielde, & De Fruyt, 2004; however, for some links between authoritarianism and compulsivity, see Schlachter & Duckitt, 2002). Most importantly, in a recent ground-breaking article, Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009) found that having high RWA reduced the impact of a distressed personality on depression (Study 1), and the negative consequences (e.g., somatic symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, and social dysfunction) of 21 potentially stressful life events experienced in the preceding 24 months (Study 2). These results led Van Hiel and De Clercq to conclude that RWA — even if it is “bad for the others” — should be considered as an efficient mechanism that people can use to cope with stress (however, for conflicting results, see Duriez, Klimstra, Luyckx, Beyers, & Soenens, 2012).

Conceiving authoritarianism as a “good for the self” construct may lead to a better understanding of the links between threat and authoritarianism found in previous studies (Altemeyer, 1988; Rickert, 1998; Sales & Friend, 1973; Stevens, Bishin, & Barr, 2006). Indeed, according to these studies, perceived threat, which is typically operationalized in terms of dangerous world beliefs (i.e., those that make reference to a societal threat mainly stemming from criminality and a deterioration in everyday social life, see Altemeyer, 1988), fosters RWA (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, Du Plessis, & Birum, 2002).

More recently, Dallago and colleagues (Dallago, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2011, 2012; Dallago & Roccato, 2010) have presented two interesting findings that help to fine-tune the links between perceived threat and RWA. First, they showed that the relation between dangerous worldview and RWA was only significant for people who had high scores on the Openness Big Five factor, that is, for people who under “normal” conditions of perceived security and stability were less authoritarian and more vulnerable than those who had low scores on Openness. Second, they showed that this conditional effect emerged when criminal threat, but not terrorist threat, was in play, that is, only when low RWA scorers faced a proximal and/or directly experienced threat, one that, in Stephan and Stephan’s (1996, 2000) terms, is a realistic threat.

Thus, Dallago and colleagues show indirectly that low RWA scorers increase their RWA level when they perceive a realistic threat, which presumes that the increment in RWA serves as a defensive function against feelings of personal vulnerability. From this point of view, participants’ “authoritarian responses” are a mechanism for coping with threats, *à la* Van Hiel and De Clercq (2009). However, the same coping mechanism was not observed in people who had low scores on Openness, who, under “normal” conditions of perceived security and stability, tend to feel less vulnerable and show higher RWA levels than those who have high scores on Openness. In sum, these results suggest indirectly that an increase in authoritarianism may be a card that people who are usually low on authoritarianism can play in conditions that require coping with stress and realistic threat.

Subsequent research has shown more directly that people who have low levels of RWA increase their authoritarianism when faced with a perceived (field longitudinal Study 1) or a manipulated (experimental Study 2) realistic threat (Mirisola, Roccato, Russo, Spagna, & Vieno, in press). These findings are consistent with the literature on the Compensatory Control Mechanism

(Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009). Indeed, according to Kay and colleagues, chronic or acute low levels of perceived control over the environment promote existential threats. People cope with these threats by endorsing external systems that impose structure and order on their social world. In line with this perspective, Mirisola and colleagues found that realistic threats induce a loss in perceived control, which, in turn, fosters an increase in RWA only among participants with initial low RWA levels.

In sum, we are pretty confident of the robustness of the conditional links between realistic threats and RWA. However, we do not know whether analogous moderated effects are in play when people have to face other types of threats, such as those to their ingroup's values, norms, and beliefs, that is, symbolic threats (cf., Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). Recent research suggests that both realistic and symbolic threats tend to trigger compensatory control processes (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). Moreover, Kay et al. (2010) have shown that people compensate for a loss in perceived control by increasing their belief in a controlling God when they observe government instability due to a no-confidence vote supported by minority political parties. Additionally, when their system of values is threatened, people who are low in system confidence tend to legitimize their system by preferring nationally branded products to foreign brands (Cutrigth, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011). Finally, Peschovska (2012) has shown that symbolic threat negatively influences perceived control.

Building on these results, we aimed to test whether low RWA scorers enhance their RWA level to deal with symbolic threats. Based on Morrison and Ybarra (2009), we regarded negative political attacks as suitable stimuli for studying the effects of this type of threat. Indeed, political attacks on a preferred candidate (an inparty candidate, with whom partisans share goals and ideology): a) challenge the political beliefs and values of the recipients, b) present incongruent political information (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006), and c) create a symbolically threatening informational environment (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Lau, 2007). Accordingly, in the current study, we analyzed the conditional links between symbolic threats and changes in RWA. We used the presence/absence of political attacks on the participants' preferred candidate by the outparty candidate (who was affiliated with the participants' opposing coalition) as the experimental manipulator of the level of threat.

HYPOTHESES

Based on the aforementioned literature, we hypothesized that symbolic threat leads to a significant increase in RWA among low, but not among high, authoritarians (Hypothesis 1).

However, as we previously stated, compared with high RWA scorers, low RWA scorers are more common among people scoring high rather than low on openness to experience (e.g., Akrami & Ekehammar, 2006; Duriez & Soenens, 2006). Thus, by definition, low RWA scorers are more sensitive to perceptual stimuli (Hartmann, 1991; McCrae, 1994; Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004). Moreover, they are more inclined to expose themselves to counter-attitudinal information, and hence to change their attitudes as a consequence of exposure to persuasive messages (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). Finally, in the USA, low RWA scorers are overrepresented among Democrats and underrepresented among Republicans (Altemeyer, 1996).

Thus, as a whole, it could be argued that results consistent with Hypothesis 1 may be more due to substantial rational adjustment to information on the part of low RWA scorers than to a reaction to symbolic threat. Indeed, when exposed to counter-attitudinal information, Democrats would be more inclined than Republicans to improve their evaluation of the outparty candidate (i.e., the candidate of the party they do not identify with), and to worsen their evaluation of the inparty candidate (i.e., the candidate they do identify with). In this light, given that RWA should be considered as an ideological variable that may change in level as a function of situational stimuli (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007), the increase in RWA detected among low authoritarians may, quite simply, be a correlate of changed evaluations. In other words, the effect detected may be the consequence of exposure to persuasive counter-attitudinal information rather than to threat.

On the basis of this argument, if results consistent with our hypothesis are due to the persuasive effect of the outparty's political attacks, symbolic threats should lead to an improvement in the evaluation of the Republican candidate and to a worsening in the evaluation of the Democratic candidate. As with Hypothesis 1, this effect would be significant among low RWA scorers, but not among high RWA scorers (Hypothesis 2).

METHOD

Participants, Design, and Procedure

The experiment was conducted in the Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (DPTE; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), which involves using a dynamic information board to study decision-making in electoral campaigns by mimicking the “ebb and flow” of political information. This tool has recently been used in a variety of experimental studies to simulate electoral campaigns (e.g., Civettini & Redlawsk, 2005, 2009; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997, 2001; Redlawsk, 2004).

Ninety-five political-science undergraduates (49.5% women, $M_{age} = 20.99$ years, $SD = 3.48$) attending Rutgers University were asked to play the imaginary role of voters in an American presidential election with a Republican and a Democrat running for office. After being instructed how to cast a vote in the upcoming election, using the information available on the dynamic information board, participants sat down in front of a computer screen in a computer laboratory. After completing a pre-experimental questionnaire, they were taken through a two-minute trial run of the dynamic information board.

At the beginning of the experimental phase, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: a) a totally positive campaign; b) the Republican candidate attacks the opponent; c) the Democratic candidate attacks the opponent; and d) both candidates attack each other. During the experiment, the participants were presented with a series of rapidly changing headlines. Indeed, the fictitious campaign environment consisted of changing items of information, given in the form of newspaper-style headlines, that, if selected, were linked to associated information texts. Political and personal information about each candidate was available, and also information on endorsements, polling data, and nonpolitical information. A total of 128 headlines were scrolled down the computer screen in random order during the campaign simulation.

In the totally positive condition, both candidates proposed 12 positive messages, whereas, in the experimental conditions, the candidate going negative proposed eight negative messages (four were issue-based attacks, and four were person-based) and four positive messages (see the Appendix for examples of the texts of the negative and positive messages).

In mid-campaign, the results of a mock poll appeared on the screen, and the participants were asked to rate their emotional reactions to the campaign so far. After answering the questions, the campaign started up again from the point at which it had been interrupted. The two candidates, although fictitious, were, through their own political positions, designed to represent a realistic ideological spectrum. At the end of the campaign, participants were asked to vote and complete a post-experimental questionnaire. They were then thanked, debriefed, and free to go.

Measures

Political affiliation. In the pre-experimental questionnaire, participants were asked whether they were Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Participants who defined themselves as Independent ($n = 36$) were also asked whether they were closer to the Republican or the Democratic Party. Based on this information, participants were classified as either Democrats (0) or Republicans (1).

Experimental manipulation coding. Based on concordance between participants' and candidates' political affiliations (Republican or Democrat), assignments to the experimental conditions were recoded to obtain a 2×2 between-subjects factorial matrix: 1 = the outparty candidate attacked the inparty candidate versus 0 = the outparty candidate did not attack the inparty candidate \times 1 = the inparty candidate attacked the outparty candidate versus 0 = the inparty candidate did not attack the outparty candidate.

Based on Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), the effects in this 2×2 between-subjects design were dummy coded using the following three variables: two main-effects terms (i.e., the inparty and outparty attacks) and one interaction term (the Inparty \times Outparty attack). The experimental condition under which the outparty went negative was regarded as the only threatening condition (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
 Dummy coding of the direct effects of being in an experimental group
 where there are inparty and outparty attacks and interaction between them

Dummy coding				
Experimental conditions	Inparty attacks	Outparty attacks	Inparty \times Outparty attacks	<i>n</i>
Both candidates go positive	0	0	0	23
Only the inparty goes negative	1	0	0	22
Only the outparty goes negative	0	1	0	25
Both candidates go negative	1	1	1	25

Right-wing authoritarianism. The results of a pre-test showed that it would have been imprudent to use the whole RWA scale, given that participants reported high levels of fatigue, especially when answering the post-experimental questionnaire. Accordingly, like in Mirisola et al. (in press), we chose to measure pre- and post-experimental RWA levels by averaging participants' responses to short, four-category versions of the RWA scale. Both measures, $\alpha_s = .64$ and $.62$, respectively, were based on sets of five items, which were taken at random from the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1996).¹ A pre-test conducted with 119 undergraduates showed that the two sets of items correlated very strongly with the entire scale, $r_s = .92, p < .001$, and $.94, p < .001$, respectively. This led us to conclude that these sets of items can be used to assess the core of RWA without systematic bias. The correlation between the pre- and post-experimental measures was $r = .74, p < .001$, which is statistically equivalent to the $r = .80, p < .001$ (Study 1) and $r = .81, p < .001$ (Study 2) that led Mirisola and colleagues (in press) to conclude that the items they used in their first and second assessments of RWA worked as parallel forms of one and the same measurement tool, $\chi^2(2) = 2.52, p = .28$.

Manipulation check. To check the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, in mid-campaign, we asked the participants how much the ongoing campaign made them feel worried, anxious, and afraid (answers on a 0-100 feeling thermometer). Based on $\alpha = .69$, we combined the variables and computed a summed anxiety index.

Candidates' evaluations. To rule out alternative interpretations of the results presented below, we used the evaluations of the candidates, on a 100-point thermometer, given by our participants in response to the post-experimental questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the study variables are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
 Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the study variables

	Zero-order correlations							
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Pre-RWA	2.54	0.70	—	.65***	.35**	.03	.13	-.07
2. Post-RWA	2.78	0.68		—	.24*	-.14	.15	-.16
3. Political affiliation	.38	0.49			—	-.16	-.07	.11
4. Anxiety	.38	0.22				—	-.11	.02
5. Inparty evaluation	71.26	15.99					—	-.23*
6. Outparty evaluation	45.27	19.32						—

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

RESULTS

For a manipulation check, we used the R Pequod package (Mirisola & Seta, 2011) to run a moderated regression (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen et al., 2003), aimed at predicting participants' anxiety in the middle of the mock electoral campaign. As a first step, we entered the two dummy-coded variables that expressed the main effects of outparty and inparty attacks. At the

second step, we added the interaction between outparty and inparty attacks. Only outparty attacks significantly increased participants' anxiety (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
 Manipulation check: Prediction of anxiety during the political campaign

	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	ES	β	B	ES	β
Intercept	.32***	.04		.31***	.04	
Outparty	.10*	.04	.25	.13*	.06	.33
Inparty	-.01	.04	-.04	.02	.06	.05
Inparty × Outparty				-.06	.08	-.13

Note. *** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$.

To test Hypothesis 1, we performed a hierachic moderated regression aimed at predicting post-experimental RWA. As a first step, we entered pre-experimental RWA (mean-centered), political affiliation, and the two main effects of outparty and inparty attacks. At the second step, we entered all of the two-way interactions between the variables from Step 1. At the third step, we entered the three-way interaction between outparty attacks, inparty attacks, and pre-experimental RWA.

Table 4 shows that, at Step 1, outparty and inparty attacks, and political affiliation, had no main effects on post-experimental RWA, but that pre-experimental RWA levels did influence post-experimental levels. At the second and third steps, the interaction between pre-experimental RWA and outparty attacks negatively influenced post-experimental RWA, while the other two-way and three-way interactions did not reach statistical significance. The addition of the interaction between outparty attacks and pre-experimental RWA led to a significant increase in the explained variance, $F(3, 87) = 3.21, p < .05$. A simple slope analysis with outparty attacks as the predictor and pre-experimental RWA as the moderator showed that, consistent with Hypothesis 1, symbolic threat fostered post-experimental RWA among participants with low pre-experimental levels of RWA ($-1 SD$), *simple slope* = $.49, p < .05$, but not among those with high levels of RWA ($+ 1 SD$), *simple slope* = $-.26, p = .23$ (Figure 1).²

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, the change in RWA was found not to be the consequence of rational adjustment to information received by the low RWA scorers. Indeed, two hierachic regressions aimed at predicting candidates' evaluations showed that post-experimental candidates evaluations were not influenced by the interaction between symbolic threat and pre-experimental RWA (Table 5).

Accordingly, we ruled out this alternative interpretation of the previous findings.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we showed experimentally that the effects of symbolic threat on RWA are similar to those of realistic threat. Indeed, symbolic threat heightens the RWA levels of people who are low on authoritarianism, but not of those who are high. Thus, our results support the idea

TABLE 4
 Predictors of post-experimental RWA

	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			
	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	
Intercept	2.84***	.22		2.79***	.22		2.81***	.05		
Pre-experimental RWA	.62***	.08	.64	.77***	.15	.79	.82***	.18	.84	
Political affiliation	.02	.12	.01	-.00	.12	-.00	.00	.12	.00	
Outparty attacks	-.02	.11	-.01	.11	.15	.08	.12	.16	.09	
Inparty attacks	-.04	.11	-.03	.02	.15	.01	.01	.16	.01	
Inparty attacks × Outparty attacks				-.22	.22	-.14	-.21	.22	-.14	
Pre-experimental RWA × Outparty attacks					-.44**	.16	-.34	-.53*	.23	-.41
Pre-experimental RWA × Inparty attacks					.18	.15	.13	.08	.24	.06
Pre-experimental RWA × Inparty attacks × Outparty attacks							.18	.32	.09	
<i>R</i> ² (Adj.)		.39			.43			.43		

Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

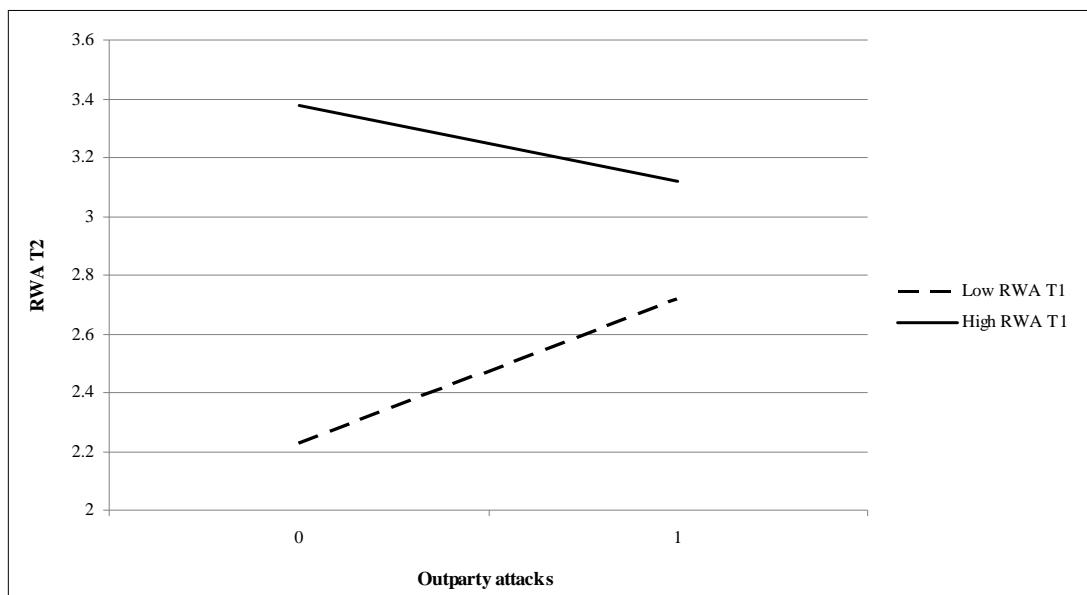


FIGURE 1
 The moderating effect of pre-experimental RWA on the relation
 between symbolic threat and post-experimental RWA.

TABLE 5
 Predictors of candidates' evaluations

	Inparty evaluation									Outparty evaluation								
	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	B	ES	β	B	ES	β
Intercept	72.86***	2.17		72.80***	2.24		72.67***	2.24		43.18***	2.64		43.78***	2.68		43.67***	2.69	
Pre-experimental RWA	4.18	2.53	.18	4.56	2.61	.20	4.57	2.61	.20	-4.17	3.08	-.15	-4.35	3.13	-.16	-4.34	3.14	-.16
Political affiliation	-3.79	3.60	-.12	-4.29	3.71	-.13	-4.50	3.73	-.14	5.08	4.39	.13	5.68	4.45	.14	5.50	4.48	.14
Outparty attacks	-7.44*	3.34	-.23	-8.07*	3.43	-.25	-8.41*	3.46	-.26	8.77*	4.06	.23	9.75*	4.11	.25	9.47*	4.16	.25
Inparty attacks	-2.61	3.34	-.08	-2.76	3.43	-.09	-2.40	3.47	-.08	-1.78	4.07	-.05	-2.27	4.11	-.06	-1.99	4.17	-.05
Inparty attacks × Outparty attacks				4.17	6.90	.07	3.88	6.93	.06				-6.23	8.23	-.08	-6.47	8.33	-.08
Pre-experimental RWA × Outparty attacks				-0.59	4.99	-.02	-.55	5.00	-.01				-5.81	5.99	-.10	-5.77	6.01	-.10
Pre-experimental RWA × Inparty attacks				-4.86	4.99	-.11	-4.60	5.01	-.10				-9.55	5.98	.17	9.76	6.02	.18
Pre-experimental RWA × Inparty attacks × Outparty attacks							-7.67	9.99	-.08						-6.23	12.01	-.06	
<i>R</i> ² (Adj.)	.05			.03			.02			.03			.04			.03		

Note. *** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$.

that authoritarianism is a consequence of living through threatening and stressful events, primarily among low authoritarians (Dallago et al., 2011, 2012; Dallago & Roccato, 2010). Moreover, our findings are consistent with those of Peshovska (2012), who showed experimentally that symbolic threat negatively influences people's perceived control over the social world. Thus, this study indirectly supports Mirisola and colleagues' (in press) idea that increasing RWA is a strategy to compensate for a loss of perceived control, which is adopted especially by low authoritarians, and Van Hiel and De Clercq's (2009) idea that authoritarianism is a "good for the self" strategy for coping with threatening and stressful events. However, we could not compare the anxiety levels of our high and low authoritarian participants after measuring their post-experimental levels of RWA, and we could not analyze directly the coping strategies used by high and low authoritarians. Nor could we explicitly test the mediating role of perceived control. Future studies should be conducted to deepen our understanding of the "good for the self" in authoritarianism.

The results of this study are in line with those of research examining the differential moderation hypothesis (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), which, in this context, states that situational threats foster negative attitudes toward outgroups among high, but not low, RWA scorers (e.g., Cohrs & Ibler, 2009; Dru, 2007; Motyl, Hart, & Pyszczynski, 2010). Previous studies have shown that people with high RWA scores try to cope with situational menaces by resorting to heightened intergroup bias, which may be a consequence of "self-protective, defensive motivational needs for control and security" (Duckitt, 2001, p. 85). The current study shows indirectly that people with low RWA try to cope with symbolic threat by increasing their RWA level, that is, by becoming more similar to their authoritarian counterparts. Future longitudinal research into whether the exposure of high and low RWA scorers to repeated threats affects their RWA trends and prejudices against outgroups would be interesting.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from our results. The first concerns the types of threats that may trigger the conditional process we focused on. Our findings show that the sense of a threat, even if not as realistic as a criminal threat, is fundamental to an increase in RWA among low authoritarians. Future research should maintain this focus, and investigate whether the process gets underway when other types of threat are experienced, for example, those stemming from natural disasters or epidemic diseases. In so doing, it would be interesting to use Whitson and Galinsky's (2008) 2×2 experimental design in which threat and perception of control are independently manipulated. Our second conclusion concerns the very nature of RWA. Our results are consistent with the conception of RWA as an ideological variable that is liable to change as a function of the "here and now" of people's daily experiences (see Dallago, Cima, Roccato, Ricolfi & Mirisola, 2008; Duckitt, 2001). However, our results are incompatible with the theories (cf., Altemeyer, 1996) that conceive authoritarianism as a stable personality trait, as is often the case when traditional approaches are adopted (Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1933).

Regarding authoritarianism as a mechanism that people can rely on when facing threatening situations resonates with Fromm's (1941) view, according to which authoritarianism is a defense mechanism that people use to escape from freedom when they are not able to handle such freedom, given their scarce personal resources. However, Fromm conceived authoritarianism as a stable trait that develops during childhood as a consequence of growing up with repressive parenting, and from living in a politically, socially, and economically threatening world. Following his line of reasoning, low and high authoritarians should show relatively immutable psychologi-

cal differences. By contrast, our results show that experiencing a threatening situation may reduce differences between low and high authoritarians. Thus, we are more pessimistic than Fromm, in that authoritarianism predicts variability in generalized prejudice (McFarland, 2011), support for military aggression, punitive attitudes toward unconventional people, approval of injustices perpetrated by authorities, and even obedience in Milgram-style experiments (Crowson, 2009; Dambrun & Vatiné, 2010).

This study has a number of strengths. First, its approach was based on an experimental technique that allowed us to maximize ecological validity (Redlawsk & Lau, 2009). Second, we focused on experimentally manipulated symbolic threat. A recent meta-analysis by Onraet, Van Hiel, Dhont, and Pattyn (2013) showed that, with regard to external threat (i.e., a menace to both the individual and society), no significant differences emerge when comparing objective situational threats and subjective perceptions of threat. However, previous studies have shown that, under conditions of equal actual threat, high authoritarians tend to feel more in danger than low authoritarians, even when both controlled processes (Cohrs & Ibler, 2009) and automatic processes (Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber, 2002) are taken into account. This calls into question whether the traditional approach to the study of RWA, which usually involves examining changes in RWA under *perceived* threat (e.g., Rickert, 1998; Stevens et al., 2006), is appropriate. Indeed, the focus on perceived threat may lead to the prediction of dependent variable (here, an increase in RWA) on the basis of an independent variable (perceived threat) that is not semantically independent of the dependent variable. Thus, a fundamental epistemological principle of causal research (i.e., semantic independence between the *explanans* and the *explanandum*) is violated (Von Wright, 1971). The experimental approach we adopted allowed us to overcome this problem.

Another strength of this study is its focus on conditional effect. A research field may be regarded as mature and sophisticated only when moderators of the relation between predictors and dependent variables are identified (Aguinis, Boik, & Pierce, 2001; Judd, McClelland, & Culhane, 1995). Recently, Sibley and Duckitt (2008) have argued that this requirement applies to research on authoritarianism, and our study represents a step in this direction.

As so often happens, the study enabled us to answer some research questions, but raised some others. First, given that we could not quantify the duration of the observed increase in authoritarianism due to symbolic threat, future longitudinal research that includes more than two waves is needed to shed light on the results presented here. Second, since we could not determine what would happen outside a laboratory, a multilevel longitudinal research project is needed to help clarify the extent to which our results generalize to the real world. However, even with these limitations, our study represents a step forward in this research field, and also provides a stimulus for new research on the conditional links between threat and RWA.

NOTES

1. Due to the low number of items in both sets, it is not surprising that their α s did not reach the conventional .70 threshold. However, their mean correlations, $r = .26$ and $r = .24$, respectively, were higher than those obtained from administration of the entire scale in Canada and the USA (see Altemeyer, 1988, 1996).
2. Two sets of supplementary analyses reinforced these findings. First, a parallel moderated regression performed after excluding Independents from the analysis showed analogous results. Indeed, the only significant interaction term was Pre-experimental RWA \times Outparty attacks, $\beta = -.03$, $p < .01$, and again

the effect of outparty attacks was to increase RWA only among participants with initially low levels of RWA, simple slope = .44, $p < .05$. Second, further parallel analyses performed using the Tobit model (Austin, Escobar, & Kopec, 2000; McBee, 2010), which provides robust results when managing floor or ceiling effects (based on Cox and Oakes, 1984, we chose the RWA empirical maximum as the censoring point) showed that the moderating effect we had detected did not depend on a ceiling effect for high RWA scorers (results available on request).

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APPENDIX

Examples of Issue-Based Negative Messages

[Candidate name] says that he will open the national wildlife preserve in Alaska, and also our coasts for drilling. Recent events should teach us that such a plan puts some of our pristine wilderness and fragile coastal areas at risk of destruction. Is it worth sacrificing our land to produce more oil when it is not going to last forever? Is it even worth voting [candidate name]?

[Candidate name] wants to reduce the military's budget at a time when we face serious threats at home and abroad. Reducing the military's budget is a dangerous step in the wrong direction. So wrong that it's scary. It's time to put American security ahead of [candidate name]'s politics.

Examples of Person-Based Negative Messages

[Candidate name] began his relationship with his current wife while his first wife was in hospital undergoing treatment for cancer. It's really hard to believe she was just a supportive friend as he's declared...it's very easy to believe he probably is not the President Americans need. We need integrity and honesty...We don't need [candidate name].

A very popular President...while [Candidate name] was Governor of California he was frequently criticized for spending more time cultivating friendships with Hollywood stars than conducting the business of the State. This is why [candidate name] is so popular. Leading a country is not acting in a movie. Are you sure you want a "popular" President?

Examples of Positive Messages

I stand for the values of hard work and responsibility, and I know that, as a country, we are most successful when we invest in our people — middle-class families and small-business owners — who can grow our economy from the bottom up.

I believe that maintaining a world-class system of education, in which all students can reach their potential, is critically important for America's future. I believe in the power of school choice, that giving parents the ability to send their children to better schools is an important way of enabling the children to get the quality education they deserve.