



Short Communication

The social development of right-wing authoritarianism: The interaction between parental autonomy support and societal threat to safety



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ABSTRACT

We tested the hypothesis that parental support for autonomy moderates the effects of societal threat to safety on the development of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). In a quasi-experimental study performed on 241 Italian university students, societal threat to safety fostered RWA only among participants who reported low levels of parental support for autonomy.

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Early theorists postulated that: *in situations of threat, individuals who are socialized in an authoritarian manner tend to submit to authority* (Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1933). In the following years, many scholars have investigated the issue, from two different angles. Some have focused on the direct link between different parenting dimensions and child authoritarianism (e.g., Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007), while others have concentrated on the direct impact of threat on authoritarianism (e.g. Onraet, Van Hiel, Dhont, & Pattyn, 2013). In the present study, we integrate these lines of research to gain insight into the social development of authoritarianism, operationalized as right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), i.e., as the covariation of authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1996).

1. Parenting, threat, and RWA

Authoritarianism has been traditionally attributed to social developmental processes (cf. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). More recently, Altemeyer (1988) contended that adolescence is the stage of life critical to the development of authoritarianism. He suggested that adolescents who have frequent contacts with members of out-groups, deviants, or people holding different values are less likely to develop authoritarian attitudes than adolescents who do not have such contacts. However, the inclination or possibility to experience

these contacts is largely determined by the social growing-up context. Altemeyer himself maintains that life experiences cannot be the ultimate cause of authoritarianism: “experiences may correlate with authoritarian attitudes, but only because ... other factors have predisposed us to experience experiences in expected ways” (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 86). From this perspective, and in line with the early works, parenting styles play an important role.

Growing research has shown that parent-child relationships are a key factor in the development of RWA. A first set of studies detected a significant relation between children's attachment style and RWA. Authoritarianism showed a weak negative link with attachment avoidance, and a weak positive link with attachment anxiety (e.g., Weber & Federico, 2008). A second set reported that parents' authoritarianism has a significant association with children's authoritarianism (e.g. Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2008). A third set focused on parental goal promotion. For instance, Duriez et al. (2007) found that the promotion of extrinsic goals at the expense of intrinsic goals is positively associated with the degree to which adolescents subscribe to the prejudice dimensions of RWA. Similarly, Duriez (2011) reported a positive association between extrinsic goals promotion and ethnic prejudice. Finally, a fourth set showed that strict parenting style and parental psychological control are positively linked to authoritarianism (Duckitt, 2001; Heydari, Teymouri, & Hagish, 2013).

These four lines of research rested on the assumption that parenting practices are directly associated with offspring's authoritarianism. However, as stated above, an intriguing idea—from the origins of the study of authoritarianism—is that people socialized in an authoritarian

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manner are especially likely to submit to authority when they are *under threat*. In this light, the socialization process affects how people react to threats more than individual levels of authoritarianism.

The dual-process motivational model (Duckitt, 2001) holds that authoritarianism, far from being a stable personality variable, is an ideological variable liable to change as a function of actual and/or perceived threat. Longitudinal research has shown that RWA increases as a function of degree of threat, especially of societal threat to safety (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). Consistent with this, Oesterreich (2005) has suggested that authoritarianism is strongly related to insecurity and threat: “flight into security” is a universal human reaction in ambiguous and frightening situations that lead people to orient themselves towards authorities, i.e., towards individuals and institutions who can provide security. In other words, people may cope with threat by endorsing external systems that impose structure and order in their social world, usually God, the government, or powerful others (e.g., Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008), and RWA accounts for people’s tendency to do so (Altemeyer, 1988). In this light, the endorsement of authoritarian views might be considered as a coping mechanism to which people resort to when facing threatening situations in order to increase their perceived control over the world (Mirisola, Roccoato, Russo, Spagna, & Vieno, 2014; Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009). Recently, different individual psychological variables have been shown to moderate the association between threat and RWA (e.g., openness to experience, initial level of RWA, meaning, and clarity of self-concept; see Dallago & Roccoato, 2010; Manzi, Roccoato, & Russo, 2015; Mirisola et al., 2014; Russo, Manzi, & Roccoato, 2016). Overall, these studies suggest that authoritarian reactions to threat characterize some people more than others.

2. The current study

Oesterreich (2005) postulated that the foundations of authoritarians’ propensity to submit to authority date back to childhood, when authoritarian reactions may protect the child against risks in a world in which s/he cannot cope. At this stage of life, the role of parents is crucial in influencing how the child will deal with threat during the following stages. According to Oesterreich (2005), whether socialization leads towards personal autonomy or a lifelong reliance on authority depends on how parents have supported the child’s autonomous functioning. When children face a particular threat, their parents’ tasks should be to reassure them and, at the same time, to help them formulate autonomously their own strategies to cope with reality. When parents support autonomy, the child’s capacity to cope with reality will be strengthened, and the child will be successful in overcoming insecurity by developing appropriate individual solutions. By contrast, controlling and manipulative parents demand that their children rely on authority or authoritarian mechanisms rather than teach appropriate coping strategies. Inability of the child to generate such strategies is likely to increase the probability of responding in an authoritarian manner to critical situations even in adulthood.

In this study, we aimed to analyze the conjoint effects of threat and parenting practices on the development of authoritarianism. In particular, we focused on parental support for autonomy. This dimension refers to parental attitudes and behaviors that encourage the child’s volitional functioning (by contrast with controlling and manipulative parenting). Parental autonomy support has been found to have important implications for many aspects of child adjustment (for a review, see Manzi, Regalia, Pelucchi, & Fincham, 2012). We suggest that the effect of societal threat to safety on the development of authoritarian attitudes depends on this parental dimension. More specifically, we hypothesize that parental autonomy support buffers people’s authoritarian responses to socially threatening situations.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two hundred and forty-one students from social-psychology courses in the Psychology Department of the University of Torino, Italy (31% males, $M_{age} = 24.51$, $SD = 5.06$) participated in this study on a voluntary basis without compensation. They were recruited in their classes, completed anonymously the questionnaire described below and, after their participation, were carefully debriefed.

3.2. Method and measures

We performed a paper-and-pencil quasi-experimental vignette study, based on Roccoato and Russo’s (2016) procedure. First, participants compiled a measure of Parental Autonomy Support (PAS; we used the Autonomy Support sub-dimension of the Perception of Parents Scale by Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991), composed of seven 5-category items. This measure assesses the degree to which parents encourage and support their children to take autonomous decisions about their lives. An example item is “My parents, whenever possible, allow me to choose what to do”, $\alpha = 0.88$ ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.74$). Subsequently, we asked our participants to imagine themselves in the hypothetical situation of coming back to Italy in 2025 after some years spent abroad and getting a sense of what the country had become. We then initiated our experimental manipulation. A randomly selected group ($n = 117$, 32.5% males, $M_{age} = 24.21$) were given a safe scenario, depicting Italy as one of the world’s safest nations, and the Italians as believing they live in one of the best periods of human history. The remaining participants ($n = 124$, 29.8% males, $M_{age} = 24.79$) were given a threatening scenario, presenting the country as a very dangerous place, where criminality is widespread and armed gangs control many city districts. The scenarios have previously been used in research on RWA (see Manzi et al., 2015; Mirisola et al., 2014).

After the manipulation, participants were presented with the item: “Think of micro-criminality: How would you define the situation regarding this problem in Italy in 2025?” (1 “Not risky at all” to 7 “Very risky”). Given that this item is an effective operationalization of perceived societal threat to safety (Dallago & Roccoato, 2010), we used it as a manipulation check. Subsequently, we measured participants’ RWA using a short, balanced version of the RWA scale. This 5-category 10-item measure, $\alpha = 0.79$ ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.66$) has been validated on a sample of 839 participants, composed of both students and adults (cf. form B, Roccoato & Russo, 2015). Like Altemeyer’s (1988) original RWA scale, the scale taps into covariation between the three dimensions of RWA. A standard socio-demographic form was then presented. We computed the mean scores of the items on the scales.

4. Results

Preliminary analyses showed that our experimental manipulation was effective: participants exposed to the threatening scenario reported higher societal threat to safety ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.49$) than those

Table 1
Predictors of RWA.

	Step 1	Step 2
Threatening scenario	0.21 (0.04)***	0.21 (0.04)***
PAS	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.07 (0.05)
Threatening scenario * PAS		−0.17 (0.05)**
Explained variance - R^2	0.10	0.14
ΔR^2		F (1, 237) = 9.45**

Notes. Unstandardized parameters are displayed, with standard errors in parentheses.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

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