

# Micro- and Macro-Identification as Moderators of the Relationship Between Social Threat and Authoritarianism

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## Abstract

The relationship between social threat and authoritarianism has often been studied in connection to social identification. In line with the Group Cohesion Model and the Social Identity Theory, the aim of this study was to verify that identification with the macro-context (sense of community identity and place identity) increases authoritarianism when a person perceives a social threat (the “catalytic effect” hypothesis). On the contrary, identification with the micro-context (family and peer group) reduces the strength of the relationship between social threat and authoritarianism (the “buffer effect” hypothesis). A moderation model on an Italian sample ( $N = 721$ ) confirmed this hypothesis. The resulting theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

## Keywords

Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Social Threat, Identification, Sense of Community Identity, Place Identity

## 1. Social Threat and Authoritarianism

Since the first studies on the authoritarian personality of Adorno and colleagues [1], social threat has been one of the variables associated with anti-democratic tendencies. For example, many studies have analyzed this relationship during particular historical events. At the societal level, manifestations of authoritarian tendencies (e.g., conversion rates from nonauthoritarian to authoritarian church denominations and prison sentences for sex offenders) have been found to be more prevalent in periods of high social, economic, or political threat [2] [3] [4] [5]. However, studies with aggregate data have also investigated the psychological factors that trigger authoritarianism in situations of perceived threat. About this, see the debate on “situational” and “dispositional” authoritarianism [6] [7]. For example, according to Duckitt [8] and Sibley and colleagues [9], authoritarianism should not be considered a stable personality characteristic; on the contrary, it should be viewed as an ideological variable expressing the situational and dispositional motivational goals of order, social control, and security.

If one wants to distinguish the authoritarianism “of the leaders” (see SDO by Sidanius & Pratto [10]) from the authoritarianism “of the followers”, one typically references the right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) of Altemeyer [11] [12]. RWA is defined as the covariation of three attitudinal clusters: *submission* (i.e., submission to authorities perceived to be established and legitimate in society), *conventionalism* (i.e., adherence to social conventions perceived to be endorsed by society and its authorities), and *authoritarian aggression* (i.e., aggression toward people or groups that is perceived to be sanctioned by authorities).

Perceived social threat is a cognitive evaluation regarding the ways in which outgroup members interfere with the desires of the ingroup to achieve the goals of their group [13]. Contemporary social-psychological theories distinguish between realistic and symbolic threats [14] [15]. A realistic threat is a threat of potential harm to tangible or concrete objects (e.g., money, land, or human life), whereas a symbolic threat includes various potential threats to relatively abstract aspects of the state, such as threats to the in-group’s identity, value system, belief system, or worldview (e.g., language, religion, or morality).

The literature on the relationship between social threat and

RWA is very extensive. Many studies have addressed this issue both at the individual level [7] [16] [17] and at the social level [3] [19] [21] [22] [23]. One of the first integrative models of the causation of RWA is the Group Cohesion Model [24], which suggests that RWA is an expression of a need for cohesion in a social group. However, Jugert and Duckitt [25] point out that RWA is a group phenomenon and could be characteristic of any social group, but it is especially relevant to macro-contextual memberships (societal or national groups). This need for societal group cohesion in individuals has been viewed as a joint product of the degree to which people identify with and the degree to which people perceive threats to their societal group. This model predicts the onset of authoritarian defenses, especially when membership in social and national groups is salient. Specifically, motivational goals to protect social stability, security, and cohesion are chronically more important or accessible in authoritarians than in nonauthoritarians. Authoritarianism has also been described as implicating high concerns for “oneness and sameness” within society [26].

Authoritarianism and social threat are often associated with prejudice, with these three elements constituting an “ideal triangle” (see the differential moderation hypothesis by Duckitt & Sibley [27]). More precisely, RWA predicted prejudice against groups culturally stereotyped as threatening (e.g., drug dealers, rock stars), but not against groups culturally stereotyped as socially subordinate (e.g., housewives, the physically disabled) [28]. Stellmacher and Petzel [18] found that for various groups (e.g., members of the Green party, psychologists), threats to group esteem led to authoritarian attitudes only in individuals who held an authoritarian disposition and identified strongly with their group.

These studies make it possible to introduce the role of group identification to explain the relationship between social threat and authoritarianism.

## 2. Identification with the Macro- and Micro-Contexts

Altemeyer’s [29] conceptualization of authoritarianism as a “dangerous world complex” suggests that threats — specifically threats to one’s ingroup orientation — act as the primary factor increasing manifestations of authoritarian attitudes and behaviors. Several types of identification with social groups have been studied in relation to authoritarianism, for example with religious groups [30], political parties [31], and against the women’s movement [32]. In their meta-review, Riek, Mania and Gaertner [33] found that ingroup identification had a significant impact on realistic and symbolic threat. Usually — using Bronfenbrenner’s terminology [34] — these groups are examples of meso- and eso-systems. Studies with microsystem groups [20] [35] [36] are rarer.

The social identity perspectives suggest that in an intergroup context, social identity produces intergroup

behavior independent of personality or individual differences in ideological beliefs [37]. In line with this, Perrault and Bourhis [38] have suggested that authoritarianism affects processes of group identification. For example, authoritarian individuals may be ready to categorize themselves and others as ingroup and outgroup members, leading them to identify more strongly with relevant ingroups. Therefore, it appears highly probable that the identification process is involved when a person feels threatened. However, this should happen mainly when the threat is against the social self — and its borders — and not any other aspect of the self.

The psychological boundaries of the self are difficult to define. Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to define these boundaries. For example, Sedikides and Brewer [39] recently devoted an entire edited volume to an exposition of the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. From their perspective, the *individual self* is defined by personal characteristics, such as personality traits, that make a person unique or set him or her apart from others. The *relational self* involves connection in the form of interdependent, often attachment-based relationships with specific others. The *collective self* derives from membership with larger, more depersonalized groups. According to the “amoebic self theory” of Burris and Rempel [40], the boundary defining the self encompasses three levels of self-representation: bodily, social, and spatial-symbolic. Our suggestion is that authoritarianism is a defense of spatial-symbolic boundaries.

For example, Verkuyten [41] talks about the “group identity moderator” model. This model, in line with Social Identity Theory [42], predicts that national identification interacts with outgroup threat to predict support for multiculturalism and minority rights. Compared with low identifiers, those with high ingroup identification are more likely to be concerned about their group, especially when the position and value of the group identity is at stake [43].

As for the relationship between authoritarianism and microsystems, an obligatory reference is to Fromm’s classical theory [44] in which identification with a strong leader is seen as a form of transfer by a weak subject in need of reassuring identification. Through the projection of the super-ego onto the authorities, they are removed from rational and moral criticism [45]. This occurs in subjects in which, for some reason, the primary identification with parental figures failed or was weak, making the parental figures unfit to be internalized and become healthy representations of the super-ego. Several studies have confirmed the indirect relationship between the quality of family education and authoritarianism [20] [46] [47] [48].

## 3. The Present Study

As has been seen, in the conception of authoritarianism as a social phenomenon [6] [24], authoritarianism is the intensity of an individual’s group identification and their commitment to group cohesiveness [24]. However, these studies generalize group memberships. The aim of this study

is to differentiate between two hierarchical levels of identification and to explain the relationship between social threat and authoritarianism differently for the two levels. Using the terminology of Amoebic Self Theory [40],

authoritarianism becomes a defense mechanism when spatial-symbolic boundaries are threatened, whereas this does not happen — or happens to a lesser degree — when proximity boundaries are threatened.

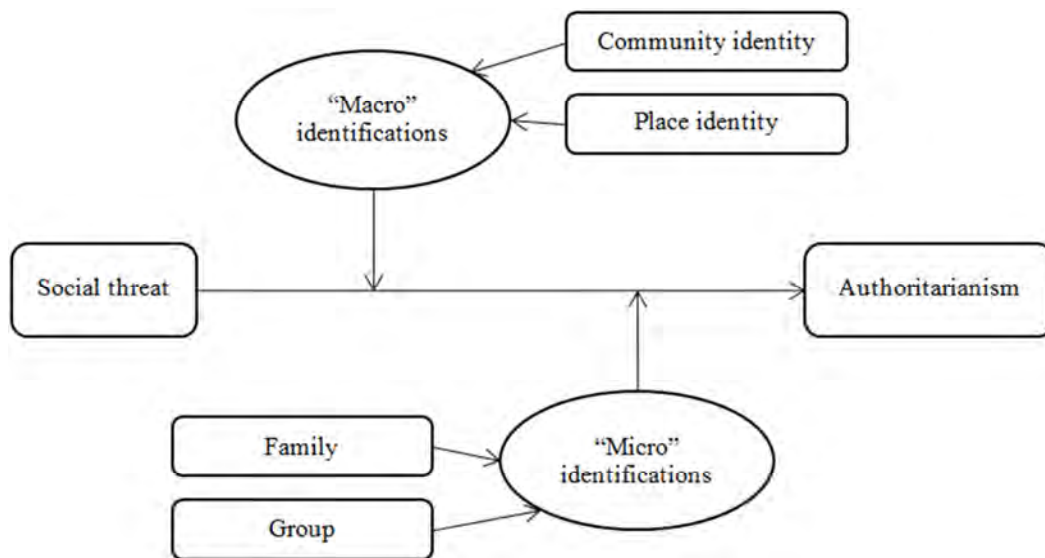


Figure 1. Theoretical model of moderation.

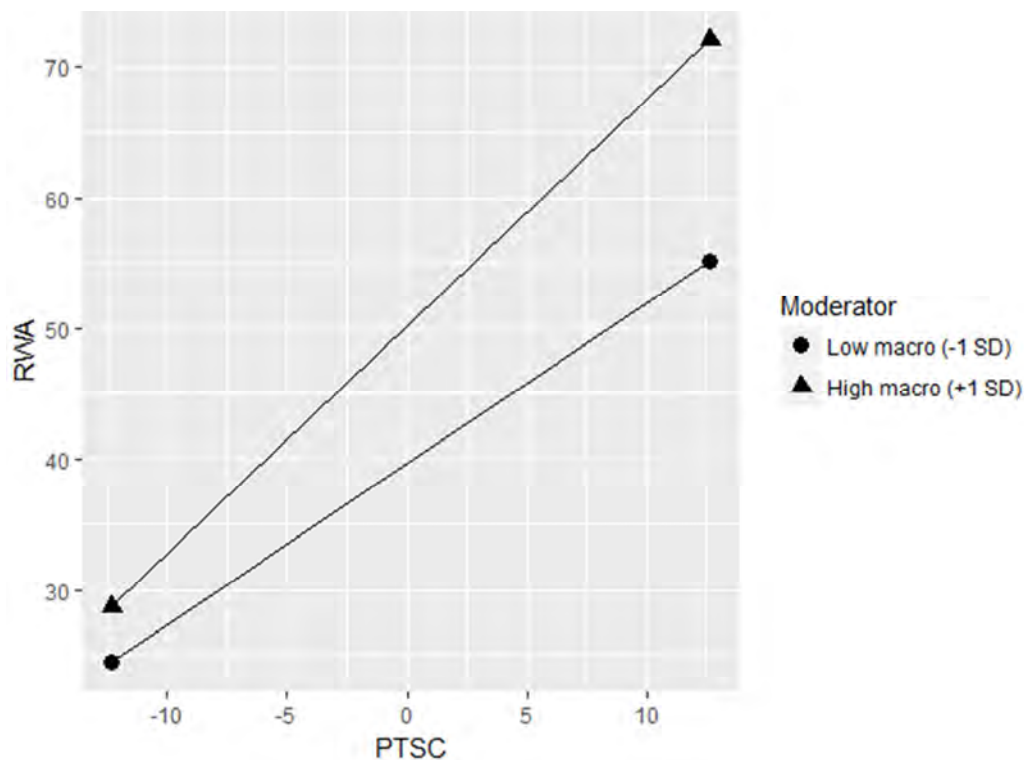


Figure 2. Plot of simple slope analysis for “macro” identification.

In practice, the relationship between threat and authoritarianism is mediated by two forms of identification (Figure 1). At the “macro” level, the identification with the community and place leads to high authoritarianism in cases of perceived threat. At the “micro” level, the identification with the family and peer group leads to a decrease in authoritarianism in cases of perceived social threat. In other

words, the macro-identification has a “catalytic effect” on the threat-authoritarianism relationship, whereas the micro-identification has a “buffering effect” on this relationship.

In line with the above, the study analyzes the following hypotheses:

$H_1$  (direct model): the perception of social threats and the macro-identification increases authoritarianism, whereas the

micro-identification decreases authoritarianism;

$H_2$  (moderation model): the perception of social threat increases authoritarianism in cases of high macro-identification more than in cases of low macro-identification

( $H_{2a}$ : the “catalytic effect”). On the contrary, the perception of social threat increases authoritarianism in cases of low micro-identification more than in cases of high micro-identification ( $H_{2b}$ : the “buffering effect”).

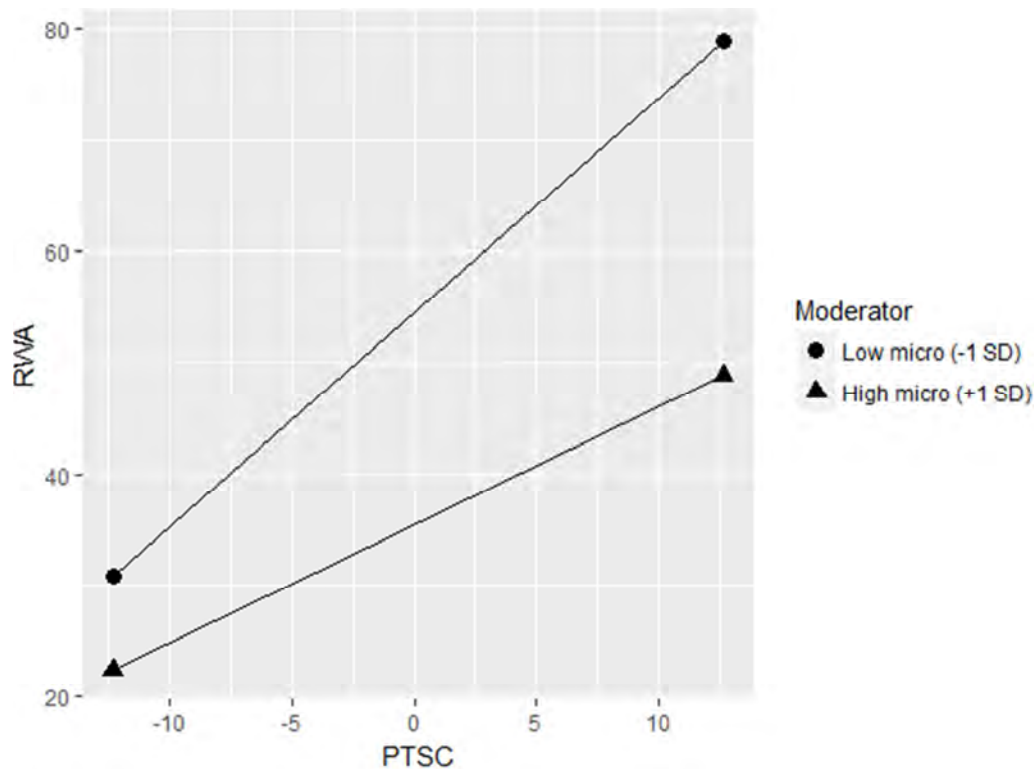


Figure 3. Plot of simple slope analysis for “micro” identification.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants and Procedures

The recruitment of participants followed two methods: paper and online. For the paper method, six graduating students from the University of Salento (Italy) distributed the questionnaire to not less than one hundred persons each. The different sub-samples had to respect precise sampling quotas based on gender, age, education, and political orientation. As for the online sample, the same questionnaire was promoted in informal networks of graduating students and mailing lists of parties and associations for political activism.

The participants were asked to participate in a survey concerning their territorial community by anonymously answering questions regarding relevant social issues. The questionnaire was completed in approximately 15 minutes, and no incentives were provided for completing the task.

The sample consists of 721 subjects (634 ss recruited with the paper method and 87 ss with the online method). The mean age of participants is 36.04 years ( $SD = 14.16$ ), with a range of 17–76 years. Of the participants, 55% are female, 56.8% have a high school diploma (18.3% middle school, 15.8% university degree), and 18% are employed (15.7% workers, 13.6% students). In regard to policy position (measured with a response from “extreme left” = 1 to

“extreme right” = 10), the variable distribution of the participants is near normal ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ , skewness = 0.26, kurtosis = -0.38).

### 4.2. Measures

**Authoritarianism.** Has been assessed Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) in the participants using Giampaglia and Roccato’s [49] balanced Italian adaptation of Altemeyer’s [50] RWA Scale (14 items, four response Likert-type categories, from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). Examples of items are “Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us” and “Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples” who are ruining everything”. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Social threat.** Feldman’s [6] Perceived Threat to Social Cohesion Scale (PTSC) was used. This scale consists of seven items with five Likert-type modes of response ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree” (e.g., “The foundations of this country are strong, and we really shouldn’t worry about recent changes in society”) plus a dichotomous item (“Thinking about values in society, do you think that things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel that things have gotten pretty

seriously off on the wrong track?”). The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

**Community identity.** The first 10 items of Puddifoot's [51] Sense of Community Identity scale were used. These items are designed to measure the “personal” dimensions of sense of community identity (SOCI) in contrast with “shared” dimensions of SOCI not considered in this study. The five Likert-type modes of response range from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree.” One example of an item is “The place where I live is a friendly community” and “People help each other in this community”. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Place identity.** Four items based on the work of Hernandez and colleagues were used. The response modalities range from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. One example of these items is “I identify with this country” and “I feel I belong to this country”. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Group identification.** To measure group identification, it

has been used the Three Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale presented by Obst and White [53] based on the work of Cameron [54]. The 12 scale items have five Likert-type modes of response (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”). One example of an item is “I often think about being a member of my group” and “Being a member of my group is an important part of my self-image”. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Family identification.** Has been adapted the Three Dimensional Strength of Group Identification Scale also to the family context. Examples of items are “I often think about being a member of my family” and “Being a member of my family is an important part of my self-image”. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

## 5. Results

Table 1 shows the correlations, means and standard deviations of the variables considered.

**Table 1.** Correlations, means and standard deviations of the variables considered.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	-									
2. Age	0.08*	-								
3. Education	-0.04	-0.24***	-							
4. PP	0.10*	0.00	-0.08*	-						
5. PI	0.07	0.08*	-0.09*	0.08*	-					
6. SCI	0.01	0.14***	-0.07	0.11**	0.59***	-				
7. RWA	-0.06	0.00	0.09*	0.03	0.35***	0.24***	-			
8. FI	0.12**	0.01	-0.10**	-0.05	-0.19***	-0.11**	-0.51***	-		
9. PTSC	-0.06	-0.02	0.07*	0.03	0.06	-0.02	0.46***	-0.30***	-	
10. GI	0.11**	-0.02	-0.09*	-0.04	-0.19***	-0.11**	-0.50***	0.58***	-0.49***	-
Mean	-	36.04	2.98	5.26	14.82	31.23	49.85	17.51	26.85	20.29
Std. Dev.	-	14.16	0.84	2.44	3.76	3.93	4.49	2.34	2.64	1.28

Note: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Gender (0 = female, 1 = male), PP = political position, PI = place identity, SCI = sense of community identity, RWA = right-wing authoritarianism, FI = family identification, PTSC = perceived threat to social cohesion, GI = group identification.

**Table 2.** Linear model (with and without moderation) of authoritarianism.

	b	std.er.
<i>Step 1</i>		
PTSC	0.51***	0.07
macro	0.25***	0.04
micro	-0.38**	0.04
F (df)	1580 (3, 656)***	
R <sup>2</sup> adj	0.33	
<i>Step 2</i>		
PTSC	0.68***	0.22
macro	-0.39***	0.04
micro	-0.35***	0.07
PTSC*macro	-0.05***	0.01
PTSC*micro	-0.02**	0.01
Low macro (-1 SD)	1.23***	0.22
High macro (+1 SD)	1.74***	0.23
Low micro (-1 SD)	1.92***	0.37
High micro (+1 SD)	1.05***	0.09
F (df)	1059.61 (5, 654)***	
R <sup>2</sup> adj	0.37	
$\Delta R^2$	0.04	
Fchange (df)	3.23 (2, 644)*	

To test the hypothesis that increasing social threat (PTSC) and identification with the macro-context increases

authoritarianism (RWA), whereas increasing identification with the micro-context decreases authoritarianism ( $H_1$ ), was

performed a linear model (Table 2, step 1) after adding together the scores of community identity with place identity (“macro” = SCI + PI) and group identification with family identification (“micro” = GI + FI). The data show, as assumed, a significant and positive effect of social threat and macro-identification and a significant and negative effect of micro-identification.

To test the hypothesis that identifications with the micro- and the macro-context moderate the relationship between social threat and authoritarianism ( $H_2$ ), was performed a moderation model in which RWA was the dependent variable, PTSC was the independent variable, and “micro” and “macro” identifications were the moderators (Table 2, step 2). The data show that the interaction between social threat and identification within the macro- and micro-contexts is significant, as expected.

Regarding the interaction between social threat and identification with the macro-context, the relationship is significant both at high (+1 *SD*) and low levels of identification with the macro-context. The analyses show the same results for high (+1 *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels of identification with the micro-context (Table 2, step 2). Moreover, the moderation model is significantly better than the model without moderation (see  $\Delta R^2$  and F-change). Figure 2 shows the direction of moderation for the macro-identification: When identification is high, the relationship between threat and authoritarianism is higher than when identification is low. On the contrary, as shown in Figure 3 for the micro-identification, the relationship between threat and authoritarianism is higher in cases of high identification, whereas it is lower in cases of low identification. These results are consistent with our hypothesis of a “catalytic effect” for the macro-identification ( $H_{2a}$ ) and of a “buffer effect” for the micro-identification ( $H_{2b}$ ).

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to verify that identification with the macro-context increases the use of authoritarian defenses when a person perceives a social threat (the “catalytic effect” hypothesis). On the contrary, identification with the micro-context reduces the strength of the relationship between social threat and authoritarianism (the “buffer effect” hypothesis). Our data have confirmed this dual moderation model.

In line with the Group Cohesion Model [24] and Social Identity Theory [42], authoritarianism is a reparative mechanism against the perception of social threats, primarily when an individual identifies strongly with his or her community, place, or nation. An important share of the existence of these people is touched by social and historical difficulties and, consequently, they take refuge in a defensive projection towards an energetic leader. On the contrary, this does not happen in the case of strong identification in the micro-context. If on the one hand, the family and the peer groups are not perceived as threatened, on the other hand, the share of identity seems to defuse the reparative authoritarian

mechanism.

The “catalytic effect” partly explains why an individual is willing to give up a little democracy and to escape from freedom [44]. Thus, many social problems — economic and political — that are often attributed to ignorance, stupidity, wrong attitudes, selfishness and human ambition may become understandable when we consider them as unconsciously motivated attempts to defend against certain anxieties that cannot be resolved at the individual level. Social conflicts become “resistance” by groups of people who unconsciously cling to institutions [55]. By contrast, the “buffer effect” confirms the theory that more proximal memberships (in our case, the family and the peer group) protect the ego from regressive investment in authority figures and totalitarian dynamics.

It is not possible overlook the particular historical and social context in which this study was carried out. This is a period full of conflicts and social tensions between different cultures, religions, and nations, and it is understandable that super-structural identifications in particular are under pressure. It is therefore possible that our results are bound to the contemporary social climate, and that this is true for this study more so than for psychosocial studies in general.

Another limitation of this study — but also a possible prospect for future research — is the lack of consideration of certain personality traits and contextual variables that facilitate or block the dynamics that has been described. That is, what types of people, and in what situations, resort to an authoritarian drift if threatened?

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