

## **Predicting Perceptions of Symbolic and Realistic Threat From Terrorists: The Role of Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation**

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**ABSTRACT** - This study addressed questions of whether right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) would be related to perceptions of terrorists as either symbolic or realistic threats to the United States. RWA was expected to be positively associated with the perception of terrorists as a symbolic threat, whereas SDO was expected to be positively associated with the perception of terrorists as a realistic threat. One-hundred and seventy six community adults were surveyed as part of this study on measures of RWA, SDO, self-rated political conservatism, and perceived symbolic and realistic threat. RWA and SDO were both positively correlated with perceived symbolic and realistic threat in the study. During regression analyses, RWA emerged as a strong predictor of the perception of symbolic threat from terrorists, yet failed to predict scores on perceived realistic threat. SDO failed to predict both forms of perceived threat.

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In recent years, the constructs of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) have been invaluable in the study of American citizens' reactions to specific terrorist events, such as that which took place on September 11, 2001 (e.g., Henderson-King, Henderson-King, Bolea, Koches, & Kauffman, 2004; Nagoshi, Terrell, & Nagoshi, 2007), as well as their perceptions of terrorism and terrorist-related threats in general (e.g., Crowson, DeBacker, & Thoma, 2005, 2006). Much of this research has focused on relationships between RWA and SDO and Americans' support for specific domestic and military policies related to the U.S. government's War on Terror. In fact, considerable research has been generated linking RWA and SDO to Americans' support for the use of military intervention in order to reduce terrorist threats from abroad (e.g., Crowson, in press; McFarland, 2005), as well as their endorsement of restrictions on human rights/civil liberties (e.g., Crowson et al., 2005, 2006; Henderson-King et al., 2004) by the U.S. government in order to reduce threats at home. Rather than focusing on relationships between RWA and SDO and policy attitudes, the present research was conducted in order to better understand how these two authoritarian dispositions (see Altemeyer, 1998) are related to threat perceptions. Specifically, this research sought to test relationships between RWA and SDO, on the one hand, and the perception of terrorists as posing a symbolic versus realistic threat to the United States, on the other.

### ***RWA and SDO: Defined and Previous Research***

According to Altemeyer (1998), RWA and SDO represent two distinct types of authoritarianism – authoritarian submission and authoritarian aggression, respectively. RWA refers to a syndrome involving the covariation of three sets of attitudes: conventionalism, or adherence to conventional norms and beliefs; authoritarian submission, or submission to conventional social authorities; authoritarian aggression, or the tendency to aggress against unconventional social targets – generally under the assumption that this aggression is sanctioned by legitimate authority (Altemeyer, 1998). SDO, on the other hand, refers to a “general attitudinal orientation toward intergroup relations” reflecting a desire “that one’s in-group dominate and be superior to outgroups” (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994, p. 742). Whereas Altemeyer (1998) considered RWA and SDO to represent facets of deep personality structure, a number of authoritarianism researchers (e.g., Duckitt, 2001; Van Hiel, Pandalaere, & Duriez, 2004) have recently begun to consider them as dimensions of social attitudes.

As noted above, RWA and SDO have been studied extensively in terms of their relationships to policy attitudes addressing how Americans deal with perceived terrorist threats. For example, Henderson-King et al. (2004) found that persons scoring higher on RWA were more likely to endorse the use of military aggression as a response to the September 11, 2001 attacks and to exhibit greater levels of support for the use of governmental surveillance as a means of defending the United States against potential terrorist threats. McFarland (2005) reported that support for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq – which has been repeatedly tied to the War on Terror by President Bush and his administration (John, Domke, Coe, & Graham, 2007) – was positively associated with support for the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, McFarland concluded that support for human costs of war mediated the relationship between SDO and support for the invasion, whereas perceived threat mediated the RWA-war support relationship. Crowson and colleagues (Crowson, 2007; Crowson et al., 2005, 2006) have also shown that RWA and SDO predict support for the use of military aggression and support for human rights/civil liberties restrictions as part of the War on Terror among diverse samples comprised of college students, community adults, and even law students. Additionally, Crowson (in press) provided evidence that the positive associations between RWA and SDO and support for military aggression against Iraq are at least partially mediated through nationalism and internationalism and belief in United Nations irrelevance.

### ***RWA, SDO, and Perceived Threat***

The purpose of this study was to explore possible relationships between RWA and SDO and perceptions of terrorist threats by considering two types of threat that have been identified by researchers operating from the perspective of Integrated Threat Theory (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006): symbolic and realistic threat. Symbolic threats refer to those that arise “from a conflict in values, norms, and beliefs between groups”. Realistic threats, on the other hand, are “similar to the threats considered by RGCT (Realistic Group Conflict Theory) and includes perceptions of competition, conflicting goals, and threats to physical and economic well-being of the ingroup” (Riek et al., 2006, p. 338). Given the strong valuing of tradition and conformity (see Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, & Kielmann, 2005) among persons high on RWA, these individuals may be particularly

likely to perceive terrorists as a symbolic threat to the United States. The tendency for persons scoring high on SDO to strongly value power and achievement (see Cohrs et al., 2005), which stems in part from their belief that the world is a competitive jungle (Duckitt, 2001), suggests that these individuals may be particularly likely to view terrorist threats to the United States mainly from the perspective of realistic threat. Based on these considerations, it was hypothesized that RWA would be positively associated with perceived symbolic threat from terrorists, whereas SDO would be positively associated with perceived realistic threat. Questions of (a) whether RWA and SDO would be related to the other threat form and (b) whether both RWA and SDO would incrementally predict both types of threat remained open for the purpose of this study.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Recruitment Procedure***

A sample of 176 community adults was collected during late spring and early summer of 2007 as part of a larger study on authoritarianism and its relationship to attitudes pertaining to the War on Terror (see Crowson, in press, for more details). The sample was comprised of 87 males and 88 females, with ages ranging from 18 to 79 (Mean = 37.13, SD = 14.09). The sample was largely White (72%) and had at least some college education (94.3%), including community college. Participants were recruited by graduate students enrolled in educational statistics/research courses being taught by the author. Student researchers were asked to recruit participants (e.g., acquaintances or strangers) in the community who were 18 years of age or older and who would be willing to complete the survey in a thoughtful manner.

### ***Measures***

Participants agreeing to participate were asked to respond to all survey measures (excluding demographics) using a bipolar scale anchored 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 7 (“strongly agree”). Survey measures included a shortened 20-item version of the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWAS) provided to the author by Professor Altemeyer (May 12, 2006), as well as a shortened 12-item version of the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDOS) (see Sidanius & Pratto (1999) for full 16-item version). Example RWAS items include “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 destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs”. Example SDOS items include “Some groups are simply inferior to other groups” and “In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups”.

Participants also responded to four symbolic and four realistic threat items that were created for the purposes of this study. Items comprising the symbolic threat index (SYMBTH) include the following: “Islamic radicalism is a challenge to traditional American values”, “Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to the American way of life”, “Terrorists are deviants who are seeking to destroy the moral fabric of American society”, and “Terrorists are subverting the values that Americans hold dear”. Items comprising the realistic threat index (REALTH) include the following: “International terrorism is undermining U.S. global dominance”, “Terrorist networks are a threat to

America's global standing", "Terrorism puts U.S. economic prosperity at risk", and "America's status as a military superpower is undermined by terrorist activity." Higher scores on the abovementioned measures reflect greater levels of RWA, SDO, and perceived symbolic and realistic threats, respectively. Finally, participants responded to a 7-point index of political conservatism (POLCON) ranging from 1 ("extremely liberal") to 7 ("extremely conservative"). This variable was included in the current study to control for political orientation.

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the variables in this study are as follows: RWAS ( $M = 3.772$ ,  $SD = 1.309$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ), SDOS ( $M = 3.179$ ,  $SD = 1.176$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ), SYMBTH ( $M = 4.687$ ,  $SD = 1.607$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ), REALTH ( $M = 4.735$ ,  $SD = 1.444$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ), and POLCON ( $M = 4.268$ ,  $SD = 1.333$ ,  $\alpha = n/a$ ). RWA correlated with SDO, symbolic and realistic threats, and self-rated political conservatism at .481, .557, .377, and .700 (all  $p$ 's < .001), respectively. SDO correlated with symbolic and realistic threats and self-rated political conservatism at .295, .241, and .299 (all  $p$ 's < .01), respectively. Perceived symbolic and realistic threats correlated at .684 ( $p < .001$ ). Self-rated political conservatism correlated at .422 and .286 ( $p < .001$ ) with symbolic and realistic threats in the sample.

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses were conducted in order to study the predictive relationships between RWA, SDO and political conservatism and each form of perceived threat. In order to account for the redundant variation among the threat measures due to their high correlation, scores on each type of threat were residualized (i.e., each threat measure was regressed onto the other and the unstandardized residuals saved) prior to including them into the abovementioned regression analyses. In the first regression model, the set of predictor variables accounted for 16% [ $F(3, 149) = 9.473$ ,  $p < .001$ ] of the variance in the residualized scores on perceived symbolic threat, with only RWA emerging as a significant predictor ( $b = .339$ ,  $SE = .103$ ,  $\beta = .380$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In the second regression model, the set of predictor variables failed to account for statistically significant variation in the residualized scores on perceived realistic threat. Given the high correlation among the threat variables, a final regression model was tested using a composite threat index (based on the full set of symbolic and realistic items) as the criterion variable. In that model, the set of predictor variables accounted for 26.1% [ $F(3, 149) = 17.507$ ,  $p < .001$ ] of the variance in the composite threat variable, with only RWA emerging as a significant predictor ( $b = .906$ ,  $SE = .224$ ,  $\beta = .435$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Discussion

Judging from the zero-order correlations in the current study, it appears that both RWA and SDO are positively correlated with perceived symbolic and realistic threats from terrorists among American citizens. Nevertheless, despite this finding it appears that some of the observed relationships between RWA and SDO and perceived threat may have been spurious, reflecting high levels of shared variation (a) between the RWA and SDO variables and (b) between the perceived symbolic and realistic threat variables. When more adequate statistical controls (i.e., the use of multiple regression; the creation of residualized criterion variables) were put in place, a clearer picture of the relationships

between RWA and SDO and perceptions of symbolic and realistic threat emerged. Results of this study suggest that RWA is a stronger predictor of perceived threat than either SDO or self-identified political conservatism. Moreover, as expected, RWA was more strongly related to the perception of terrorists as a symbolic threat than the perception that they pose a realistic threat. Contrary to expectations, SDO was more strongly correlated with perceived symbolic threat than realistic threat. During regression analyses, it completely failed to predict either symbolic or realistic threat from terrorists.

It should be noted that the index of realistic threats in the current study focused less on issues of real, physical threats from terrorists and more on perceived threats to America's standing in the world. Perhaps if this index had included items pertaining to threats to one's own physical safety, or the safety of one's family or friends, the results pertaining to SDO and realistic threats might have been different. Moreover, the results might have been different had the realistic threat items addressed issues related to one's own economic well-being or the well-being of the U.S. as a whole. Taken together, these possibilities might be addressed in future research on relationships between authoritarianism and perceived threat from terrorists.

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