

# The existential function of right-wing authoritarianism\*

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Four studies tested the existential and existential buffering functions of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). We tested whether the facets of meaning mediated these functions.

**Method:** All studies measured RWA and meaning in life (MIL). Study 1,  $N = 2,319$ , also measured covariates, including Protestant Work Ethic and religiosity. Study 2,  $N = 505$ , examined RWA and meaning facets (purpose, coherence, and significance), and measured religiosity. Study 3,  $N = 971$ , measured psychological distress to test the existential buffering function of RWA. Study 4,  $N = 833$ , tested this hypothesis using meaning facets and tested for moderated mediation.

**Results:** In all studies, RWA and MIL were positively correlated. In Study 1, Protestant Work Ethic and religiosity weakened this association. In Study 2, significance mediated the association between RWA and global MIL. Religiosity wiped out the relationship between RWA and meaning variables, except significance. Study 3 supported the existential buffering hypothesis: distress and global MIL were less strongly related among those high on RWA. Study 4 replicated this finding for MIL facets. Significance mediated the existential buffering function of RWA.

**Conclusions:** Findings extend scientific knowledge by demonstrating that RWA contributes to MIL, particularly existential mattering, and especially for those experiencing distress. We discuss implications for our understanding of RWA and MIL.

## KEYWORDS

meaning in life, personality, right-wing authoritarianism, well-being, worldviews

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Experiencing one's life as meaningful is an important aspect of psychological functioning. Those who rate their lives as having meaning are better off in a variety of ways compared to those who view their lives as less meaningful (King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). Research has illuminated the

types of experiences that support a sense of meaning in life (MIL). MIL is promoted by variables ranging from the potentially trivial (e.g., positive mood, King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006) to the more enduring (e.g., religious faith, Steger & Frazier, 2005). Vess (2013) distinguished between micro- and macro-level meaning sources. Macro-level sources of MIL emerge from the endorsement of enduring

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social structures, including worldviews. Generally, research has not addressed whether investment in particular worldviews predicts the subjective sense of MIL. The present studies sought to fill this gap with attention to the potential existential function of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). Although RWA is often studied in the context of negative social behaviors such as out-group hostility (e.g., Weise, Arciszewski, Verlhiac, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2012), the present studies examined RWA as a macro-level source of existential meaning. We tested the prediction that RWA would be positively correlated with MIL and serve as an existential buffer, allowing a person to maintain a sense of meaning even in the face of difficult experiences. Before presenting the studies, we first define MIL. Then we describe RWA and the rationale behind our potentially provocative predictions.

## 2 | MEANING OF MIL

MIL has been defined in many ways (Baumeister, 1991). King et al. (2006, p. 180) offered the following definition: “Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have a significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos.” Reflected in this definition, MIL is thought to be comprised of at least three components: purpose, coherence, and significance (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016). Purpose is the feeling of one’s life having direction and being driven toward the achievement of valued goals. Coherence, or comprehensibility, refers to perceptions of order in the world and that the events in one’s life are understandable, fit together, and make sense (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Significance, also referred to as existential mattering, is experienced when one feels their life is of profound and lasting value and that one’s contributions will make a difference in the world (Martela & Steger, 2016). Research has demonstrated that each of these experiences relates to global MIL. For example, daily goal progress (an instantiation of purpose) is associated positively with MIL (King et al., 2006). For coherence, exposure to stimuli that make sense (vs. random stimuli) leads to higher MIL (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013). Finally, compared to a control condition, being forgotten (an indication of insignificance) lowers MIL (King & Geise, 2011; Ray, Gomillion, Pinteá, & Hamlin, 2018).

Although most research has included only measures of the global experience of MIL (e.g., the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Presence of meaning subscale; MLQP, Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), more recently, measures tapping the facets of meaning have been designed, allowing the facets to be measured directly. Psychometric studies show that the three facets feed into a higher-order factor of general MIL (George & Park, 2016; Krause & Hayward, 2014). A more recent investigation showed that, among the three facets,

global MIL was most strongly predicted by experiences of significance in the preceding weeks (Costin & Vignoles, 2019), suggesting the value of examining the facets of meaning. Focusing on the facets allows us to ask not only if characteristics predict meaning but via what experiences they do so.

## 3 | THE EXISTENTIAL APPEAL OF AUTHORITARIANISM

RWA involves submission to a strong leader, endorsement of hierarchical social structures, conformity to social conventions and traditions, and aggression toward out-groups perceived as violating these conventions (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950/1982; Altemeyer, 1981; Mavor, Louis, & Sibley, 2010). This collection of characteristics has been considered a personality type (Adorno et al., 1950/1982), an “ideological attitude” (Altemeyer, 2006; Duckitt, 2001), and a worldview (Greenberg et al., 1990). Our approach and hypotheses were motivated by the idea that RWA can serve as an interpretative framework for experience or a worldview.

Terror management theory (TMT) defines worldviews as, “humanly constructed shared symbolic conceptions of reality that give meaning, order and permanence to existence” (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004, p. 436). TMT research shows that worldviews buffer the terror inspired by reminders of death (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Greenberg et al. (1990) argued that the overlap between the conceptual definition of worldviews and RWA was sufficient to employ authoritarianism measures as a worldview. In keeping with this idea, after a reminder of their own mortality, individuals high (vs. low) on RWA showed more negative evaluations of targets with dissimilar attitudes (Greenberg et al., 1990; see also Weise et al., 2012). Such evidence suggests that RWA may serve an existential function, directing defensive responses to death. However, TMT research generally has not incorporated measures of the subjective experience of existential meaning.

Psychodynamic and existential scholars have long recognized that authoritarianism may serve an existential function. Fromm (1941/1994) argued that societal movement toward individual freedom and away from reliance on social controls entails the experience of uncertainty. In the context of such uncertainty, Fromm suggested that people may adopt authoritarian views because they provide a sense of existential comfort and social order. Likewise, Frankl (1984) suggested that the erosion of traditional sources of meaning has led to a crisis of meaninglessness, or an “existential vacuum.” In the absence of established meaning sources, Frankl worried that authoritarian beliefs might offer to fill this existential void. In support of these ideas, two previous studies have reported positive associations between RWA and MIL ( $r =$

0.35,  $N = 149$ , using the MLQP and Altemeyer's 1988 RWA scale, Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; and,  $r = 0.13$ ,  $N = 316$ , after a manipulation, using the MLQP and an Italian version of Altemeyer's 1996 RWA scale, Manzi, Roccato, & Russo, 2015).

In addition to predicting global MIL, there are compelling reasons to expect RWA to relate to each facet of meaning (purpose, coherence, and significance). Indeed, RWA may contribute to global perceptions of MIL via one or more of these facets. For instance, RWA asserts that conventions and traditions dictate the right way to behave. It, thus, suggests the goals one ought to pursue (e.g., following strong leaders and authorities, maintaining safety through group cohesion). It also delineates right (preserving tradition) from wrong (defying tradition) behavior. Hence, RWA may facilitate meaning by contributing to a sense of purpose.

In addition, RWA provides a way to make sense of complex social reality, dividing the world into us versus them. It provides a framework for interpreting experiences: positive events result from the leadership of strong figures and authorities and negative events result from failure to conform with these. Thus, RWA may contribute to global meaning by enhancing the experience of coherence.

Finally, authoritarianism provides the individual a place in the world—as a loyal follower of a strong leader—potentially enhancing significance. Of the three MIL facets, significance is most strongly implicated in TMT. From the TMT perspective, endorsing cultural worldviews provides an opportunity to achieve symbolic immortality. Those who endorse RWA may have a greater sense of symbolic immortality and may be more likely to endorse items like, “Even a thousand years from now, it would still matter whether I existed or not.” Thus, we predicted that RWA would be positively related to MIL and to each of the facets of this experience. We also tested whether RWA contributes to global perceptions of MIL via one or more facets of MIL.

## 4 | THE EXISTENTIAL BUFFERING HYPOTHESIS

Scholars interested in identifying a potential function of RWA have suggested that it may serve as a buffer, protecting the person from mental distress during difficult times (e.g., Van Heil & De Clercq, 2009). Results are mixed with regard to this hypothesis. Data from the 2008 and 2012 American National Election Study showed that authoritarian child-rearing values were more strongly related to life satisfaction among members of stigmatized groups (low-income, low education, ethnic minorities vs. others; Brandt, Henry, & Wetherell, 2015). Similarly, in a study of Belgian adults, stressful life events were less strongly related to depression, anxiety, insomnia, somatic symptoms, and social dysfunction

among high authoritarians (Van Heil & De Clercq, 2009). However, Duriez, Klimstra, Luyckx, Beyers, and Soenens (2012) found no evidence for the idea that RWA buffered the association between life events and depression. Instead, the results suggested that authoritarianism is a risk factor for depression.

Here, inspired by TMT, we offer a more specific version of the buffering hypothesis, the notion that RWA might provide an *existential* buffer, allowing the person to maintain a sense of existential meaning even in the presence of psychological distress. Notably, the experience of MIL can exist even in the presence of negative affect (King et al., 2006). Although MIL is negatively related to distress, this relationship is weaker than for other aspects of well-being (Burrow, Sumner, & Ong, 2014; Diener, Fujita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2012; Tov & Lee, 2016). In keeping with the famous Nietzsche quote, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how,” we propose that those invested in RWA will experience life as meaningful despite negative experiences. This proposal fits with Fromm's assertion that authoritarian ideas can provide existential comfort when individuals feel their lives are lacking in important ways. As such, we predicted that RWA would moderate the negative relationship between distress and MIL: among those invested in RWA, distress would be less likely to take a toll on MIL. Thus, distress and MIL should be less strongly negatively linked at high versus low levels of RWA.

## 5 | OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STUDIES

Four studies addressed two research questions. First, is RWA positively related to MIL? Second, does RWA serve an existential buffering function for those experiencing distress? Following Krause and Hayward (2014), we first addressed each question with a global measure of MIL and then with facet-level measures. Thus, Studies 1 and 2 tested the prediction that RWA would be positively correlated with MIL, at the global (Study 1) and facet levels (Study 2). Then, Studies 3 and 4 tested the prediction that the link between psychological ill-being and MIL would be moderated by RWA, treating MIL as a global variable (Study 3) and with focus on facets (Study 4).

## 6 | STUDY 1

Study 1 sought to establish that RWA shares a positive relation with global MIL. We considered numerous plausible “third variables” that might explain the relationship between RWA and MIL, including demographic, ideological, religious, cognitive, and well-being variables, and personality

traits. We briefly review the rationale for the inclusion of variables below.

## 6.1 | Demographics

There are demographic differences in RWA for gender (men are higher than women, Steger, Taylor, & Mehta, 2010) and socioeconomic status (SES is negatively related to RWA, Carvacho et al., 2013). MIL studies have reported (and controlled for) differences as a function of ethnicity, education, and income (e.g., Ward & King, 2016). Certainly, it is possible that people who might be drawn to authoritarian ideologies (such as White, lower SES, and older men) simply endorse higher MIL, explaining the potential link between MIL and RWA. We examined demographic characteristics to probe this possibility.

## 6.2 | Ideology

Research has demonstrated a positive association between RWA and conservatism (Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013). Evidence for an association between conservatism and well-being is mixed (MacInnis, Busseri, Choma, & Hodson, 2013; Onraet, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2013). Still, at least some of the association between RWA and MIL might be explained by conservatism and conservative ideologies. We measured conservatism, Protestant Work Ethic, and Social Dominance orientation to test for the independence of the link between RWA and MIL.

## 6.3 | Religiosity

RWA and MIL are both positively correlated with religiosity (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004; Steger & Frazier, 2005). Clearly, it is important to determine if the link between RWA and MIL exists independently of their mutual association with religiosity.

## 6.4 | Cognitive variables

RWA is negatively associated with reliance on deliberative thought processes (Van Hiel, Onraet, Crowson, & Roets, 2016) and cognitive ability (Onraet et al., 2015). MIL is positively correlated with reliance on intuition and need for cognition (Heintzelman & King, 2016); its association with cognitive ability has not been studied. We tested whether information processing styles or cognitive ability explained the association between RWA and MIL.

## 6.5 | Well-being

RWA is (weakly and inconsistently) associated with some indicators of well-being (MacInnis et al., 2013). MIL is related

to many aspects of psychological well-being (Steger & Kashdan, 2007). We included a host of well-being measures to test whether RWA is related to MIL, controlling for these.

## 6.6 | Personality

Lastly, in the domain of personality traits, Openness to Experience (negatively) and Conscientiousness (positively) predict RWA (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). Extraversion positively correlates with both RWA (Nicol & France, 2016) and MIL (King et al., 2006). Thus, personality traits might explain the potential association between RWA and MIL, and were measured in Study 1.

We predicted that RWA would be positively correlated with MIL and that this association would persist, controlling for these covariates. Tests for moderation of the association between RWA and MIL by gender, age, income, education, race/ethnicity, and cognitive variables are shown in the Supplement (pp. 8 and 17–18).

## 6.7 | Method

### 6.7.1 | Participants and materials

Participants (2,391 American adults, paid \$0.50) completed online assessments on Amazon Mechanical (MTurk). See Supplemental Table S1 for demographics. All participants completed measures of RWA, MIL, and demographics. To reduce demands on participants, covariates were measured in three subsamples that overlapped on some but not all measures ( $n$ 's = 781, 799, and 811). Table 1 shows  $n$ 's,  $\alpha$ 's, descriptive statistics, and rating scales for all measures. Correlations among covariates are in Supplemental Tables S2 and S3.

### Authoritarianism and MIL

Participants completed the 22-item Right-wing Authoritarian scale (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981; e.g., “The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things, while the radicals and protestors are usually just ‘loud mouths’ showing off their ignorance”) and the 5-item presence of meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQP; Steger et al., 2006; e.g., “I understand my life’s meaning;” “I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful”).<sup>1</sup>

### Political beliefs/ideology

Participants rated their general political leaning, ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). The Protestant Work Ethic Scale (Katz & Hass, 1988; e.g., “Most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements”) measures the belief that hard work leads to success. The Social Dominance Orientation scale (SDO<sub>7</sub>; Ho et al., 2015) contains two

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics and correlations, Study 1 (continues on next page)

Variables	Correlations					
	<i>N</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	$\alpha$	RWA	MIL	Partial
Right-wing authoritarianism	2,351	2.78(1.38)	0.96		0.22*	
Meaning in life	2,353	4.77(1.53)	0.94			
<i>Demographics</i>						
Gender (women = 1; men = 0)	2,327			−0.07*	0.06	0.22*
Race (White = 1; Nonwhite = 0)	2,325			0.07*	−0.02	0.21*
Age	2,307	37 (12.62)		0.07*	0.15*	0.21*
Income	2,323	3.58(1.56)		−0.02	0.10*	0.22*
Education	2,326	3.54(0.96)		−0.09*	0.08*	0.22*
<i>Ideology</i>						
Protestant work ethic	1540	4.28(0.70)	0.83	0.34*	0.32*	0.12*
Social dominance orientation-D	1553	2.32(1.42)	0.94	0.46*	−0.03	0.26*
Social dominance orientation-E	1553	1.50(1.47)	0.94	−0.47*	−0.04	0.22*
Conservatism	1590	3.39(1.71)	–	0.65*	0.16*	0.18*
<i>Religiosity</i>						
Intrinsic religiosity	1598	4.44(3.31)	0.94	0.54*	0.31*	0.08*
Extrinsic religiosity	798	5.69(3.70)	0.87	0.49*	0.26*	0.15*
God belief	1600	3.50(1.46)	–	0.49*	0.27*	0.13*
Religiously affiliated	2,391	0.75(0.43)	–	0.38*	0.21*	0.22*
<i>Cognition</i>						
Faith in intuition	2,378	4.59(1.09)	0.91	0.14*	0.18*	0.20*
Need for cognition	2,378	5.15(1.07)	0.81	−0.10*	0.22*	0.24*
ICAR cognitive ability	811	5.87(2.74)	0.79	−0.20*	−0.12*	0.20*
<i>Well-being</i>						
Positive affect	2,384	4.19(1.64)	0.95	0.17*	0.52*	0.15*
Negative affect	2,384	2.26(1.50)	0.91	0.04	−0.32*	0.24*
Self-esteem	801	5.04(1.34)	0.93	0.07	0.66*	0.23*
Life satisfaction	801	4.31(1.58)	0.93	0.14*	0.68*	0.17*
PWB: environmental mastery	801	4.73(1.32)	0.75	0.08	0.58*	0.21*
PWB: self-acceptance	801	4.67(1.42)	0.82	0.09	0.68*	0.21*
PWB: autonomy	801	5.14(1.03)	0.60	−0.16*	0.13*	0.25*
PWB: personal growth	801	5.44(1.05)	0.63	−0.19*	0.29*	0.29*
PWB: social relatedness	801	4.66(1.30)	0.62	−0.07	0.41*	0.27*
PWB: purpose	801	4.90(1.11)	0.44	−0.05	0.36*	0.25*
<i>Personality</i>						
Neuroticism	807	3.27(1.52)	0.77	−0.05	−0.42*	0.22*
Extraversion	807	3.70(1.58)	0.72	0.08	0.31*	0.21*
Openness to Experience	807	5.17(1.26)	0.52	−0.19*	0.13*	0.25*
Agreeableness	807	5.23(1.22)	0.45	−0.02	0.25*	0.23*
Conscientiousness	807	5.27(1.27)	0.62	0.13*	0.41*	0.19*

*Notes.* Pairwise  $N = 798$  to 2,378. Partial correlations in the last column are the first-order partials between RWA and MIL controlling for the respective variable. Income/education were rated from 1 (<\$10,000/some high school/GED) to 6 (>\$151,000/doctorate/professional degree). D = dominance; E = (rejection of) egalitarianism. PWB = Positive Well-Being. God belief was from 1 (God certainly does not exist) to 5 (God certainly exists). Religious affiliation was coded 1 for any religious faith; 0 for atheist/agnostic. All other items were rated from 1 (*strong disagreement/absolutely untrue/not at all*) to 7 (*strong agreement/absolutely true/very much*).

\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

subscales: dominance (e.g., “In getting what your group wants, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups”) and (rejection of) egalitarianism (e.g., “We should strive to make incomes more equal,” reversed).

### Religiosity

Intrinsic and extrinsic Religiosity were measured using the Revised Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religious Orientation scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; e.g., for intrinsic: “My whole approach to life is based on my religion;” e.g., for extrinsic: “What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow”). Participants also rated their belief in God on a scale from 1 (*God certainly does not exist*) to 5 (*God certainly does exist*) and indicated their religious affiliation, if any (coded 1 = religiously affiliated; 0 = not affiliated).<sup>2</sup>

### Cognition

Participants completed the Rational-Experiential Inventory (Pacini & Epstein, 1999) scales for Need for Cognition (e.g., “I enjoy intellectual challenges”) and Faith in Intuition (e.g., “I believe in trusting my hunches”). Twelve items (tapping three-dimensional rotation, letter, and number series, and matrix and verbal reasoning) from the International Cognitive Ability Resource (Condon & Revelle, 2014; The International Cognitive Ability Resource Team, 2014) were used to measure cognitive ability.

### Psychological well-being

Participants rated how they were currently feeling: enjoyment/fun, cheerful, happy, and pleased (for positive affect); anxious, frustrated, nervous, and worried (for negative affect) (Diener, Smith, & Fujita, 1995). Participants also completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; e.g., “So far I have gotten the most important things I want in life”) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”). They also completed Positive Well-Being Scales (Ryff, 1989), including measures of autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, and purpose in life.

### Personality traits

Traits were measured using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) that includes two items representing opposite poles of Neuroticism/emotional stability, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

## 6.8 | Results

With  $\alpha$  set at 0.01, as Table 1 shows, RWA was positively correlated with MIL.<sup>3</sup> RWA and MIL were each positively correlated with age, Protestant Work Ethic, conservatism,

intrinsic religiosity, God belief, being religiously affiliated, faith in intuition, positive affect, and life satisfaction. They were both negatively related to cognitive ability. The final column of Table 1 presents the partial correlations for each potential third variable. As can be seen, although some variables substantially lowered the magnitude of the correlation, RWA remained significantly related to MIL controlling for each.

Multivariate analyses, pooling the subsamples wherever possible, tested for the independence of the relationship between RWA and MIL within each class of variables. Below we present a summary of the results. Full equations can be found in the Supplement (Tables S6–S12). For comparison purposes, when MIL was regressed on RWA alone,  $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $B(SE) = 0.26(0.02)$ , 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.21, 0.31].

To test whether demographic variables ( $N = 2,294$ ) explained the association between RWA and MIL, a series of dummy variables representing each racial/ethnic group were entered on Step 1 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.006$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and age, gender, education, and income were entered on Step 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.043$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). RWA, entered on Step 3, ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.044$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) continued to positively predict MIL,  $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S6). All subsequent equations control for demographics on Step 1, with potential explanatory variables entered on Step 2. To anticipate the results, for all equations, RWA, entered on the final step, continued to predict MIL.

For ideology ( $n = 774$ ), when Social Dominance Orientation, Protestant Work Ethic, and conservatism were entered on Step 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Protestant Work Ethic contributed significantly,  $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . For RWA, entered on Step 3 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ),  $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S7). For religiosity ( $n = 782$ ), when intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, God belief, and religiously affiliated were entered on Step 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), intrinsic religiosity contributed significantly,  $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Entered on the final step ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), RWA continued to predict MIL,  $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.01$  (see Table S8).<sup>4</sup>

When cognitive variables ( $n = 804$ ) were entered on Step 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), need for cognition ( $\beta = 0.23$ ), faith in intuition ( $\beta = 0.10$ ), and cognitive ability ( $\beta = -0.12$ ; all  $p$ 's  $< 0.01$ ), all contributed significantly. On the final step ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), RWA continued to predict MIL,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S9). We also found modest evidence for moderation by need for cognition (see Supplement Figure S1).

When all well-being measures were entered on Step 2 ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), all contributed to MIL. Still, RWA continued to predict MIL,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S10). Additionally, controlling for MIL fully wiped out a modest positive association between life satisfaction and RWA, partial  $r(798) = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.80$ . In

contrast, controlling for life satisfaction, RWA and MIL remained positively related, partial  $r(798) = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . (See Supplement p. 19 for bootstrapped tests for mediation.)

When personality traits ( $n = 801$ ) were entered on Step 2,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Neuroticism ( $\beta = -0.28$ ), Extraversion ( $\beta = 0.21$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ), and Agreeableness ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) contributed to MIL. Entered last, RWA significantly predicted MIL,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$ ,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S11).

As a final test of the independence of the association between RWA and MIL, we pooled a data set ( $n = 793$ ) including as many covariates as possible. MIL was regressed on demographics, a composite of all well-being measures, the personality traits, the three cognitive variables, and a composite of God belief and intrinsic religiosity,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Added on Step 2, RWA predicted MIL,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$  (see Table S12). Overall, Study 1 supported our predictions. To ensure that the results would generalize to a different population, we conducted a second study using a sample of college students ( $N = 1,266$ ). The results, in keeping with Study 1, are shown in the Supplement (pp. 19–20).

## 6.9 | Brief discussion of study 1

As predicted, RWA was positively associated with MIL. This association was not explained fully by demographic, ideological, religious, cognitive, well-being, or personality variables. The association was unique to MIL among well-being measures, and MIL explained a modest positive relationship between RWA and life satisfaction.

## 7 | STUDY 2

Study 2 sought to replicate Study 1 using the MLQP and a measure tapping the facets of meaning. We expected that RWA would be positively related to global MIL and its facets. We probed the possibility that one or more of the facets might explain the association between RWA and global MIL. Because, as noted above, we felt it plausible that authoritarianism might relate to each of the facets, we did not make specific predictions about which would emerge as most important. Because facets have been shown to contribute to global meaning (George & Park, 2016; Krause & Hayward, 2014) and they are conceptualized as experiences that contribute to MIL (Costin & Vignoles, 2019), we considered facets as mediators of the link between RWA and MIL (rather than global MIL as a mediator of the effect of RWA on the facets). In addition, Study 2 included a measure of intrinsic religiosity (a variable that substantially weakened the relationship in Study 1) to test again for the independence of the association between RWA and MIL. Finally, Study 2

expanded on Study 1 by including a more recent measure of RWA.

## 7.1 | Method

### 7.1.1 | Participants and measures

MTurk workers ( $N = 505$ ) completed the study online. Supplemental Table S1 shows demographics. All items were rated on 1–7 scales with higher scores indicating higher agreement. As in Study 1, we administered the MLQP,  $M(SD) = 4.89(1.40)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ . In addition, participants completed the Tripartite Meaning Scale (TMS, Costin & Vignoles, 2019), which has four 4-item subscales measuring overall meaning (e.g., “My life as a whole has meaning”)  $M(SD) = 5.38(1.42)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.89$ ; purpose (e.g., “I have a good sense of what I am trying to accomplish in life”)  $M(SD) = 5.30(1.40)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ; coherence (e.g., “I can make sense of the things that happen in my life”)  $M(SD) = 5.08(1.26)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ; and significance (e.g., “Even considering how big the universe is, I can say that my life matters”),  $M(SD) = 4.73(1.64)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.89$ . To measure RWA, participants completed the 14-item RWA Aggression Conventionalism Submission scale (Mavor et al., 2010; Mavor, Wilson, Sibley, & Louis, 2012), overall  $M(SD) = 3.34(1.23)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ .<sup>5</sup> Finally, we measured intrinsic religiosity, using six items from the Intrinsic/Extrinsic Religiosity scale from Study 1. Originally, the scale included eight items, but two were dropped due to poor reliability ( $\alpha = 0.76$  with the items;  $\alpha = 0.90$  without them). (We measured need for cognition using the same scale from Study 1. It moderated only the relationship between RWA and significance, see Supplement pp. 26–27).

## 7.2 | Results

We created a global MIL composite by aggregating the MLQP and the general meaning judgment scale from the TMS ( $r = 0.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). All of the meaning facets were positively correlated with each other, ranging from 0.61 for significance and coherence to 0.66 for purpose and significance, all  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$  (Supplemental Table S13 shows full correlation matrix). RWA was significantly related to MLQP,  $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , the TMS general meaning scale,  $r = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.032$ , and the global MIL composite,  $r = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

For the meaning facets, RWA was significantly correlated with purpose,  $r = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.03$ , and significance,  $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , but not coherence,  $r = 0.06$ . RWA was more strongly related to significance than to purpose ( $z = 6.46$ ) or coherence ( $z = 7.06$ ,  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ). The second-order partial correlation of RWA with significance, controlling for purpose and coherence, was 0.36,  $p < 0.001$ . For purpose (controlling for significance and coherence), partial  $r = -0.08$ ; for

coherence (controlling for significance and purpose), partial  $r = -0.11$ .

Could feelings of significance explain the association between RWA and global MIL? To answer this question, we computed three mediation models using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS, v22.16.3 (Model 4, Hayes, 2012). Each model regressed global MIL on RWA, entering one of the facets of meaning as the mediator. Table 2 shows that for both purpose and coherence, mediation was partial (the 95% CI for the direct effect of RWA on global MIL did not include 0). In neither case was the indirect effect of RWA through the mediator significant. In contrast, significance fully wiped out the association between RWA and global MIL. In addition, the indirect effect of RWA through existential significance was statistically significant. These results suggest that it is the feeling of significance that explains the link between RWA and global MIL.

In Study 1, intrinsic religiosity weakened the association between RWA and global MIL. We next computed partial correlations for RWA and each meaning variable, controlling for religiosity. The relationships between RWA and global meaning, purpose, and coherence were not significant controlling for intrinsic religiosity (partial  $r$ 's(495) = 0.01,  $-0.02$ , and  $-0.03$ , respectively, all  $p$ 's > 0.51). However, RWA remained significantly associated with significance controlling for religiosity, though the effect was weakened, partial  $r$ (495) = 0.10,  $p = 0.02$ . These results, again, point to the potential unique link between RWA and feelings of significance.

### 7.3 | Brief discussion of study 2

Study 2 replicated the relationship between RWA and MIL found in Study 1. Additionally, Study 2 showed that RWA was more strongly related to significance than purpose or

coherence. Further, mediation analyses showed that the association between RWA and global MIL is best explained by feelings of significance. The importance of significance to RWA was shown as well in a series of partial correlations demonstrating that intrinsic religiosity wiped out the association between RWA all meaning measures except significance. These findings suggest that the existential function of RWA is found in the promotion of the experience of mattering.

## 8 | STUDY 3

The existential buffering hypothesis asserts that authoritarian ideals will help maintain the experience of meaning in the context of distress. Thus, Study 3 tested the prediction that RWA would moderate the association between distress and global MIL, such that ill-being would be less strongly (negatively) related to MIL among those who are strongly invested in this worldview. Because the general buffering hypothesis has received only mixed support and previous studies have not included measures of MIL, we also examined whether RWA would interact with measures of poor functioning to predict depression (a more common criterion in the literature, Duriez et al., 2012; Van Heil & De Clercq, 2009).

### 8.1 | Method

#### 8.1.1 | Participants and procedures

MTurk workers ( $N = 971$ ) participated for \$1.25. See Supplemental Table S1 for demographics. In addition to the MLQP and the RWA scale from Study 1, participants

	Mediator		
	Significance	Purpose	Coherence
Right-wing authoritarianism → mediator, model $R^2$	0.11**	0.01	0.004
Right-wing authoritarianism, $B(SE)$	0.43(0.06)**	0.11(0.05)	0.06(0.05)
Right-wing authoritarianism → mediator → meaning in life, model $R^2$	0.63**	0.67**	0.59**
Mediator $B(SE)$	0.65(0.023)**	0.75(0.02)**	0.78(0.03)**
Right-wing authoritarianism $B(SE)$	$-0.07(0.03)$	0.13(0.03)**	0.16(0.03)**
95% CI for effect of RWA on meaning in life controlling for mediator	$[-0.13, -0.01]$	$[0.08, 0.19]$	$[0.10, 0.23]$
95% CI for indirect effect of RWA through mediator	$[0.20, 0.37]$	$[0.00, 0.16]$	$[-0.03, 0.13]$

**TABLE 2** Mediation models predicting global meaning in life from authoritarianism and facets of meaning, Study 2

Notes.  $N = 505$ . For right-wing authoritarianism → meaning in life (without mediator),  $B(SE) = 0.22(0.05)$ ;  $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . \*\* $p < 0.0001$ . \* $p < 0.01$ . Each column represents a separate model. Confidence intervals are bootstrapped with 10,000 resamplings.

completed measures of poor functioning across different life domains life.

Unless otherwise specified, items were rated on scales from 1 (*strong disagreement/extremely uncharacteristic of me*) to 7 (*strong agreement/extremely characteristic of me*). The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff & Locke, 1986) measures the frequency of 19 depressive symptoms over the past week (e.g., “I felt depressed”) rated on a scale from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most or all of the time*). The Revised Manifest Anxiety Scale measures symptoms of anxiety (Taylor, 1953; e.g., “I frequently find myself worrying about something”). The Hostility subscale of the Aggression Questionnaire taps a general hostile, cynical attitude toward life (Buss & Perry, 1992; e.g., “I am suspicious of overly friendly strangers”). The Global Severity Index from the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982) was used as an indicator of general distress. BSI items were rated on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). The Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness (PILL; Pennebaker, 1982) measures the frequency of an array of physical symptoms (e.g., “Stiff or sore muscles”) rated on a scale from 0 (*Have never or almost never experienced these symptoms*) to 4 (*more than once every week*). Participants completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978; e.g., “I am unhappy doing so many things alone”), rated on a scale from 0 (*I never feel this way*) to 3 (*I often feel this way*). In addition, they completed the Existential Isolation Scale (Pinel, Long, Murdoch, & Helm, 2017; e.g., “Other people usually do not understand my experiences”) and the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The latter includes subscales measuring attachment anxiety (e.g., “I’m afraid that I will lose my partner’s love”) and avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”).

## 8.2 | Results

Table 3 shows the reliabilities, descriptive statistics, and correlations among measures. MIL and RWA were positively correlated. Ill-being measures were negatively related to MIL and unrelated to RWA. All ill-being measures were related to each other. Because analyses with each scale followed a similar pattern (see the Supplement pp. 29–40; Tables S14–S23), we standardized these variables and created a unit-weighted composite for ill-being,  $\alpha = 0.93$ .

When global MIL was regressed on the main effects ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) of RWA ( $\beta = 0.18$ ) and ill-being ( $\beta = -0.55$ ,  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ), a significant RWA X ill-being interaction emerged,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ ,  $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Generated regression lines for those  $\pm 1$  SD from the mean on RWA and ill-being are shown at the top of Figure 1. For those high on

RWA ( $n = 143$ ), ill-being predicted MIL,  $\beta = -0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; for those low on RWA, the relationship was stronger, ( $n = 223$ ),  $\beta = -0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Supporting the existential buffering hypothesis, these results demonstrated that RWA weakened the negative association between physical and psychological distress and MIL.

To test the general buffering hypothesis, we conducted parallel analyses predicting depression from a composite of the remaining ill-being measures, RWA, and their interaction. We found no evidence for an RWA X ill-being interaction,  $\beta = -0.02$ ,  $p = 0.29$ .

## 8.3 | Brief discussion of study 3

Study 3 results support the idea that RWA serves an existential buffering function—weakening the negative relationship between distress and MIL. Study 3 did not provide support for a general buffering function. Past research on the buffering function of RWA has produced mixed results. Study 3 findings suggest that one reason for this discrepancy may be that the hypothesis has not been tested with regard to existential meaning.

## 9 | STUDY 4

Study 4 participants completed global- and facet-level measures of MIL, a measure of RWA, and a subset of the ill-being measures from Study 3. To ensure that Study 2 results were not due the specific facet measure used, we included an additional measure of meaning facets. These data were used to address three goals. First, Study 4 sought to replicate Study 2 showing that significance, rather than purpose or coherence, would explain the association between RWA and MIL. Second, Study 4 sought to replicate the existential buffering pattern identified in Study 3 and probed whether it would generalize to the facets of meaning. Third, Study 4 tested for moderated mediation. In this case, we were interested in probing whether the pattern of moderation found in Study 3 might be mediated by the facets of meaning. Based on Study 2 results, we predicted that significance would show evidence of moderated mediation.

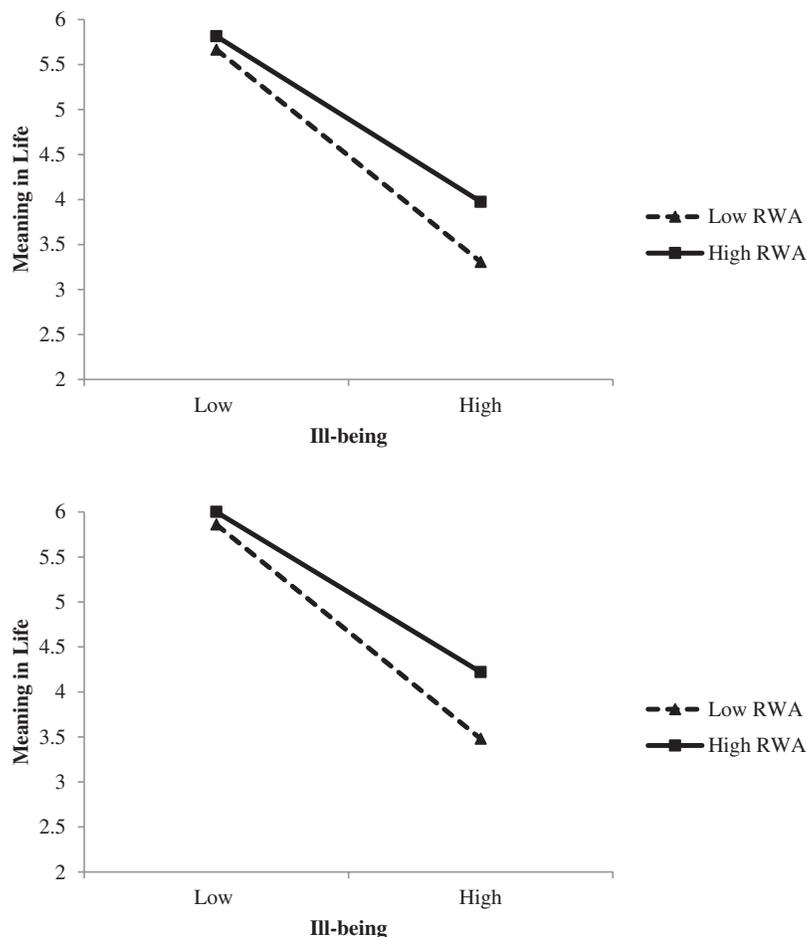
## 9.1 | Method

Participants were 833 MTurk workers. Supplemental Table S1 shows demographics. They completed an online survey including the RWA measure from Study 3,  $M(SD) = 3.09(1.29)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.93$ , and three ill-being measures from Study 3: the CESD,  $M(SD) = 0.79(0.64)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.94$ , the UCLA Loneliness scale,  $M(SD) = 1.93(0.81)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.97$ , and PILL,  $M(SD) = 12.15(10.10)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.96$ . They completed the meaning measures from Study 3 including, the MLQP,  $M(SD) =$

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables, Study 3

	MIL	RWA	PILL	BSI	Dep	Anx	Host	A/Anx	A/Av	Lone	EI
Meaning in life	0.93										
RWA	0.20*	0.96									
PILL	-0.28*	-0.04	0.96								
BSI	-0.43*	0.04	0.70*	0.98							
Depression	-0.56*	-0.03	0.57*	0.84*	0.94						
Anxiety	-0.41*	-0.05	0.66*	0.70*	0.66*	0.86					
Hostility	-0.43*	0.02	0.50*	0.69*	0.68*	0.68*	0.91				
Attachment anxiety	-0.40*	0.02	0.44*	0.62*	0.62*	0.60*	0.66*	0.96			
Attachment avoidance	-0.44*	0.06	0.23*	0.42	0.50*	0.38*	0.46*	0.53*	0.96		
Loneliness	-0.52*	-0.04	0.53*	0.75*	0.79*	0.61*	0.68*	0.68*	0.53*	0.97	
Existential isolation	-0.45*	-0.07	0.27*	0.40*	0.49*	0.34*	0.41*	0.38*	0.42*	0.51*	0.89
III-being composite	-0.55*	-0.01	0.69*	0.87*	0.87*	0.80*	0.86*	0.79*	0.63*	0.86*	0.59*
Gender†	0.04	-0.04	0.17*	0.02	-0.00	0.18*	-0.25*	0.02	-0.04	0.05	-0.24*
Age	0.15*	0.02	-0.11*	-0.25*	-0.24	-0.24	-0.24*	-0.21*	-0.12*	-0.12*	-0.11
<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	4.31 (1.52)	2.98 (1.32)	1.89 (0.57)	1.75 (0.77)	2.44 (0.65)	3.62 (1.19)	3.01 (1.52)	2.97 (1.44)	2.95 (1.30)	1.90 (0.81)	3.58 (1.25)

Notes. Pairwise  $N = 965-1,007$ ; \*  $p < 0.001$ .  $\alpha$ 's are on the diagonal. III-being  $\alpha = 0.93$ . †  $W = 1$ ;  $M = 0$ .



**FIGURE 1** Moderation of the link between right-wing authoritarianism and meaning in life by ill-being, Studies 3 (top) and 4 (bottom) *Notes*. Generated regression lines for those  $\pm 1$  *SD* from the mean on ill-being composite and right-wing authoritarianism.

4.87(1.59),  $\alpha = 0.94$ , and the TMS measure of general meaning,  $M(SD) = 5.33(1.45)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; purpose,  $M(SD) = 5.16(1.36)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; coherence,  $M(SD) = 5.06(1.36)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; and significance,  $M(SD) = 4.82(1.57)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.88$ . In addition, participants completed the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (EMS, George & Park, 2016), which measures purpose,  $M(SD) = 5.29(1.30)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.93$ ; coherence,  $M(SD) = 4.99(0.64)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.96$ ; and significance,  $M(SD) = 4.61(1.56)$ ,  $\alpha = 0.90$ . The TMS and EMS overlapped on some items: “I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going” (purpose); “I can make sense of the things that happen in my life,” “Looking at my life as a whole, things seem clear to me” (coherence); “Whether my life ever existed matters even in the grand scheme of the universe,” and “Even considering how big the universe is, I can say that my life matters” (significance). To address this issue, for correlations among meaning measures, items were assigned to the scale completed first (the TMS) and removed from the other. For correlations across constructs (e.g., from RWA to meaning), we used full scales.

## 9.2 | Results

The full correlation matrix is shown in Supplemental Table S24. The two global meaning measures were correlated,  $r = 0.86$ ,  $p$

$< 0.001$ , and were aggregated. All facet scores were positively related to their counterparts in each scale: all  $r$ 's = 0.82, all  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ . We averaged the scores for purpose, coherence, and significance across the two measures to simplify the analyses (including overlapping items once). Finally, standard scores for ill-being measures were aggregated,  $\alpha = 0.98$ .

### 9.2.1 | Is RWA most strongly related to significance?

RWA was positively related to all meaning measures. For global MIL,  $r = 0.19$ , purpose  $r = 0.16$ , coherence,  $r = 0.13$ , and significance,  $r = 0.25$ , all  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ . As in Study 2, RWA was significantly more strongly associated with significance than purpose ( $z = 5.15$ ) or coherence ( $z = 4.04$ ,  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ). The second-order partial correlation of RWA with significance, controlling for purpose and coherence, was 0.22,  $p < 0.001$ . For purpose (controlling for significance and coherence), partial  $r = -0.08$ ; for coherence (controlling for significance and purpose), partial  $r = 0.01$ .

Finally, as shown in Table 4, replicating Study 2, although the indirect effect of RWA through all three of the mediators was significant, only significance fully explained the association between RWA and global MIL.

	Mediator		
	Significance	Purpose	Coherence
Right-wing authoritarianism → mediator, model $R^2$	0.06**	0.02*	0.03**
Right-wing authoritarianism, $B(SE)$	0.29(0.04)**	0.13(0.03)*	0.17(0.04)**
Right-wing authoritarianism → mediator → meaning in life, model $R^2$	0.69**	0.77**	0.83**
Mediator $B(SE)$	0.82(0.02)**	0.99(0.02)**	0.97(0.02)**
Right-wing authoritarianism $B(SE)$	-0.03(0.02)	0.09(0.02)**	0.05(0.02)*
95% CI for effect of RWA on meaning in life controlling for mediator	[-0.07, 0.02]	[0.05,0.13]	[0.02, 0.09]
95% CI for indirect effect of RWA through mediator	[0.17, 0.32]	[0.05,0.20]	[0.09, 0.24]

Notes.  $N = 813$ . For right-wing authoritarianism → meaning in life (without mediator),  $B(SE) = 0.22(0.04)$ ,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . \*\* $p < 0.0001$ . \* $p < 0.01$ . Each column represents a separate model. Confidence intervals are bootstrapped with 1,000 resamplings.

**TABLE 4** Mediation models predicting global meaning in life from authoritarianism and facets of meaning, Study 4

### 9.2.2 | Existential buffering hypothesis

In separate hierarchical regression models, global MIL and facet aggregates were regressed on main effects for RWA and ill-being on Step 1, and the RWA X ill-being interaction on Step 2. As Table 5 shows, results replicated Study 2. The bottom panel of Figure 1 shows generated regression lines for

those  $\pm 1 SD$  from the mean on RWA and ill-being predicting global MIL. Among those high on RWA ( $n = 120$ ), ill-being predicted global MIL,  $\beta = -0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; for those low ( $n = 175$ ), the effect was stronger,  $\beta = -0.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . In addition, moderation emerged whether MIL was measured at the global or facet level. (See Supplement, pp. 46–48, for results for each ill-being variable separately.)

**TABLE 5** Right-wing authoritarianism X ill-being predicting meaning, Study 4

	Main effect $R^2$	Main effects $\beta$	Interaction $R^2$	Interaction $\beta$
<b>MLQ-presence</b>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.36***	0.18***	0.01***	
Ill-being		-0.56***		0.10***
<b>MIL judgments</b>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.38***	0.13***	0.01*	
Ill-being		-0.59***		0.07*
<b>Composites</b>				
<i>Meaning in life</i>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.39***	0.16**		
Ill-being		-0.60**	0.01***	0.09**
<i>Significance</i>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.32***	0.23***	0.01***	
Ill-being		-0.50***		0.10***
<i>Purpose</i>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.32***	0.10**		
Ill-being		-0.55***	0.02***	0.13***
<i>Coherence</i>				
Right-wing authoritarianism	0.41***	0.12***	0.01***	
Ill-being		-0.62***		0.10***

Notes. Significance, purpose, and coherence are aggregates of facets scales from the Tripartite Meaning Scale and Existential Meaning Scale. \* $p < 0.019$ . \*\* $p < 0.008$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

Once again, we tested the general buffering hypothesis. We regressed depression on RWA and a composite of the other two ill-being measures, and their interaction. Results showed that a significant main effect of ill-being,  $\beta = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , was qualified by a significant interaction,  $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . Among those low on RWA ( $n = 174$ ), distress was more strongly associated with depression ( $\beta = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to those high in RWA ( $n = 117$ ),  $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Interestingly, controlling for any of the four measures of meaning fully wiped out this interaction (e.g., the interaction  $\beta$ , controlling for global MIL,  $\beta = -0.02$ ,  $p = 0.33$ ; controlling for purpose,  $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.80$ ; controlling for coherence,  $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.52$ ; and controlling for significance,  $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.47$ ).

### 9.2.3 | Moderated mediation

Table 5 results justify a test for moderated mediation. In these analyses, we tested whether the existential buffering effect of RWA might be mediated by the facets using first stage models (PROCESS Macro for SPSS, Model 7; Hayes, 2012). In this case, paths from the main effects and the interaction go through the mediator (here, the facets of MIL) and then to global MIL. The index of moderated mediation (the product of the path from the interaction to the mediator and the path from the mediator to the outcome, Hayes, 2015) for all three models was significant. For purpose, coherence, and significance, the index of moderated mediation,  $B(SE)$ ,

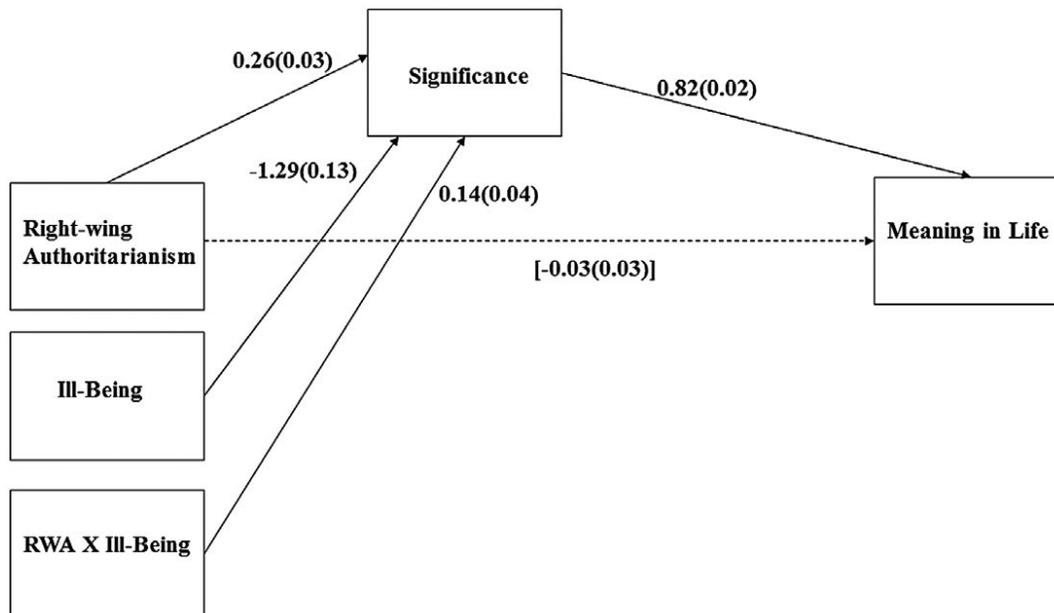
[bootstrapped 95% CIs] = 0.14(0.03) [0.07, 0.20]; 0.11(0.04) [0.03, 0.19], and 0.09(0.04) [0.02, 0.16], respectively.

The models differed in one way. Controlling for purpose, the direct effect of RWA on MIL remained significant,  $B(SE)$  0.09 (0.02)  $p < 0.001$ . For coherence, likewise, the direct effect of RWA on MIL remained significant,  $B(SE)$  = 0.05(0.02),  $p = 0.0013$ . In contrast, significance fully wiped out the direct effect of RWA on MIL. The model for significance is shown in Figure 2.

The existential buffering hypothesis asserts that ill-being will less strongly linked to lower MIL as a function of RWA. To estimate the conditional effect of ill-being on MIL through significance at values of RWA, we recalculated the model treating ill-being as the central predictor ( $X$ ) and RWA as the moderator ( $W$ ). Results showed that at low levels of RWA, the effect of ill-being was stronger  $B(SE)$  =  $-0.72(0.06)$ ,  $CI = [-0.85, -0.60]$ , than at mean levels of RWA,  $B(SE)$  =  $-0.60(0.04)$ ,  $CI = [-0.69, -0.52]$ , and was weakest at high levels of RWA,  $B(SE)$  =  $-0.48(0.06)$ ,  $CI = [-0.61, -0.36]$ . The Supplement shows the full models for the facets (p. 52).

### 9.3 | Brief discussion of study 4

Study 4 results support our predictions and bolster confidence in the results of the preceding studies. First, replicating Study 2, only significance (including a different measure of the construct) fully mediated the association



**FIGURE 2** Moderated mediation model predicting global meaning in life from right-wing authoritarianism and ill-being through significance, Study 4

*Notes.* Path coefficients are unstandardized weights (standard errors). Solid lines are significant,  $p < 0.001$ . The dashed line (the direct effect from RWA to meaning in life) is not significant. Prior to controlling for significance, for the direct effect of RWA to meaning in life,  $b(SE)$  = 0.18(0.03),  $p < 0.001$ .

between RWA and global MIL. Second, RWA buffered the effects of distress on the experience of MIL, replicating Study 3. Although some evidence emerged for the general buffering role of RWA in the prediction of depression, controlling for meaning wiped out this effect. Finally, Study 4 showed that not only is the main effect of RWA explained by significance, but so is its existential buffering function. Taken together, these results point to the importance of existential mattering as a key factor in the relationship between RWA and MIL.

## 10 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

These studies probed the relationship between RWA and the experience of MIL. As predicted, RWA was positively related to global MIL and this association was not wiped out by potential third variables (Study 1). Furthermore, the existential buffering function of RWA was demonstrated in two independent samples (Studies 3 and 4). Among those high in RWA, distress was less strongly related to the experience of MIL. In addition, results showed that RWA was consistently more strongly related to the feeling of significance than other components of MIL (Studies 2 and 4). The relationship between RWA and significance was the only such relationship to maintain controlling for intrinsic religiosity (Study 2). Finally, the existential buffering function was fully explained by feelings of significance (Study 4). Although conceptual links from RWA to purpose and coherence are plausible (and supported by correlations among the constructs), significance emerged as the key to the relationship between RWA and MIL. These results support our contention that investment in authoritarianism serves an existential function and have implications for our understanding of the existential function of RWA as well as, potentially, the nature of MIL, itself.

It may seem ironic that authoritarianism, a belief system that entails sacrifice of personal freedom to a strong leader, would influence the experience of MIL through its promotion of feelings of personal significance. Yet, RWA does provide a person with a place in the world, as a loyal follower of a strong leader. In addition, compared to purpose and coherence, knowing with great certainty that one's life has mattered in a lasting way may be challenging. Handing this challenge over to a strong leader and investment in societal conventions might allow a person to gain a sense of symbolic or vicarious significance.

The relevance of significance to the link between RWA and MIL may illuminate features of psychological functioning that predispose people to adopt authoritarian belief systems. Specifically, as suggested by Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek (2009), perceptions of insignificance may lead individuals to endorse relatively extreme beliefs,

such as authoritarianism, and come to follow authoritarian leaders as a way to gain a sense that their lives and their contributions matter. Thus, individuals who strongly believe that they matter to others, and that their lives are of lasting value, may be less likely to adopt right-wing authoritarian views. Developing an understanding of other sources of significance that can serve an existential function, potentially protecting individuals against the adoption of RWA is an important goal for future research. Furthermore, if egalitarian beliefs could be leveraged to provide a sense of significance, these might hold equal existential appeal and could potentially replace authoritarian belief systems among individuals who endorse them. Future research should use longitudinal designs to address these possibilities.

One way to think about these results is to proffer explanations tied to RWA and its potentially unique relationship to feelings of personal significance (as we have above). Alternatively, it may be that significance shares an important relationship to MIL, itself. Thus, the present results may have relevance beyond RWA and speak, instead, to the essential meaning of MIL. Some previous research supports the idea that purpose, coherence, and significance operate as coequal contributors to global MIL (e.g., George & Park, 2016). However, other scholars have suggested that global MIL is primarily about feeling significant (Costin & Vignoles, 2019). Importantly, the zero-order relationship of significance to global MIL did not differ from that of purpose or coherence, across studies. In addition, measures of significance were not more reliable than those for purpose and coherence, removing concerns that these results might be artifactual.

Do results for significance reveal a unique pathway by which RWA contributes to MIL or might they generalize to other sources of MIL? Because we measured intrinsic religiosity (a robust correlate of MIL) in Study 2, we were able to examine whether significance also mediated the association between intrinsic religiosity and MIL. In analyses parallel to those conducted for RWA, we found that significance, but not purpose or coherence, fully explained the association between intrinsic religiosity and MIL. (Full results are shown in the Supplement p. 28). Thus, conclusions about significance do not appear to be unique to RWA but may reflect a larger fact about MIL. That is, at least in terms of the association between broad belief systems and MIL, the experience of meaning is largely rooted in perceptions that one's life is of value and that one's contributions will have a lasting impact. Both RWA and religiosity appear to contribute to MIL through such feelings. Authoritarianism may promote significance via investment in cultural institutions that will outlast the self; religiosity may do so via the promise of immortality in the afterlife. Future research might seek to provide empirical support to these proposed pathways. It may be that broad macro-level sources of meaning are particularly appealing sources of significance. Future research should also examine

whether other established sources of MIL (e.g., positive affect, social relationships) show a similar pattern or impinge on MIL via experiences of purpose or coherence. Certainly, the present studies highlight the value of including facet-level measures of the experience of MIL alongside global measures.

### 10.1 | The existential buffering hypothesis

We found consistent moderation of the link between MIL and indicators of physical, social, and psychological distress by RWA. Among those high in RWA, indicators of physical symptoms, depression, anxiety, and loneliness were less strongly related to MIL. These findings support the existential buffering hypothesis. However, analyses testing the general buffering hypothesis (i.e., treating depression rather than MIL as the outcome) were inconsistent (with Study 3 finding no evidence and Study 4 providing some evidence, accounted for by measures of MIL). These results point to one potential important reason for the inconsistency in previous literature regarding the general buffering function of RWA (e.g., Brandt et al., 2015; Duriez et al., 2012; Van Heil & De Clercq, 2009). Namely, past research has failed to consider these relationships in the context of existential meaning. Future research designed to understand how RWA relates to adaptive outcomes should employ measures of MIL to best understand these associations.

### 10.2 | Limitations

The present studies possess a few notable strengths, including large samples, the use of different measures of the constructs of interest, and, perhaps most notably, the inclusion of facet-level measures of MIL. In addition, this package of studies included opportunities to replicate findings across studies. Nevertheless, a number of limitations warrant note. Most importantly, the present studies were limited by cross-sectional, self-report methodology. Cross-sectional data are invaluable in establishing an association (our primary goal) but cannot capture dynamic relationships over time. Studies including measures over multiple occasions would be valuable in illuminating the dynamic that likely characterizes worldviews, MIL, life events, and experiences. The addition of peer or observer reports would also strengthen confidence in the relationships uncovered here.

The studies were all conducted online. The anonymity afforded by the online format is a strength when asking about socially controversial constructs (such as RWA). Nevertheless, testing this association in person might allow investigation into additional, potentially behavioral, outcomes. These studies were also limited in terms of the cultural context. Data from other political and cultural contexts would help clarify whether the present results reflect the association between

endorsement of relatively popular ideas and MIL or are specific to RWA.

Additionally, it is a limitation of Study 1 that we tested a number of third variables, but only of the relationship between RWA and global MIL. Study 2 showed that intrinsic religiosity wiped out the relationship of RWA and all but the significance component of MIL. Future research should probe plausible mediators of the link between RWA and significance. Finally, the present data do not establish a causal relationship between RWA and MIL. Future experimental research should test the causal direction of this relationship.

### 10.3 | Conclusion

MIL is an important aspect of human functioning and understanding how people come to view their lives as meaningful is an important goal for science. The present studies demonstrate that RWA, despite its negative social implications, serves an existential meaning function. This existential function is primarily about facilitating the sense that one's life matters. In the context of physical and psychological distress, rather than serving a general buffering function, RWA serves as an existential buffer, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of MIL in the context of ill-being. This existential buffering function is primarily about allowing individuals to maintain a sense that they matter during difficult experiences. RWA differs from the types of experiences that are typically considered well-springs of meaning. Nevertheless, understanding its existential meaning function is a critical first step in reducing its negative social implications.

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### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Participants completed the full MLQ but the search for meaning subscale was not analyzed. Some participants completed a forced-choice measure of authoritarian child-rearing values (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; e.g., "... which ... is more important for a child to have: obedience or self-reliance"). Because the results were parallel to those reported for RWA, they are presented in the Supplement.

<sup>2</sup>Some participants completed a measure of religious fundamentalism which correlated 0.82 with RWA and 0.29 with MIL (both

$p$ 's < 0.001). Analyses demonstrating the separable nature of RWA and religious fundamentalism and their separable relations with MIL will be included in a separate manuscript (Womick, Sanders, & King, in preparation).

<sup>3</sup>To explore whether specific items drove this association, we computed correlations between MIL and all RWA items. Each item was significantly related to MIL,  $r$ 's ranged from 0.11 to 0.23,  $p$ 's < 0.001. In addition, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (see the Supplemental Table S4). MIL was related to the identified factors equally.

<sup>4</sup>Study 1 data also replicated results from Steger & Frazier, 2005. See Supplement pp. 22–23.

<sup>5</sup>Correlations for RWA facets in Studies 2 and 4 are shown in the Supplement (pp. 24 and 43–45). We conducted analyses to test whether the relationship between MIL and RWA was stronger for one facet of RWA or another, and whether moderation was unique to one facet (Supplement pp. 49–51). Results indicated they were not.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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