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The Magritte Effect :

Adherence to Conspiracy Beliefs as Fluid Compensation after a Meaning-Threat ?

Florent Varet¹³, Jaïs Troian¹², Alexis Akinyemi¹⁴ & Éric Bonetto¹

¹ LPS, Aix-Marseille Univ., 13100 Aix-en-Provence, France. ² Centre PsyClé, Aix-Marseille Univ., 13100 Aix-en-Provence, France.

³ IFSTTAR-TS2-LMA, 13300, Salon-de-Provence, France. ⁴ LAPPS, Univ. Paris Nanterre, UPL, 92001, Nanterre, France.

Introduction

Surveys in the E.U. and U.S. show *conspiracist beliefs* (CB) to be widespread. (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Conspiracy Watch, 2018).

CB have undesirable consequences on political, health and environmental behaviors (e.g. Jolley & Douglas, 2014).

Adherence to CB increases under identity/control threats (Graeupner & Coman, 2017; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

However, no research has yet investigated the effects of basic meaning threats upon adherence to CB.



Figure 1. Priming stimuli from studies 1, 2, 3. Left = control; Right = Threat

Hypothesis

Using the **Meaning Maintenance Model**, we hypothesized that meaning-threats should increase individuals' adherence to CB

Method

We conducted conceptual replications of Proulx, Heine & Vohs (2010, Study 2).

Experimental design

- 1) Prime,
- 2) PANAS,
- 3) Distractor Task,
- 4) CB measure.

Measures

CB measure: 'General Conspiracist Beliefs' scale' (GCBS; 15 items; 5-points likert; Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013)

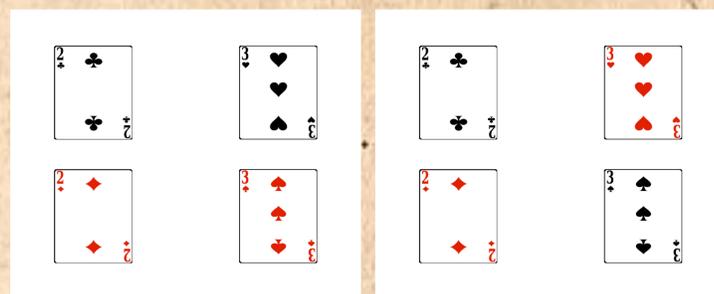


Figure 2. Priming stimuli from study 5. Left = control; Right = Threat

Results

Table 1. Sample characteristics, methodology and effect size of differences in GCBS scores based on *t*-test comparisons across studies (N = 925)

	Type	Prime	N	Population	% Male	Age	M _{control}	M _{threat}	d
Study 1	Online	Painting	237	General	13.1	32.0(11.9)	3.3(.7)	3.5(.7)	.41**
Study 2	Paper	Painting	129	WEIRD	20.9	21.5(2.9)	2.9(.6)	3.0(.7)	.15
Study 3	Online	Painting	275	WEIRD	15.6	20.5(4.4)	3.0(.6)	3.0(.8)	.08
Study 4	Paper	Text	137	WEIRD	14.6	18.9(1.4)	3.1(.6)	2.9(.6)	-.41*
Study 5	Online	Cards	145	STEM workers	32.4	35.3(16.2)	2.5(.8)	2.3(.8)	-.20
Meta-Analysis			925	Mixed	18.2	25.7(11.2)	3.0(.7)	3.0(.8)	

Note. Number between brackets represent SDs. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

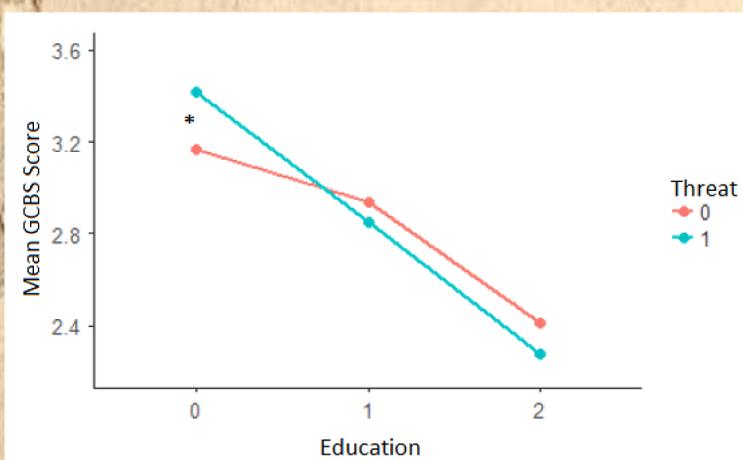


Figure 3. Mean GCBS scores across studies as a function of sample education level and threat conditions. Education: 0 = General population, 1 = WEIRD, 2 = STEM workers. Threat: 0 = Control, 1 = Meaning-threat. * $p < .05$.

Results were meta-analyzed. A linear mixed-model was computed with the following equation: $CB \sim 1 + (1 | Study) + (1 | Gender) + Age + Education + Type + Threat + Education*Threat + Type*Threat$. (AIC = 1973.9, $r^2_{marginal} = .16$, $r^2_{conditional} = .21$).

Interaction effect between Education and Threat, $F(2, 909) = 5.11$; $p = .006$ with a main, positive effect of threat found only among the general population sample $t(909) = -2.32$, $p = .021$, $d = .30$.

Discussion

No straightforward effect of meaning threat was found across studies. It seems that education level plays a moderating role upon meaning-threat regulation through adherence to CB.

This might be due to psychological differences between WEIRD and non-WEIRD populations (see Heinrich, Heine & Norezayan, 2010) regarding:

- Cognitive abilities (e.g. analytical reasoning)
- Epistemic motivations (e.g. need for closure)

Both of which were found to be linked with adherence to CB (Swami et al., 2014; Marchlewska et al., 2017)

Limitations: only one type of CB measure, self-reported outcome, no proper laboratory conditions, no replication study among general population samples.

Perspectives: two pre-registered replication studies among the general population with both absurdist text/painting primes and a measure of education level as a moderator.