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The Magritte Effect :

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

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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)

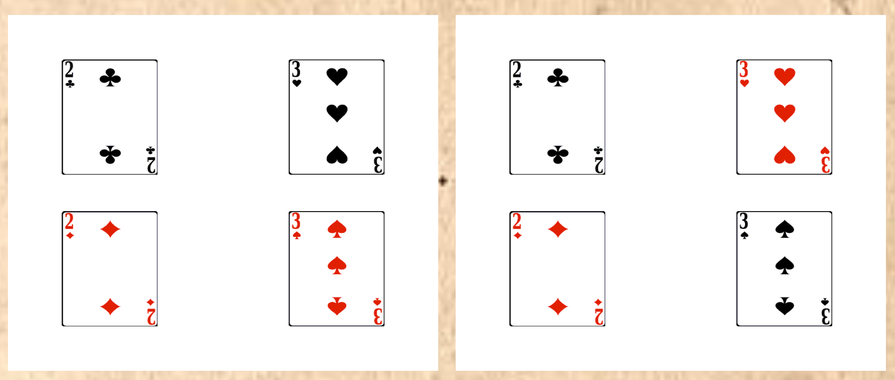

Figure 2. *Priming stimuli from study 5. Left = control; Right = Threat*

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.*

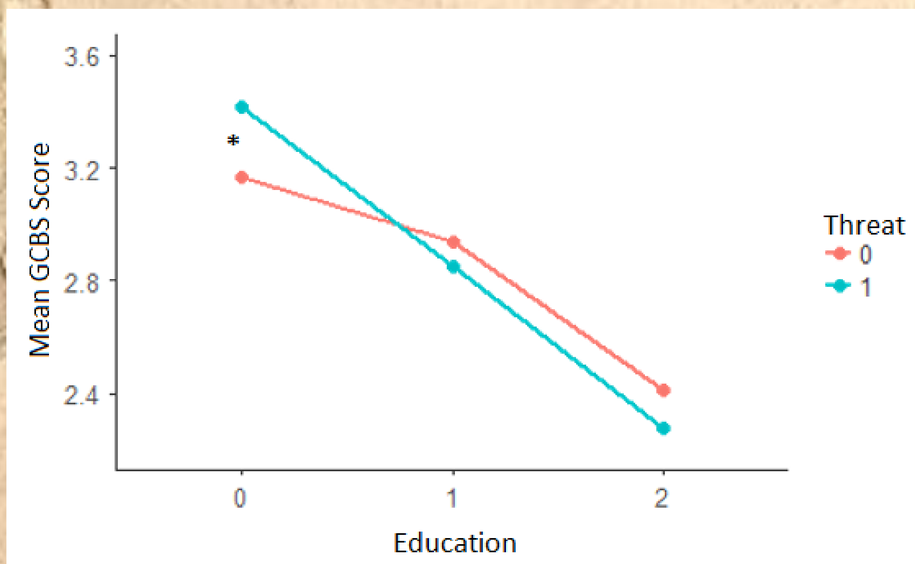

Figure 3. *Mean GCBS scores across studies as a function of sample education level and threat conditions. Education: 0 = General population, 1 =WEIRD, 2 = STEM workers. Threat: 0 = Control, 1 = Meaning-threat. * p < .05.*

Results were meta-analyzed. A linear mixed-model was computed with the following equation: *CB ~ 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.