



Short Communication

Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment conspiracy theories

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ABSTRACT

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) has shown inconsistent results as a predictor of beliefs in conspiracy theories (CTs). The present investigation attempted to clarify these results by separating anti-establishment CTs, which challenge the existing social order, from pro-establishment CTs, which seek to justify and reinforce it against external threats. In two MTurk samples ($N = 294, 200$), RWA correlated strongly with pro-establishment CTs but weakly with anti-establishment CTs. Regression analyses suggest that after controlling for exposure to the CTs, this gap in the predictive power of RWA can be explained by differences in attitudes toward their alleged perpetrators, highlighting the importance of intergroup attitudes as an important driver of CT endorsement.

Scholars have long speculated that conspiracy theories (CTs; allegations regarding collusion among powerful actors to achieve sinister ends through deception; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012) are a signature feature of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Although many recent studies have confirmed that there is probably a positive correlation between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and conspiracy belief, several other investigations have found no association between the two. At the moment, there is no obvious reason for these conflicting results (for a review, see Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).

Some of the issue may lie with imprecise effect size estimates. For example, McHoskey (1995) reported an unusual negative correlation between RWA and conspiracy belief, but the sample was small ($N = 33$) and the correlation was only significant with an unreported one-tailed test. Another part of the issue may be psychologists' tendency to treat conspiracy beliefs as a more or less unitary construct – understandable, as conspiracy belief scales tend to load on a single factor, and CT beliefs intercorrelate strongly regardless of their content (Sutton & Douglas, 2014). However, while some CTs clearly reinforce the RWA view of the world as a threatening place in which survival depends on obedience, adherence to tradition, and socially sanctioned aggression against outsiders (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007), other CTs posit a view of mainstream authorities as corrupt despots who must be disobeyed, and traditions as top-down control mechanisms for an unaware public (Byford, 2011) Considering these subtypes of CT separately – and

recruiting enough participants for more precise effect size estimates – might explain some of the divergent results regarding RWA.

Consistent with this idea, RWA is a relatively consistent positive predictor of so-called *conspiracy stereotypes* – CTs about relatively large outgroups, such as Jews or Russians – but is less reliably correlated with beliefs in CTs about specific events or with general conspiracy mentality (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).¹ With the aim of clarifying under what circumstances RWA correlates with particular conspiracy beliefs, we test here whether RWA predicts two separate types of relatively specific CT: theories that propose a conspiracy among the existing establishment (e.g., governments abusing their power) and theories that propose a conspiracy against that establishment (e.g., minority groups conspiring against the social order). Authoritarians tend to be vigilant against threats to the stability of the current social order and the cohesion of valued ingroups (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007), so RWA should predict stronger agreement with CTs that threaten an ingroup authority. On the other hand, CTs that portray the present establishment as corrupt and unworthy of obedience should be less appealing to high authoritarians. These relationships should occur independently of social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) which tends to correlate with RWA and has also shown correlations with conspiracy beliefs (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015).

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E-mail address: Michael.Wood@winchester.ac.uk (M.J. Wood).¹ Grzesiak-Feldman (2012; as cited in Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015) observed an interaction between RWA and SDO whereby RWA predicted conspiracy stereotypes only for low social dominators, but no such interaction was observed in the present Study 1 for either pro-establishment or anti-establishment CT belief ($ps > 0.25$).

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants and design

300 participants were initially recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; for a discussion of the validity of MTurk data, see Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). After eliminating ineligible participants, duplicates, and anyone who took < 90 s, 294 participants were retained (176 male, 117 female, 1 unspecified) with a mean age of 33.83 (SD = 11.01). All participants were U.S. residents and had an MTurk approval rate of at least 90%, and were paid \$3 each for their participation. The data were collected during the second term of Barack Obama's presidency. Study 1 was correlational, and measured beliefs in two different types of CT, along with RWA and SDO.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were given three scales in a randomized, counterbalanced order. The 30-item RWA scale ($\alpha = 0.96$; Altemeyer, 1988) asked participants to rate their agreement with statements such as “Obedience is the most important virtue children should learn” on a -3 (strongly disagree) to $+3$ (strongly agree) Likert scale. The SDO scale ($\alpha = 0.96$; Pratto et al., 1994) asked participants to rate their feelings on 16 statements (8 reverse coded), e.g., “Inferior groups should stay in their place,” on a 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) Likert scale.

Conspiracy beliefs were measured by agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with 7 pro-establishment CTs (e.g., “Many of the foreigners coming into this country are here as part of a deliberate plan to radically change our society,” $\alpha = 0.88$) and 7 anti-establishment CTs (e.g., “Those in power are secretly campaigning to destroy individual freedom in this country,” $\alpha = 0.90$). Following the questionnaires, participants were debriefed and paid via MTurk.

1.2. Results

Pearson correlations between measures can be seen in Table 1. Pro- and anti-establishment CT beliefs were strongly intercorrelated. The correlation with RWA was significantly stronger for pro-establishment than for anti-establishment CT belief, Fisher's $z = 11.45, p < .001$ (Lee & Preacher, 2013). Standard multiple linear regression analyses showed that pro-establishment CT belief was significantly predicted by both RWA ($\beta = 0.41, t(293) = 7.52, p < .001$) and SDO ($\beta = 0.24, t(293) = 4.36, p < .001$). However, anti-establishment CT belief was predicted only by SDO ($\beta = 0.18, t(293) = 2.71, p = .007$); RWA was not a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.005, t(293) = -0.29, p = .773$).

2. Discussion

As predicted, pro-establishment CT beliefs correlated positively with RWA, and this relationship was independent of SDO. Unexpectedly, anti-establishment CT beliefs were uncorrelated, rather than negatively correlated, with RWA.

Table 1

Correlations and descriptive statistics in Study 1, $N = 294$. * $p < .05$ (Bonferroni-corrected for $k = 6$ comparisons).

	1	2	3	M	SD
1. Pro-establishment conspiracy belief				3.05	1.33
2. Anti-establishment conspiracy belief	0.709*			3.92	1.42
3. Right-wing authoritarianism	0.524*	0.064		-23.03	34.73
4. Social dominance orientation	0.432*	0.168*	0.469*	36.99	19.61

We expected an RWA/pro-establishment correlation because pro-establishment CTs propose a plot to overthrow the existing social order. The prospect of a fifth-column subversion of a valued ingroup would threaten authoritarians (just as the potential disruption of the status quo presents a salient threat to high social dominators and system justifiers). However, CTs generally seem more plausible when they implicate a generally disliked outgroup (Radnitz & Underwood, 2015) and when people are repeatedly exposed to them (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). High RWAs may simply dislike the minority or deviant groups who are supposedly behind pro-establishment CTs, or have more exposure to these CTs via their cultural milieu. Finally, openness to experience correlates negatively with RWA and attitudes toward minority groups, and positively with at least some conspiracy beliefs (Swami et al., 2010). A positive relationship between RWA and pro-establishment CT beliefs might therefore reflect a mutual negative relationship with openness to experience. Study 2 set out to test whether these factors could account for the stronger RWA/pro-establishment CT correlation.

3. Study 2

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and design

200 MTurk participants (71 female, 128 male, 1 other; mean age 33.37, SD = 9.58) took part in exchange for US\$2.00 each. All participants were U.S. residents with an MTurk approval rating of at least 90%; none were excluded from analysis. The data were collected during the second term of Barack Obama's presidency. Study 2 followed a correlational design.

3.1.2. Materials and procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were presented with four questionnaires in counterbalanced order: the 30-item RWA scale ($\alpha = 0.88$), measures of beliefs and exposure to the CTs from Study 1, attitudes toward alleged perpetrator groups, and openness to experience.

The belief/exposure measure followed Swami et al. (2010). After rating their agreement with each pro- and anti-establishment theory, participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale the degree to which they heard about the theory from friends, in rallies, and through various media. These items were averaged across each theory type to create a composite exposure score. Separately, participants rated their attitudes toward the alleged perpetrators of each CT, such as immigrants or corporations, on a 1 (extremely negative) – 7 (extremely positive) Likert scale. For anti-establishment theories, agreement $\alpha = 0.86$, exposure $\alpha = 0.89$, attitudes $\alpha = 0.80$; for pro-establishment theories, agreement $\alpha = 0.85$, exposure $\alpha = 0.88$, attitudes $\alpha = 0.69$.

Finally, a 10-item measure of openness to experience was included ($\alpha = 0.83$; Goldberg et al., 2006). Participants rated how much 10 statements (e.g., “I have a vivid imagination”), 2 reverse-coded, applied to them on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) Likert scale. Following the questionnaires, participants viewed a debriefing and received their payment as in Study 1.

3.2. Results & discussion

RWA correlated strongly and significantly with pro-establishment CT agreement ($r = 0.618, p < .001$). Unlike Study 1, RWA also correlated with anti-establishment CT agreement ($r = 0.245, p < .001$), though not as strongly (Fisher's $z = 4.68, p < .001$). Agreement with each kind of CT correlated very strongly with exposure to it ($r_s > 0.70$) and moderately with attitudes toward the relevant perpetrator groups ($r_s > 0.40$); see Table 2.

Contributors to both types of CT were investigated using standard multiple regression analyses (see Table 3). Pro-establishment CT

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