



Anxious attachment and belief in conspiracy theories

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the link between attachment styles and belief in conspiracy theories. It was hypothesized, due to the tendency to exaggerate the intensity of threats, that higher anxiously attached individuals would be more likely to hold conspiracy beliefs, even when accounting for other variables such as right-wing authoritarianism, interpersonal trust, and demographic factors that have been found to predict conspiracy belief in previous research. In Study 1 ($N = 246$ Amazon Mechanical Turk workers), participants higher in anxious attachment style showed a greater tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Further, this relationship remained significant when accounting for other known predictors of conspiracy belief. Study 2 ($N = 230$ Prolific Academic workers) revealed that anxious attachment again predicted the general tendency to believe conspiracy theories, but also belief in specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories about groups. These relationships held when controlling for demographic factors. The current studies add to the body of research investigating the individual differences predictors of conspiracy belief, demonstrating that conspiracy belief may, to some degree, have roots in early childhood experiences.

1. Introduction

1.1. Belief in conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories attribute significant social and political events to the actions of powerful and malicious groups (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). For example, popular conspiracy theories propose that the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers were an ‘inside job’ orchestrated by the Bush administration, and that Diana, Princess of Wales was assassinated by the British Secret Service. Conspiracy theories like these are popular (Oliver & Wood, 2014) and research suggests that if an individual believes in one conspiracy theory they are likely to believe others (Goertzel, 1994; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010), even when those theories directly contradict each other (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). Belief in conspiracy theories also has important consequences, such as reducing levels of civic engagement (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), commitment to important preventative health treatments (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), and loyalty to the workplace (Douglas & Leite, 2017). It is therefore important to understand the factors that draw individuals toward conspiracy theories. To meet this aim, the current research adds to a growing body of literature examining the individual differences predictors of belief in conspiracy theories. Specifically, we focus on the association between conspiracy belief and attachment style, arguing that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories may originate—to

some extent—in early childhood experiences.

Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017) reason that conspiracy theories are appealing to individuals because they appear to satisfy three types of psychological needs: *social* (e.g., the need to maintain positive image of oneself or one's group), *epistemic* (e.g., the need to be certain, consistent, and accurate), and *existential* (e.g., the need for security and control). For example, conspiracy theories seem to be more appealing to individuals who feel that their personal image is being threatened (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016) and those who have a high personal need for uniqueness (Lantian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2017), which may appear to satisfy the social need to maintain positive self-esteem. Conspiracy theories also seem to appeal to individuals who seek patterns and order in their environment (van Prooijen, Douglas, & De Inocencio, in press), or those with lower levels of education (Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry, & Harvey, 2016), which may appear to satisfy the epistemic need for accuracy and certainty. Finally, research suggests that individuals who feel disempowered (Abalakin-Paap, Stephan, Graig, & Gregory, 1999) and anxious (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, which may appear to satisfy the existential need for security and control. Whether conspiracy theories successfully address these needs is unclear, and the research to date suggests that they might not. For instance, some research suggests that conspiracy theories increase (rather than decrease) feelings of powerlessness (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a). Nevertheless, people appear to be attracted to conspiracy theories when

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these needs are unfulfilled (Douglas et al., 2017).

People's existential needs in particular are the focus of the current research. People are motivated to perceive their environment as safe and reassuring (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) proposed that threats to one's security and perceived sense of control over the environment (e.g., terrorist attacks), lead people to attempt to restore compensatory control at a more symbolic level, such as feeling that they possess unique knowledge of the concerning threat (i.e., knowing the 'truth'; see also Deci & Ryan, 1985 for a discussion of compensatory control mechanisms that people might adopt when needs are thwarted). Douglas et al. (2017) argue that belief in conspiracy theories may be one way in which people seek such compensatory control. Experimental research supports this view, showing that when people were reminded of a time when they had no control, endorsement of conspiracy theories increased, whereas belief decreased when a sense of control was induced (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). Further, Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild (2010) found that threats to personal control increased the perceived conspiratorial power of an enemy. There is some evidence, therefore, that people turn to conspiracy theories in an attempt to relieve particular concerns related to security and control.

1.2. Attachment style

The origins of such concerns can be considered through the lens of attachment theory. Pioneered by Bowlby, (1969, 1982) attachment theory proposes that infants are biologically driven to seek proximity to a primary caregiver when feeling distressed or threatened—termed the “attachment behavioral system”. The primary goal of attachment behavior is to alleviate feelings of anxiety and to elicit a sense of security (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Bowlby argued that early experiences of threats to security create an internal working model consisting of expectations, emotions, and behavioral strategies elicited by threatening stimuli. He further argued that threatening stimuli later in life activate these working models.

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) found evidence for three types of working attachment models in infants that result from interactions with primary caregivers. These are *secure* attachment, which is the result of consistent emotional and physical responsiveness, *anxious* attachment, which is the result of inconsistent emotional and physical responsiveness, and *avoidant* attachment, which is the result of consistent emotional and psychological unavailability. Attachment styles are not simply the product of attachment experiences in infancy, but are also relevant during adulthood (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2009). Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) found that adult attachment styles can be understood by two fundamental dimensions. These are attachment anxiety, or a heightened state of arousal and preoccupation with close relationships, and attachment avoidance characterized by discomfort in close relationships, and emotional distancing. Furthermore, low anxiety and low avoidance constitute a secure attachment style, high anxiety and low avoidance constitute an anxious attachment style, and low anxiety and high avoidance constitute an avoidant attachment style.

Integrating the theoretical perspectives of attachment theorists (e.g., Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Main, 1995), Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) developed a model of attachment-system functioning in adulthood. They argued that the activation of the attachment-system depends upon the occurrence of a threat (actual or perceived), how the threat is appraised, and the attachment style of the concerning individual. Once the attachment system is activated, individuals are motivated to seek proximity to external or internalized (mental representations) attachment figures. If successful, security-based strategies can be employed and feelings of security, relief and positive affect can be attained. However, if external or internalized attachment figures are not available or are inconsistently available, then the threat is compounded and secondary strategies (hyperactivating and deactivating) are employed to alleviate

feelings of distress (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). Main (1990) likens these two secondary strategies to the distinction between fight and flight, in that hyperactivating strategies—fight responses—include increased effort to seek proximity to significant others, whereas deactivating strategies—flight responses—emphasise a decreased effort to seek proximity to significant others.

Individuals with a secure attachment have a history of successful interactions with available and responsive attachment figures, which then increases the likelihood of security-based strategies being employed to alleviate feelings of distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). For example, research has shown that individuals with secure (vs. insecure) attachment have a greater tendency to seek instrumental and emotional support from significant others and professional sources such as teachers and counselors (Florian, Mikulincer, & Bucholtz, 1995; Larose, Bernier, Soucy, & Duchesne, 1999). Avoidant attachment is the result of emotional and psychological unavailability of attachment figures. Therefore proximity seeking is not a viable option for avoidant individuals, so in threatening times they tend to alleviate distress by deactivating the attachment system (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). For example, individuals with avoidant attachment have been shown to adopt distancing coping strategies, such as diversion of attention, stress denial, and cognitive and behavioral disengagement (Feeney & Ryan, 1994; Lopez, Mauricio, Gormley, Simko, & Berger, 2001; Shapiro & Levendosky, 1999). Furthermore, avoidant individuals tend to deny thoughts or feelings that imply vulnerability or dependence (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Anxiously attached individuals have a history of inconsistent responsiveness from attachment figures, but nevertheless have strong desire for proximity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). To gain an attachment figure's support, attention, and care in times of need, anxiously attached individuals tend to employ hyperactivating strategies (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988). For example, they tend to exaggerate the seriousness of threats they are facing, in the hope that this will gain them the support, attention and care they desire (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). This coping strategy appears not to be a fruitful one. Overall, Girme, Lemay, and Hammond (2014) found that individuals with anxious attachment tend to exaggerate expressions of hurt when their relationship is threatened, with the aim of inducing guilt in their partner to gain a reassuring reaction. The benefit of attaining some reassurance also comes with the cost of a significant decrease in relationship satisfaction. Mikulincer and Florian (2000) argued that this tendency to exaggerate can account for why anxiously attached individuals are more sensitive to threats. We argue that this exaggeration may also manifest itself in increased conspiracy belief.

1.3. Anxious attachment and conspiracy belief

Recent theorizing in social psychology suggests that individuals use conspiracy theories as an attempted defensive mechanism to address psychological needs, including the existential need for security and control (Douglas et al., 2017). Individuals with anxious attachment are preoccupied with their security, tend to hold a negative view of out-groups, are more sensitive to threats, and tend to exaggerate the seriousness of such threats. Secure and avoidant attachment styles, on the other hand, are less sensitive to threats and do not exaggerate such threats. Anxious attachment—compared to secure and avoidant attachment—could therefore potentially be a key predictor of conspiracy belief.

Several studies provide indirect evidence for this relationship. For example, insecure attachment has generally been shown to predict greater endorsement of right-wing attitudes (for a review see Koleva & Rip, 2009). Furthermore, dispositional and primed attachment security has been found to buffer the effects of existential threats and is associated with decreased endorsement of right-wing attitudes and policies (Weise et al., 2008). Lastly, insecure attachment and interpersonal trust are intimately connected. Much of the literature has revealed that individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment style tend to be low in

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