Uncertainty, Insecurity, and Ideological Defense of the Status Quo

The Extremitizing Role of Political Expertise

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Psychologists have devoted a great deal of attention to the question of why people adopt the political attitudes, values, and beliefs they do. In particular, contemporary researchers have explored the mechanisms that encourage individuals to endorse ideologies that legitimize existing social inequalities, even when the status quo is not advantageous to them (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Many of the mechanisms that have proven most relevant to explaining ideological justification of the unequal status quo pertain to individual differences in epistemic motives—needs governing how individuals use information to explain reality—and existential motives—needs governing how individuals maintain a sense of security (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a; Kruglanski, 2004; Van Hiel, Pandalae, & Duriez, 2004). In a nutshell, this line of inquiry indicates that the desire to avoid uncertainty and insecurity is associated with greater conservatism, the political orientation classically associated with resistance to change and the acceptance of existing inequalities (Jost, 2006).

However, far less attention has been devoted to exploring the conditions that lead uncertainty and insecurity to result in particularly extreme forms of support for the status quo. In this chapter, we review a program of research focused on one such condition: individuals' understanding of politics. In multiple samples, we find that variables related to uncertainty and insecurity predict greater extremism in support for the status quo among political experts—individuals with better-developed political knowledge structures (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). That is, somewhat counterintuitively, we find that ideological orientations toward the...
status quo are more rather than less extreme and polarized as a function of uncertainty and insecurity among the sophisticated and well-informed. Before describing this program of research, we briefly review work on the links between motives related to uncertainty and insecurity and support for the status quo.

Uncertainty, Insecurity, and Support for the Status Quo

Research on the foundations of ideological affinity suggests that people adopt the ideological belief systems that best satisfy their underlying psychological needs (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost et al., 2003a, Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003b; see also Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Specifically, recent work conceptualizes support for various ideologies, whether they support or challenge the hierarchical status quo, as a form of motivated social cognition linked to the management of uncertainty and insecurity (among other things). According to this account, fears about risk, loss, and social instability and needs for order, structure, and closure should be associated with support for right-leaning ideologies that endorse existing inequalities, while openness to experience, cognitive complexity, and tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity should be associated with support for left-leaning ideologies that challenge the hierarchical status quo (Jost et al., 2003a, 2004; Kruglanski, 2004; see also Duckitt & Sibley, 2009).

The basis for this argument is the notion of a psychological "fit" between the need to avoid or reduce uncertainty and insecurity and support for an unequal status quo (Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b; see also Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1998; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949; McClosky, 1958; Wilson, 1973). As Jost and colleagues (2007) note, "stability and hierarchy generally provide reassurance and structure, whereas change and equality imply greater chaos and unpredictability" (p. 990). Consequently, "preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar and known, while rejecting the risky, uncertain prospect of social change" (p. 990). Thus, a desire to avoid uncertainty and insecurity should push people in a risk-averse direction, leading them to endorse the status quo even when they are disadvantaged by existing inequalities.

Over several decades, this perspective has received a great deal of empirical support. Early studies in political psychology found that intolerance of ambiguity was associated with support for conservative ideologies that tend to promote hierarchy and stability (Budner, 1962; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949; McClosky, 1958; see also Adorno et al., 1950; Wilson, 1973). More recently, Jost and his colleagues (2003a, 2003b) conducted a large-scale metaanalytic review of the psychological bases of ideological affinity and found that several variables related to the management of uncertainty predict political conservatism, including the need for cognitive closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and openness to experience (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Subsequent studies have confirmed these findings (Jost et al., 2007; Mondak & others). Other studies have found that social world as a dangerous plu

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The Status Quo

suggests that people adopt the underlying psychological needs Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & 8). Specifically, recent work on they support or challenge social cognition linked to the other things. According to ability and needs for order, support for right-leaning ideologies to experience, cognitive may be associated with the hierarchical status quo Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). Psychological “fit” between the and support for an unequal Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, 49; McClosky, 1958; the, “stability and hierarchy in change and equality imply mutually,” preserving the status quo while rejecting the risky, a desire to avoid uncertainty direction, leading them to be targeted by existing inequalities. A great deal of empirical that intolerance of ambiguity theories that tend to promote Frenkel, 1949; McClosky, 1958; recently, Jost and his colleagues re-eval of the psychological real variables related to the assimilating, including the need for openness to experience confirmed these findings (Jost et al., 2007; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Similarly, with respect to insecurity, other studies have found that individuals who are chronically disposed to see the social world as a dangerous place are more likely to endorse conservative, system-justifying belief systems (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Federico, Hunt, & Ergun, 2009; Weber & Federico, 2007). Finally, yet another line of work finds that individuals who are highly predisposed to authoritarianism—who prefer uniformity and submission to conventional norms and authorities and who dislike the uncertainty and insecurity introduced by individual autonomy and social diversity—also tend to provide stronger support for the status quo in their explicit political attitudes and ideological affiliations (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005; see also Altemeyer, 1996, 1998; Barker & Tinnick, 2006). In sum, across social contexts, affinity for the hierarchical status quo is reliably associated with individual differences related to the management of uncertainty and insecurity.

Political Expertise and the Ideological Impact of Uncertainty and Insecurity

While research strongly supports the existence of a relationship between variables linked to uncertainty and insecurity and ideological support for the status quo, we know little about the conditions governing this relationship. In particular, almost none of the studies in this area conducted over the past six decades have addressed the question of whether uncertainty and insecurity are associated with a more extreme pattern of support for the status quo among individuals who differ in the extent to which they actually understand key political ideas.

A long line of research in political psychology suggests that this omission is problematic. Studies have consistently shown that citizens of mass democracies vary a great deal in political expertise—the extent to which they possess well-developed political knowledge structures (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990). Research on expertise, which is typically measured using tests of factual political knowledge, finds large knowledge gaps between members of the mass public and the political professionals or “elites” that help construct ideological belief systems, and also between different segments of the mass public (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1992). Many citizens do not know basic facts about the political system, including information about political figures, ideas, institutions, and democratic procedures (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). These differences in expertise have crucial implications for the content and structure of individuals’ ideological belief systems. For example, studies have indicated that only elites and the most knowledgeable members of the mass public adopt political attitudes that are ideologically consistent with one another and with broader predispositions.
(Bennett, 2006; Converse, 1964; Erikson & Tedin, 2003; Federico, 2007; Federico & Schneider, 2007; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Kinder, 2006; Kinder & Sears, 1985; Lavine, Thomsen, & Gonzales, 1997; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Luskin, 1987; Zaller, 1992). Moreover, while about two-thirds of adults are willing to identify themselves as liberal or conservative, only elites and that portion of the mass public near the top of the expertise distribution are able to “correctly” think about politics in the abstract ideological language of left versus right (Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Erikson & Tedin, 2003; Stimson, 2004; but see Jost, 2006).

This suggests that even if psychological variables related to uncertainty and insecurity have the potential to attract individuals to system-justifying ideologies, the extremity with which individuals actually do so as a result of these motivations may depend on the extent to which they understand abstract political ideas well enough to choose the “right” ideological content. On one hand, some citizens may not know enough about the ideologies available in a particular context to effectively determine which one is capable of providing them with a sense of certainty and security by lending legitimacy to the status quo. On the other hand, citizens with well-developed political knowledge structures may very accurately and extremely seize on system-justifying ideologies in an effort to manage uncertainty and insecurity. This basic argument leads to a crucial hypothesis: the relationship between variables linked to the management of uncertainty and insecurity and support for system-justifying ideologies should be stronger among individuals who are high in political expertise. Specifically, psychological inclinations that make one relatively intolerant of uncertainty and insecurity should lead to a more extreme ideological defense of the status quo among individuals who attend closely to politics and understand the implications of various belief systems, that is, those who are high in political expertise. In contrast, individuals who are low in political expertise should be less familiar with how various ideological constructs are used in a particular context, making it more difficult for them to appropriately identify and select the ideological positions most capable of reducing uncertainty and insecurity via system justification. As such, intolerance of uncertainty and insecurity should not produce as extreme a defense of the status quo among those low in expertise. In sum, uncertainty and insecurity should pack a more extreme punch among those whose expertise allows them to best detect the epistemic and existential implications of ideological alternatives that support or challenge the status quo.

Overview

In this chapter, we review a recent program of research from our laboratory addressing this hypothesis. Specifically, we look at whether two different variables related to the management of uncertainty and insecurity—the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 2004; Sibley, 2009)—are associated with hierarchical status quo among general approach is to operationalize political manifest (see Jost, 2006): specifically, among groups of individuals arrived at our findings, we resection. We keep this language

The Need for Cognitive Closure

One variable relevant to the need for cognitive closure, and it is studies of the psychological need for closure. The need for closure is the need to avoid ambiguity, clear, and and Webster, 1996; Webster & Kukla, 2000; Kruglanski & Webster, 2000). Individuals with a high need for closure tend to avoid ambiguous information and are more likely to exhibit rigid ways of thinking to defend and maintain their views.

As noted earlier, this need for cognitive closure should push people towards a status quo position. Specifically, endorsement of system-justifying ideologies (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2007; Kemmelmeier, 2010; Kruglanski, 1994; see also McClosky, 1958).

However, in the present chapter, we have conducted two studies examining the relationship in which a better understanding of system-justifying ideologies (Federico & Goren, 2008).
2003; Federico, 2007; Federico & 6, 2006; Kinder & Sears, 1985; & Carsey, 2002; Luskin, 1987; of adults are willing to identify I that portion of the mass public I correctly think about politics ght (Campbell et al., 1960; Delli mson, 2004; but see Jost, 2006). sles related to uncertainty and to system-justifying ideologies, as a result of these motivations and abstract political ideas well one hand, some citizens may de in a particular context to providing them with a sense of status quo. On the other hand, structures may very accurately gies in an effort to manage ads to a crucial hypothesis: the ment of uncertainty and insecure be stronger among individuals al inclinations that make one should lead to a more extreme viduals who attend closely to as belief systems, that is, those n low in political expertise gial constructs are used in a to appropriately identify and hacing uncertainty and insecurity status quo among those low in d pack a more extreme punch est detect the epistemic and that support or challenge the research from our laboratory whether two different variables security—the need for cognitive

closure (Kruglanski, 2004) and the belief in a dangerous world (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009)—are associated with a more extreme ideological defense of the hierarchical status quo among those high in political expertise. In both cases, our general approach is to operationalize defense of the status quo in terms of its most common political manifestation, namely, generalized political conservatism (see Jost, 2006); specifically, we attend to relative extremism on this dimension among groups of individuals differing in expertise. In order to explain how we arrived at our findings, we rely on some statistical language in the following two sections. We keep this language as simple as possible for the benefit of all readers.

The Need for Cognitive Closure

One variable relevant to the management of uncertainty that has figured prominently in research on defensive support for system-justifying ideologies is the need for cognitive closure, and it is perhaps the most frequently examined predictor in studies of the psychological bases of ideological affinity (Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b). The need for closure is the need to pursue, possess, and rely on information that is unambiguous, clear, and unlikely to change (Kruglanski, 2004; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). In general, individuals with a high need for closure tend to find uncertainty highly unsettling, and they try to eliminate it as quickly and definitely as possible. People under a high need for closure do this by "seizing" quickly on available information and by "freezing" in a rigid way on these conclusions once they are reached (Kruglanski, 1996).

As noted earlier, this motivation—like others aimed at the avoidance of uncertainty—should push people in the direction of supporting the political status quo. Specifically, endorsement of the status quo and support for well-defined social hierarchies should help protect what is familiar and orderly, while reducing the risks associated with social change and instability in social relations (Jost et al., 2003a). Consistent with this account, numerous studies find that a high need for closure—assessed using individual-difference measures—is reliably associated with the endorsement of conservative, system-justifying ideologies (Jost, 2006; Jost et al., 2003a; Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon, 1999; Jost et al., 2007; Kemmelmeier, 1997; Kruglanski, 2004; Van Hiel et al., 2004; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; see also Adorno et al., 1950; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949; McClosky, 1958).

However, in the present context, our main interest is in whether the need for closure is associated with a more extreme defense of the status quo among those with a better understanding of politics. In an effort to address this question, we conducted two studies examining the relationship between the need for closure and general political conservatism among individuals differing in political expertise (Federico & Goren, 2009). Our first study relied on a convenience sample of
221 university students and measured individual differences in the need for closure using the full Need for Cognitive Closure Scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994); higher scores indicated a greater need for closure. Expertise was measured using a 16-item knowledge test (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), with higher scores indicating greater expertise. Conservatism was measured using a composite of ideological self-placement and partisan identification, both of which were measured with standard seven-point scales; higher scores indicated greater conservatism.

In order to analyze the data, we used linear regression, a technique that allows us to examine the independent relationship between an outcome variable and each one of a set of explanatory variables, while holding the others constant (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Specifically, in our regression model, we used the need for closure, expertise, and the Need for Closure × Expertise interaction to predict conservatism. The crucial part of this model is the Need for Closure × Expertise interaction. For each individual in the data, an interaction between two explanatory variables is represented by the product of the individual’s scores on the two variables—in this case, the need for closure and expertise. A significant interaction term indicates that the ability of one explanatory variable to predict the outcome variable varies as a function of the other explanatory variable. In the present context, we expect a positive interaction, indicating that the relationship between the need for closure and conservatism becomes stronger as expertise increases. Turning to the data, the estimates revealed a significant main effect of the need for closure, such that those high in the need for closure displayed greater conservatism, all other things being equal. However, this relationship was qualified by the predicted positive Need for Closure × Expertise interaction. A series of follow-up analyses examining the effect of the need for closure at specific expertise levels revealed that the relationship between the need for closure and conservatism was significant only among those high in expertise—and that the relationship was three times larger among those high (versus low) in expertise.

In order to replicate this finding, we turned to a second dataset consisting of 1,201 American adults. In this sample, the need for closure was measured using a short six-item version of the Need for Cognitive Closure Scale. Expertise was measured using six knowledge items similar to those used in the student survey, while conservatism was again operationalized as a composite of seven-point ideological self-placement and party identification scales. Again, higher scores indicated a higher level of each construct. As before, the need for closure, expertise, and the Need for Closure × Expertise interaction were used to predict conservatism in a linear regression model. Replicating the results of the student survey, the estimates revealed a significant main effect of the need for closure, with those high in the need for closure showing a greater level of conservatism. As before, this relationship was qualified by a significant positive

Need for Closure × Expertise

Follow-up analyses similar to the positive relationship between a need for closure and political conservatism suggest that a measure of cognitive conservatism is the need for closure. In sum, individuals who believe in the belief in a danger for efforts to minimize social status quo mainly among those who endorse the belief in a danger for efforts to minimize social status quo (Altemeyer, 1996; et al., 2002; Jost et al., 2003).
Need for Closure × Expertise interaction, suggesting the relationship between
the need for closure and conservatism became stronger as expertise increased.
Follow-up analyses similar to those conducted in the student survey indicated that
the positive relationship between the need for closure and conservatism was
significant only among those high in expertise, and that the relationship was more
than three times stronger at high expertise than at low expertise.

In sum, individuals who are high in the need for closure tend to be more
extreme in their endorsement of system-justifying ideological positions when they
are also relatively high in political expertise. In fact, among individuals who are low
in expertise, the need for closure is not associated with a conservative, system-
justifying orientation. We should also note that studies from outside our own
laboratory have produced parallel results. For example, in an analysis of archival
data from 95 American foreign-service officers, Kemmelmeier (2007) found
that a measure of cognitive rigidity similar in content to the Webster and
Kruglanski (1994) Need for Cognitive Closure Scale was more strongly predictive
of political conservatism among officers with a greater interest in politics. Taken
together, these results suggest that system justification is not an unqualified
consequence of one’s epistemic orientation. Rather, the distaste for uncertainty
represented by a high need for closure tends to result in more extreme support for
the status quo mainly among those who are in the best position to understand the
content of the ideologies available in a particular social context.

The Belief in a Dangerous World

Another construct that has been repeatedly linked to ideological support for the
status quo is the belief in a dangerous world (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Duckitt
et al., 2002). The belief in a dangerous world taps into insecurity and uncertainty
about the safety and orderliness of social life, and it is typically assessed in terms of
perceptions that the “social world is dangerous and threatening” (Duckitt &
Sibley, 2009, p. 297). Research on this worldview has empirically linked it to a
number of other variables related to uncertainty and insecurity, such as low
openness to experience (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), high
attachment anxiety (Weber & Federico, 2007), a high need for closure (Federico,
Hunt, & Ergun, 2009), and a high level of concern with maintaining security and
social order (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt et al., 2002). In turn, individuals who strongly
endorse the belief in a dangerous world tend to be more extreme in their support
for efforts to minimize social deviance, preserve order and stability, and protect
traditional values. In the realm of politics, this leads more broadly to a relationship
between belief in a dangerous world and support for ideologies that reinforce the
status quo (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Duckitt
et al., 2002; Iost et al., 2003a, 2007; Weber & Federico, 2007).
Again, our interest is in whether the belief in a dangerous world is associated with a more extreme ideological defense of the status quo among those in a better position to understand the content of various ideologies. Another recent study from our laboratory addressed this question, among others (Federico, Hunt, & Ergun, 2009). This study drew on a sample of 288 university students and measured individual differences in dangerous-world beliefs using a 10-item scale developed by Duckitt (2001). Sample items included: “My knowledge and experience tells me that the social world we live in is basically a dangerous and unpredictable place, in which good, decent, and moral people's values and way of life are threatened and disrupted by bad people” and “There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack somebody out of pure meanness, for no reason at all.” Higher scores indicated a stronger belief in a dangerous world.

Expertise was measured using an 11-item knowledge test, with higher scores indicating greater expertise. Conservatism was measured using a composite of two standard seven-point items asking respondents for their “general political outlook” with respect to social and economic matters respectively; higher scores indicated greater conservatism. Finally, another worldview relevant to system justification—belief in a “competitive jungle world” where force and might rule (Duckitt, 2001)—was also included as an additional control.

In the analyses, linear regression was used to predict our measure of support for the status quo—political conservatism—on the basis of belief in a dangerous world, expertise, and the Dangerous World × Expertise interaction. Belief in a competitive jungle world was also included as an additional explanatory variable in the regression. The Dangerous World × Expertise interaction is the crucial part of the model: a positive, statistically significant interaction between belief in a dangerous world and expertise would suggest that the relationship between belief in a dangerous world and conservatism increases as expertise increases. Turning to the data, the model revealed a significant main effect of the belief in a dangerous world, such that those who perceived a more dangerous world expressed more conservative views. This relationship was qualified by the expected positive Dangerous World × Expertise interaction. Follow-up analyses revealed that the relationship between belief in a dangerous world and conservatism was significant only among those high in expertise—and three times larger among these individuals than among those low in expertise.

Importantly, our study also examined the intervening beliefs that might account for why political experts who perceive a dangerous world are more extreme in their conservatism. As noted previously, individuals who strongly believe in a dangerous world tend to be more extreme in their support for efforts to preserve traditional morality, which in turn leads them to greater general support for the status quo. This suggests that those who believe strongly in a dangerous world may be better able to select the traditional moral stance best capable of relieving their insecurities when they are higher in political expertise, with this pushing them in turn toward hypothesis, we looked at the to moral traditionalism—rigid relationship between belief of the status quo among constellation of attitudes into authority, and hostility toward was originally developed as authoritarianism (Altemeyer, better conceptualized as a kind appear to more closely measure than an abstract psychological authorities (Duckitt, 2001). Du some of the more well-known heritage are the things that have to show greater respect for strongly predict ideological et al., 2003a). Endorsement is the relationship between belief conservatism (e.g., Weber &

To put our hypothesis in mediated moderation, in which of Belief in a Dangerous World quo (Wegener & Fabrigar, 2006) linear regression model to picture World, Competitive-Jungle Expertise interaction. This is an in a dangerous world, in which showed greater RWA. Howe significant Dangerous Worldship between belief in a da increased. Follow-up analyses a dangerous world and RWA suggesting that experts who believe their traditionalism. In a fun increased traditionalism accord dangerous world were more end, we added RWA to our fun and the Dangerous World × E tism—as an additional expla t that RWA had a positive and confirming that those who en
dangerous world is associated with those in a better model. Another recent study by others (Federico, Hunt, & 288 university students and 12 beliefs using a 10-item scale labeled “My knowledge and my basically a dangerous and fair people’s values and way of life. I have many dangerous out of pure meanness, for no belief in a dangerous world. edge test, with higher scores tested using a composite of two their “general political outlooks” respectively; higher scores worldview relevant to system where force and might rule control. let our measure of support for the belief in a dangerous world increase. Belief in a additional explanatory variable is the crucial interaction between belief in that the relationship between these as expertise increases. main effect of the belief in a more dangerous world was qualified by the expected. Follow-up analyses revealed that world and conservatism was and three times larger among etc.

intervening beliefs that might dangerous world are more strong, individuals who strongly in their support for efforts to Iem to greater general support strive strongly in a dangerous moral stance best capable of political expertise, with this pushing them in turn toward more extreme conservatism. To examine this hypothesis, we looked at the degree to which higher levels of one variable related to moral traditionalism—right-wing authoritarianism—accounted for the stronger relationship between belief in a dangerous world and ideological endorsement of the status quo among experts. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA)—a constellation of attitudes involving conventionalism, submission to conventional authority, and hostility toward those who deviate from conventional norms—was originally developed as an updated measure of the psychological construct of authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996, 1998). However, recent work suggests that it is better conceptualized as a kind of ideological attitude, given that many of the items appear to more closely measure a political commitment to moral traditionalism than an abstract psychological orientation toward conformity and submission to authorities (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). This is evident from the text of some of the more well-known RWA items (e.g., “Our customs and national heritage are the things that have made us great, and certain people should be made to show greater respect for them”). Among other things, it has been shown to strongly predict ideological support for the status quo (Altemeyer, 1996; Lost et al., 2003a). Endorsement of its ideological content also appears to account for the relationship between belief in a dangerous world and general ideological conservatism (e.g., Weber & Federico, 2007).

To put our hypothesis in statistical terms, we expected a pattern known as mediated moderation, in which increased RWA accounts for the interactive effect of Belief in a Dangerous World and Expertise on conservative support for the status quo (Wegener & Fabrigar, 2000). To examine our hypothesis, we used another linear regression model to predict RWA on the basis of Belief in a Dangerous World, Competitive-Jungle Beliefs, Expertise, and the Dangerous World × Expertise interaction. This analysis revealed a significant main effect of the belief in a dangerous world, in which those who perceived a more dangerous world showed greater RWA. However, this relationship was qualified by a positive, significant Dangerous World × Expertise interaction, suggesting that the relationship between belief in a dangerous world and RWA increased as expertise increased. Follow-up analyses indicated that the relationship between belief in a dangerous world and RWA was in fact stronger among those high in expertise, suggesting that experts who believed in a dangerous world were more extreme in their traditionalism. In a final step, we attempted to determine whether this increased traditionalism accounted for why experts who believed strongly in a dangerous world were more likely to ideologically support the status quo. To this end, we added RWA to our first model—in which expertise, the two worldviews, and the Dangerous World × Expertise interaction were used to predict conservatism—as an additional explanatory variable. The results of this analysis revealed that RWA had a positive and highly significant relationship with conservatism, confirming that those who endorsed the traditionalism inherent in RWA were in
fact more likely to generally support the status quo net of other influences. Importantly, the analysis also indicated that the Dangerous World x Expertise interaction was reduced to nonsignificance once RWA was accounted for. This suggests that the interaction between dangerous-world beliefs and expertise is no longer directly relevant to conservatism once RWA is considered. Instead, when taken together with the finding that dangerous-world beliefs are more strongly associated with RWA among those high in expertise, this result suggests that the combination of dangerous-world beliefs and high expertise is indirectly related to greater conservatism via its association with greater RWA.

Thus, our results confirm the pattern reported above for the need for closure. Individuals who believe that the social world is a dangerous, insecure place are more extreme in their conservative, system-justifying orientation when they also possess high levels of political expertise. In contrast, among those who are low in expertise and fail to understand the content of different ideological positions, the belief in a dangerous world is not associated with a more extreme ideological endorsement of the status quo. Moreover, this pattern appears to be accounted for by the tendency for those who believe strongly in a dangerous world to gravitate more extremely toward moral traditionalism, as indexed by right-wing authoritarianism. In sum, then, it again appears that the extremity of one’s support for the system depends not just on feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, but also on the extent to which one is able to discern the social and psychological implications of different ideological orientations.

Conclusion

Decades of psychological research have demonstrated a relationship between variables linked to the management of uncertainty and insecurity and conservative support for the status quo (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost et al., 2003a, 2003b). According to these accounts, sticking with the hierarchical status quo provides those who find uncertainty and insecurity particularly aversive with a reassuring, orderly alternative to the risk and unpredictability of social change. Nevertheless, only a handful of studies in this long line of inquiry have looked at the extent to which the extremity of the support for the status quo motivated by desires for certainty and security is conditioned by individuals’ understanding of the ideological currents in a particular environment. In this chapter, we attempt to fill this gap by reviewing a series of studies examining whether the relationship between variables linked to uncertainty and insecurity and support for system-justifying ideologies differs as a function of political expertise, that is, one’s knowledge of politics. In other words, we try to address the question of whether relatively extreme support for the status quo is more likely to emerge when uncertainty and insecurity coexist with political sophistication.

Across several key variables individuals who are intolerant of uncertainty in their ideological dispositions. In contrast, the reliably insecure and support for those low in expertise. In other words, more readily gravitate toward uncertainty of politics is weak have difficulty in their underlying psychology.

Taken together, these findings are quite robustly linked to politics: insecurity—may not manifest rejection of the status quo in an explicit manner here indicates that prior research is consistent. In general, the present, psychological variables and the hierarchical status quo support the claim that their basic epistemic and existential security needs are present, psychological variables and the hierarchical status quo may be associated with traditionalism. Moreover, they imply that consequences of research in public opinion has conclusions of contemporary political expertise are strengthened by the link between political expertise and political ideology. Stimson (2006) and place the Democrats to the right of the Republicans. This may be relatively familiar as a matter of course. Nevertheless, the results reveal a relationship between psychological anxiety and insecurity and...
Across several key variables and multiple datasets, we find the same pattern: individuals who are intolerant of uncertainty and insecurity are likely to be more extreme in their ideological defense of the status quo if they are also high in political expertise. In contrast, the relationship between variables linked to uncertainty and insecurity and support for a conservative ideological position is far weaker among those low in expertise. In other words, those with a strong understanding of politics more readily gravitate toward the ideological content consistent with their orientation toward uncertainty and insecurity, while those whose understanding of politics is weak have difficulty selecting the ideological content that best serves their underlying psychological needs.

Taken together, these findings have a number of noteworthy implications. Perhaps most importantly, they suggest that psychological variables—even ones as robustly linked to politics as those related to the management of uncertainty and insecurity—may not manifest themselves in the form of ideological support for or rejection of the status quo in a simple, unqualified way. Rather, the findings we have reviewed here indicate that psychological constructs do not have clear implications for system support unless individuals’ political knowledge structures are well-developed enough to point them toward the political orientation that best reflects their basic epistemic and existential needs. Nevertheless, when such knowledge is present, psychological variables that tend to push one in the direction of conservatism may be associated with an even more extreme defense of the hierarchical status quo.

On a different front, the results of the studies discussed in this chapter also imply that consequences of political expertise may be more profound than research in public opinion has indicated. In this respect, one of the most important conclusions of contemporary research on ideological belief systems is that expertise strengthens the links between explicitly political attitudes, values, and beliefs, leading individuals to be more consistently ideological (e.g., Converse 1964, 2000; Zaller, 1992). However, the belief-systems literature is relatively silent on the question of whether the relationship between psychological variables and explicitly political constructs like ideology is also conditioned by expertise. In fact, some have argued that motivated system justification should not necessarily depend on expertise (Jost, 2006; see also Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Specifically, despite depressingly low levels of political expertise in the mass public, about two-thirds of survey respondents are able to place themselves on the left–right continuum and place the Democrats to the left of the Republicans on it (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Stimson, 2004). This suggests that the left–right continuum itself may be relatively familiar and easy to use in order to orient oneself to the hierarchical status quo that is the chief point of contention between left and right. Nevertheless, the results reviewed here indicate that expertise does condition the relationship between psychological variables linked to the management of uncertainty and insecurity and support for the status quo in the form of generalized
conservatism. Thus, expertise appears to influence not only the internal links between specific elements of political belief systems, but also the extent to which support for general ideological positions that support or challenge the status quo is rooted in basic epistemic and existential motives.

Finally, the program of work we review here also has some counterintuitive and potentially important normative implications. Our basic conception of democratic citizenship rests on the Enlightenment ideal of the well-informed citizen who makes political judgments in a manner that is autonomous, critical, and fact-driven (see Marcus, 2008). In the context of this ideal, political expertise should help on all fronts: it should facilitate critical, informed thinking about politics, thus enhancing the individual citizen’s autonomy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Similarly, from a normative perspective, expertise should mitigate against crude extremity in one’s beliefs. However, our results paint a more sanguine picture of what exactly expertise can accomplish in this regard. As we have seen, expertise actually appears to amplify the impact of basic orientations toward uncertainty and insecurity, rather than displacing them in favor of reasoned judgment on the basis of the added information expertise supposedly provides. Indeed, if citizens bring a low tolerance for uncertainty or insecurity to the political table, expertise makes their support for the system more extreme, rather than allowing them to more effectively challenge it. Thus, political expertise may not always encourage a critical political stance, and extremism in defense of the status quo may not be a phenomenon limited to the ignorant and poorly informed. Indeed, as we have seen, sophistication may even strengthen the impact of psychological variables known to make one uncritical with respect to the status quo.

Note

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References


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