

How thinking style differences are associated with anti-immigrant conspiracy beliefs

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In recent years, anti-immigration sentiment and conspiracy theories have become widespread across the U.S. and Europe.

In this context, a right-wing [conspiracy theory](#) has emerged that has become known as the "great replacement." This conspiracy theory alleges that the recent flows of migration to Europe and the U.S. have been planned by global elites, which, with the support of international organizations and national politicians, seek to replace the autochthonous white and Christian population with non-white and Muslim immigrants. This conspiracy theory appears particularly toxic, since far-right terrorists have already referred to it in their violent acts.

In their article, published in the open-access journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*, Alexander Jedinger, Lena Masch, and Axel Burger explore the extent to which individual differences in thinking are associated with belief in the "great replacement" narrative. Specifically, the scientists wanted to test whether people who naturally tend to be analytical rather than intuitive in their thinking style would be less susceptible to the "great replacement" conspiracy theory.

To do this, they applied a widely used cognitive reflection test (CRT) in a survey among 906 German adults. The sample of participants was representative of the German population in terms of age, gender, region, and education.

The CRT consists of short quiz-style questions, which make an intuitive but wrong answer come to mind quickly. To find the correct solution, respondents have to overcome their first intuitive response by investing the effort of a second thought. Accuracy on the CRT reliably correlates with a range of social attitudes and beliefs, such as higher "faith" in science, disbelief in paranormal phenomena, or lower religiosity.

For the purpose of the study, the team developed a novel scale designed to measure conspiratorial beliefs. It included statements, such as: "I think that, in 2015, the government planned to bring refugees to Germany to replace the [native population](#) with non-European immigrants," and:

"Powerful organizations are behind the migration crisis, which aims to bring large quantities of foreigners to Europe to create a multicultural society, in which natives are the minority."

The results of the study support the authors' hypothesis that people who think more analytically, rather than intuitively, are less likely to believe in the "great replacement" conspiracy. This association remained when [individual differences](#) in [political ideology](#) and education were statistically controlled in the analyses.

On the other hand, left-wing political views and [higher education](#) proved to be associated with less endorsement of the conspiracy theory.

In the meantime, gender and age were found to have no relation to either belief or disbelief in this specific anti-migration conspiracy theory.

The results of the study suggest that the appeal of the great replacement conspiracy theory to some individuals is rooted in intuitive processes rather than reflective thinking, which has implications for strategies to counter anti-immigration conspiracy sentiments.

As the authors write, "given that studies indicate that reflective thinking can be improved and facilitated by systematic training and interventions, this might be one component of the strategic responses of liberal democracies against the proliferation of the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory."

More information: Jedinger et al, Cognitive reflection and endorsement of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.10825](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.10825)

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