

“Conservatism,” Context-Dependence, and Cognitive Incapacity

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Three different varieties of “conservatism”—authoritarianism, status quo conservatism, and laissez-faire conservatism—regulate attitudes in different domains, and do so in ways, and at times, and in places, that are determined by the kind of things they are (primitive fear? entrenched habit? reasoned ideology?) and the primary functions they serve for the individual.

Authoritarianism

I have argued, both here and in previous works (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005), that *authoritarianism* is a functional disposition concerned with maximizing oneness and sameness, especially in conditions where the things that make us one and the same—common authority, and shared values—appear to be under threat. In this “authoritarian dynamic” (Stenner, 2005), perceptions of leadership failure and diversity in public opinion (“normative threat”) activate latent predispositions to authoritarianism and increase their expression in manifest intolerance. That is to say, intolerance is a function of the *interaction* of authoritarian predisposition with conditions of normative threat. In short, normative threat increases the *impact* of authoritarianism on intolerant attitudes and behaviours. This means that in conditions of normative reassurance (high confidence in leaders and institutions, and consensus in public opinion), latent authoritarians and libertarians may be virtually indistinguishable in their attitudes and behaviors, despite their widely divergent predispositions. But they will vary markedly in the intolerance they express under conditions of normative threat. By the same token, individuals with a certain level of authoritarianism may manifest entirely different attitudes and behaviors from one occasion to the next, depending upon the presence or absence of normative threat.

I have demonstrated the prevalence and significance of this “authoritarian dynamic” with many different kinds of data (Stenner, 2005), always measuring latent authoritarianism with some low-level, “bare bones” measure of fundamental predisposition (either adult respondents’ choices among child-rearing values or else college students’ choices among “appealing” words, as appropriate for those barely beyond childhood themselves), and then interacting

authoritarianism with “normative threat.” Normative threat—specifically belief diversity, and/or leadership failure—is subjectively perceived, experimentally manipulated, or objectively experienced (with threat either varying over time, or across cultures). Thus, we find that the intolerance “returned” by authoritarianism (i.e., the difference in intolerance between authoritarians and libertarians) is magnified when respondents

- *perceive* that the public and political elites are ideologically distant, or that leaders on all sides have let them down (see Stenner, 2005, p. 57, from the *Durham Community Survey 1997*)
- are *experimentally* exposed to seemingly real news coverage about “leaders unworthy of our trust” or “fractured public opinion” where “no-one agrees on anything anymore” (see Table 1 and Figure 1, which are from the *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*).¹
- are being interviewed *at a time* (e.g., some week in U.S. history) of high variance in public opinion (see Stenner, 2005, p. 314, from the *General Social Survey 1972–2000*)
- are living *in a place* (e.g., some nation of the world) marked by high variance in public opinion (see Stenner, 2005, p. 314, from the *World Values Survey 1990–1995*)

In every case we find that normative threat dramatically increases the influence of authoritarianism on all intolerance of difference (racial, political and moral), with the impact of authoritarianism (i.e., the steepness of the slope) varying in accordance with the presence of normative threat or reassurance (see Table 1, column 2, and Figure 1).

This varying impact of latent authoritarianism on manifest intolerance—its supposed “failure” to consistently produce intolerant attitudes and behavior—is perfectly predictable and suggests neither “unreliability” of the predisposition nor “erratic” influence. That is to say, these shifting relationships cast doubt on neither the existence of authoritarianism as an enduring predisposition nor its importance as the principal determinant of general intolerance of difference across

¹These data were collected jointly with Stanley Feldman, who bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

Table 1. *Determinants of General Intolerance of Difference*

Explanatory Variables	Experimental Conditions Only	Emotion Only	Cognition Only	Emotion & Cognition	Full Model
Authoritarianism	-.21 (.11)	.27(.07)**	.25(.06)**	.30(.06)**	-.05 (.14)
<i>Experimental threat</i>					
Belief diversity	.04 (.06)				-.01 (.06)
Bad leadership	-.04 (.06)				-.03 (.06)
Unjust world	-.08 (.05)				-.08 (.05)
No afterlife	-.01 (.05)				-.01 (.05)
<i>Auth × Threat</i>					
Auth × Belief Diversity	.92 (.23)**				.66 (.29)**
Auth × Bad Leadership	.53 (.15)**				.43 (.17)**
Auth × Unjust World	.26 (.20)*				.16 (.19)
Auth × No Afterlife	.50 (.17)**				.40 (.19)**
<i>Emotion & Cognition</i>					
Negative Arousal		.06 (.07)		.06 (.06)	.01 (.06)
Auth × Negative Arousal		1.04 (.33)**		.82 (.24)**	.61 (.27)**
Characters/word of commentary			-.03 (.06)	-.04 (.06)	-.05 (.06)
Auth × Characters Per Word			-.24 (.10)**	-.20 (.10)**	-.02 (.11)
Political knowledge			-.22 (.06)**	-.19 (.06)**	-.19 (.06)**
<i>Auth × Political Knowledge</i>					
Constant	.59 (.04)**	.57 (.02)**	.56 (.02)**	.57 (.02)**	.60 (.03)**
R ²	.23	.16	.20	.24	.32

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares multiple regression coefficients (standard errors are in parentheses). Source: *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*, Whites only; $N = 103$. These data were collected jointly with Stanley Feldman, who bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. See Stenner (2005, pp. 48–51) for study description, and <http://www.karenstenner.com>, Appendix C, for stimulus materials (fictitious news magazine articles) and further details on variable construction and Table C.1 for univariate statistics. See also Stenner (2005, p. 293, Table 9.3, column 6, and p. 312, Figure 9.9) for similar experimental results from the *Multi-Investigator Study 1999*. A dash indicates that the variable was dropped for lack of effect.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$ (one-tailed tests applied as appropriate).

time and space. Rather, all is as it should be: a pre-disposition serving certain needs for the individual is called into service when needed.

It is worth noting, further, that in the course of investigating this “authoritarian dynamic” cross-nationally,

I have often observed another way in which the influence of authoritarianism varies, which also bears on the question posed here regarding the processes underwriting the translation of certain “orientations” into specific attitudes. When comparing the influence of

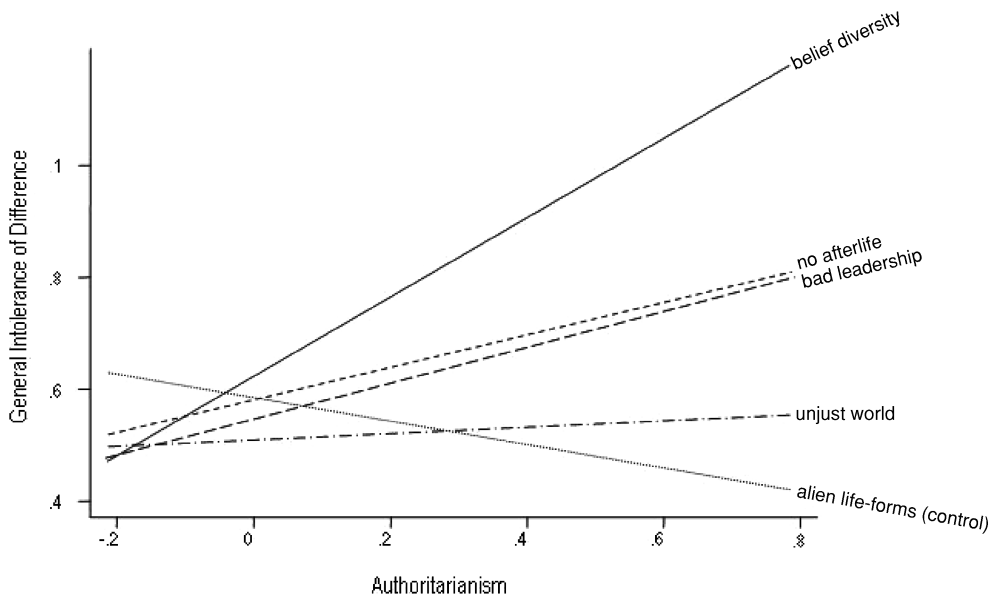


Figure 1. Effects of authoritarianism on general intolerance of difference given experimental manipulation of threat. Source: Table 1, column 2 from the *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*.

authoritarianism across cultures, and subcultures within a nation, it becomes evident that although authoritarianism remains the primary determinant of intolerance of difference worldwide, its influence is actually strongest in more tolerant societies, that is, authoritarianism exerts its strongest influence where intolerance receives the least societal support. Thus, the explanatory power of authoritarianism is predictably greater in Western than in Eastern Europe (Stenner, 2005, pp. 96, 107), in the Netherlands than in Portugal (Stenner, 2005, p. 96), in contemporary American society than in the 1970s (Stenner, 2005, pp. 190–191), in the non-South than the Southern states (Stenner, 2005, p. 197), among English- than Afrikaner-South Africans (Mynhardt, 1980), and more speculatively, in Berkeley, California, in the aftermath of the Holocaust (à la Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) than perhaps just about anywhere else on the planet. In short, psychological aberrations explain more of intolerance the more aberrant intolerance is for the society in question, and the influence of ab-norm-al psychology diminishes in environments where intolerance is more norm-al.

This is easily apprehended in Table 2, which lines up the regional correlation (according to my analy-

ses of the *WVS90-95*) between authoritarianism and general intolerance of difference, alongside the mean level of intolerance in each of those regions, with the two rank orders forming a near perfect match. The Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani and Christians in Nigeria may be vastly intolerant of one other, but their intolerance is not substantially fuelled by authoritarianism. And note that when I broke down the western European category still further, I found that the Netherlands—which others have been surprised to see troubled by a powerful “far right” movement of late—exhibits both the lowest average level of intolerance of difference (.40) and the strongest influence of authoritarianism on intolerance ($r = .51$) in the entire *WVS90-95*. As I have argued elsewhere (Stenner, 2005, pp. 135–137), all of this leaves us with a decidedly bleaker vision of the future, and a very different picture of whose problem this will be, than if intolerance were more a matter of the almost disinterested absorption of pervasive cultural norms. It is certainly hard to escape the grim conclusion that “authoritarianism is a problem of and for libertarian, more than authoritarian, cultures. And intolerance is not a thing of the past, it is very much a thing of the future” (Stenner, 2005, p. 137).

Table 2. *Influence of Authoritarianism Grows as Intolerance Becomes More Abnormal for Society*

Region	Influence of Authoritarianism on General Intolerance of Difference (r)	Average Societal Level of General Intolerance of Difference (0-1)
<i>North/West Europe</i> ^a		
France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland	.46	.48
<i>Australasia</i> ^b		
Australia, New Zealand	.40	.48
<i>Southern Europe</i> ^c		
Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece	.40	.54
<i>North America</i> ^d		
United States, Canada	.33	.54
<i>United Kingdom/Eire</i> ^e		
Britain, Northern Ireland, Ireland	.30	.56
<i>South America</i> ^f		
Mexico, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Chile, Peru, El Salvador, Venezuela, Uruguay, Dominican Republic, Colombia	.29	.60
<i>Eastern Europe</i> ^g		
Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic	.16	.60
<i>Asia</i> ^h		
Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India	.25	.65
<i>Africa</i> ⁱ		
Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa	.08	.69

Note. Cell entries are (column 2) Pearson’s r correlation coefficients (all significant at $p < .05$) between authoritarianism and general intolerance of difference, and (column 3) mean levels of general intolerance of difference (scored 0–1) in the combined *World Values Survey* samples in question. See <http://www.karenstenner.com>, Appendix E, for study description and variable construction and Table E.1 for univariate statistics. Source: *World Values Survey 1990–95*, all national samples ($N = 110,298$).

^a $N = 20,675$. ^b $N = 2,048$. ^c $N = 8,561$. ^d $N = 5,111$. ^e $N = 2,484$. ^f $N = 14,381$. ^g $N = 37,349$. ^h $N = 11,954$. ⁱ $N = 6,705$.

Status Quo Conservatism

Next, in regard to *status quo conservatism*, I have shown here and elsewhere (Stenner, 2005) that status quo conservatism yields varying “returns” of intolerance depending on the extent of intolerant content in the traditions one’s status quo conservatism compels one to preserve. Since the core of status quo conservatism is about seeking stability and avoiding change, status quo conservatism generates little intolerance in the context of tolerant cultural traditions. Thus, examined cross-nationally in 1990, status quo conservatism generated more racial intolerance in Western than in Eastern Europe—where communist regimes had spent decades suppressing ethnic identity and conflict—and within Western Europe, boosted racial intolerance to a far greater degree in traditionally exclusive West Germany than traditionally inclusive Denmark. And yet whereas status quo conservatism lent no support to racial intolerance among the Danes, their long tradition and exceptional levels of religious homogeneity ensured that status quo conservatism *was* substantially implicated in fuelling *moral* intolerance (Stenner, 2005, pp. 96, 107).

The varying, context-dependent relationship between status quo conservatism and intolerance is likewise evident cross-temporally, observing a single culture over time. Thus, examining U.S. survey data from the 1970s to the 1990s, I have shown that the influence of status quo conservatism on moral intolerance in the United States is considerable and barely wavers over time, consistent with the prevailing cultural context: an exceptionally and persistently religious society with deep Puritan roots. Yet in contrast, the impact of status quo conservatism on *racial* intolerance—while in the early 1970s predictably greater among those socialised in the notoriously racist traditions of the South than elsewhere—declined precipitously over the next few decades in every corner of the country, consistent with the seismic shift in racial norms in the wake of the passage of major civil rights legislation.

Overall then, it is evident that if the status quo is a stable regime of institutionalized and authoritative support for tolerance, then status quo conservatism yields very meagre returns of intolerance (if not outright promotion of tolerance). Quite simply, the intolerant “returns” to any individual propensity to cling to tradition depend on the traditions actually prevailing at that juncture, in that culture, that is, they vary across both time and space. Although I have shown that this time- and context-dependence holds for intolerant attitudes, it stands to reason that the same should hold true for other attitudinal domains as well, and the available evidence does tend to bear this out. The claim of varying influence of status quo conservatism *over time* is consistent with Sugar, Viney, and Rohe’s (1992) findings regarding the declining relationship in the United

States between conservatism and opinions on social security, as income support moved from fringe notion to entrenched and widely accepted social entitlement. Likewise, the claim of varying influence of status quo conservatism *across cultures* accords with Kossowska and van Hiel’s (2003) finding that the relationship between “need for closure” (associated with status quo conservatism) and laissez-faire conservatism is positive where free markets have traditionally prevailed (Flanders) but negative where government intervention has long been the norm (Poland). My own analyses of the *World Values Survey* indicate that in the early 1990s status quo conservatism had a modest positive association with laissez-faire conservatism in the United States but a negative association with free market values right across the former Soviet socialist republics.

Laissez-Faire Conservatism

We have seen that authoritarianism is essentially a functional stance that is activated and springs into service when needed, producing greater demand for oneness and sameness (i.e., greater racial, political and moral intolerance) in conditions where the things that make us one and the same—common authority and shared values—appear under threat. And status quo conservatism is basically a process preference with little fixed content, a rather indiscriminate aversion to change that can attach itself to and defend almost *any* system that seems likely to promote stability and certainty. But laissez-faire conservatism at least appears on its face to be the one “conservatism” that most resembles a true “ideology,” whose relationship with other variables should be least time- and context-dependent, and mostly just a matter of reasoning from general principles to specific attitudes with varying success, depending on individual expertise and the “assistance” of political elites. Thus, to the extent that one’s laissez-faire conservatism fails to consistently produce issue stances protective of limited government intervention, it should be due to only some cognitive inability to deduce the appropriate policy preferences from one’s general ideology, for example, as when inexpert “liberals” mistakenly support “aid to the Contras” because they know they generally favor government assistance though they know not who these Contras are (see Zaller, 1992).

Cognitive Processing

This brings us around to the second issue of whether different political orientations are inherently associated with more or less complex thinking. I must answer in the affirmative without supposing it has a great deal to do with “liberal” positions necessarily being more

multidimensional, being more integratively complex, or requiring more sophisticated processing. I have repeatedly found that authoritarianism is heavily, indeed primarily, determined by cognitive incapacity (along with lack of openness to experience). Any variable that even remotely reflects cognitive incapacity invariably proves a significant determinant of authoritarianism, whether that involves (lack of) verbal ability, years of education, possession of a college degree, political knowledge, or sophistication/complexity of writing (see Stenner, 2005, Figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 on pp. 159, 168, and 171). Note, in contrast, that *laissez-faire* conservatism is *positively* associated with these things to the extent that they reflect social class, which renders one more the benefactor than beneficiary of government programs, thereby diminishing support for intervention and redistribution.

Status quo conservatism seems to be largely about the rigidity associated with aging. Whereas age (the principal determinant of status quo conservatism) reduces one's ability to cope with change, uncertainty, and instability (i.e., difference over time, things not being closed or settled), cognitive incapacity (the principal determinant of authoritarianism) reduces one's ability to deal with complexity (i.e., difference across space, things not being simple). As I have noted, this is a subtle but very critical distinction politically, and in fact is probably roughly akin to that which perhaps ought to be drawn between the (unfortunately confounded) measures of "need for closure" (decisive-

ness) and "need for structure" (order; see also Neuberg, Judice, & West, 1997; Neuberg, West, Judice, & Thompson, 1997). I have always contended that authoritarians are simple-minded avoiders of complexity more than closed-minded avoiders of change. These complexity-avoiders are cognitively limited to begin with. And it is evident from the *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995* that their fears are aroused and their thinking deteriorates still further in the face of threats to oneness and sameness (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

This negative arousal and cognitive decline then magnify authoritarian demands for limits on racial diversity, political dissent and moral deviance (see Table 1, columns 3, 4, and 5). But it still seems to me that authoritarians are not endeavoring to avoid complex thinking so much as a complex world. It remains the case, reading across the rows to the final column of Table 1, that a substantial proportion of the impact of normative threat on intolerance is neither mediated nor moderated by the negative arousal and cognitive deterioration that it precipitates among authoritarians. Note, most important, that normative threat only invites this kind of fear, cognitive unravelling and outbursts of intolerance *among authoritarians*, whereas in fact these very same conditions (i.e., the public dissension and criticism of leaders that are the hallmarks of a healthy democracy) induce only greater tranquillity, sharper cognition, and more vigilant defence of tolerance *among libertarians*. This consistent divergence in the emotions, cognition, and attitudes of

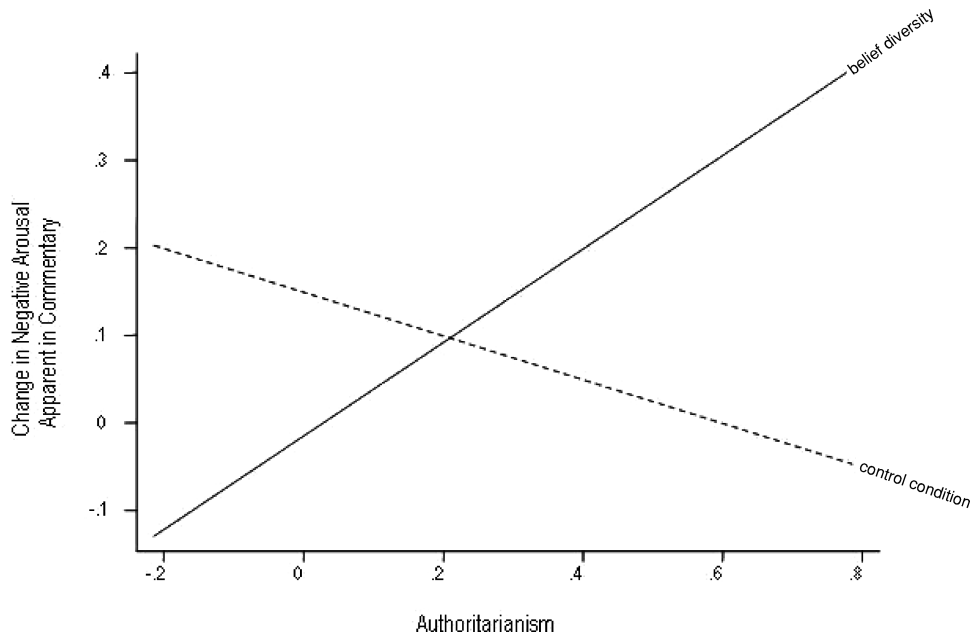


Figure 2. Effects of authoritarianism on change in negative arousal apparent in commentary moving from experimental reassurance to threat. Source: *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*; see Appendix C, Table C.6, column 2 at <http://www.karenstenner.com>.

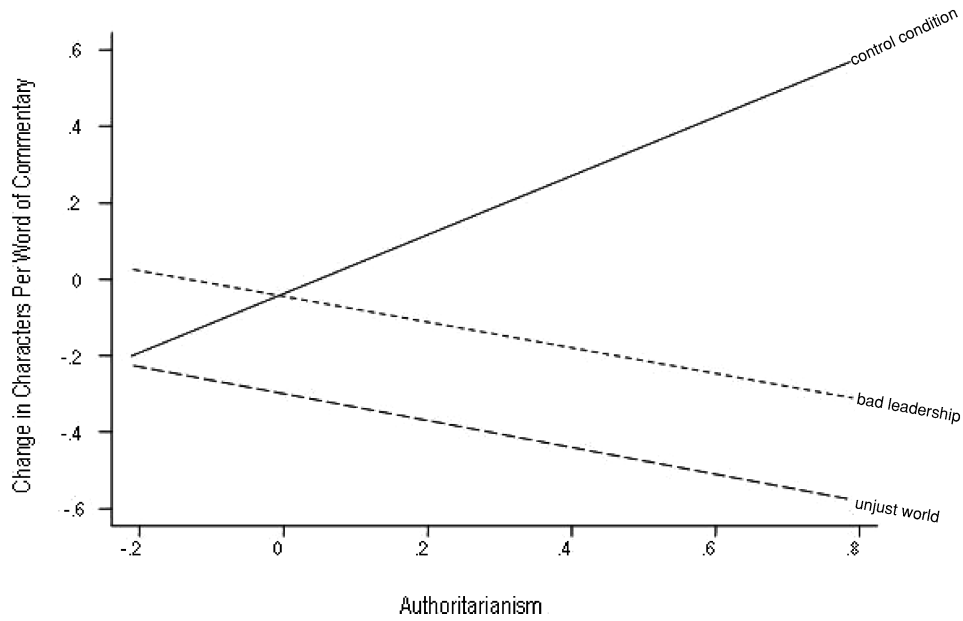


Figure 3. Effects of authoritarianism on change in characters per word of commentary moving from experimental reassurance to threat. Source: *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*; see Appendix C, Table C.6, column 3 at <http://www.karenstenner.com>.

authoritarians versus libertarians under conditions of normative threat is initially difficult to reconcile with the findings of convergence on “conservative” positions given time pressure (Hansson, Keating, & Terry, 1974) or distraction (Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, & Chamberlin, 2002) but remains a consistent finding in all my testing of the authoritarian dynamic

to date. Of course, these studies involve entirely different experimental manipulations, independent variables, and dependent variables. Altering any one of these three components might be sufficient to wholly reverse the results, and more focused investigations will be necessary to determine the true extent of any contradiction between the findings.

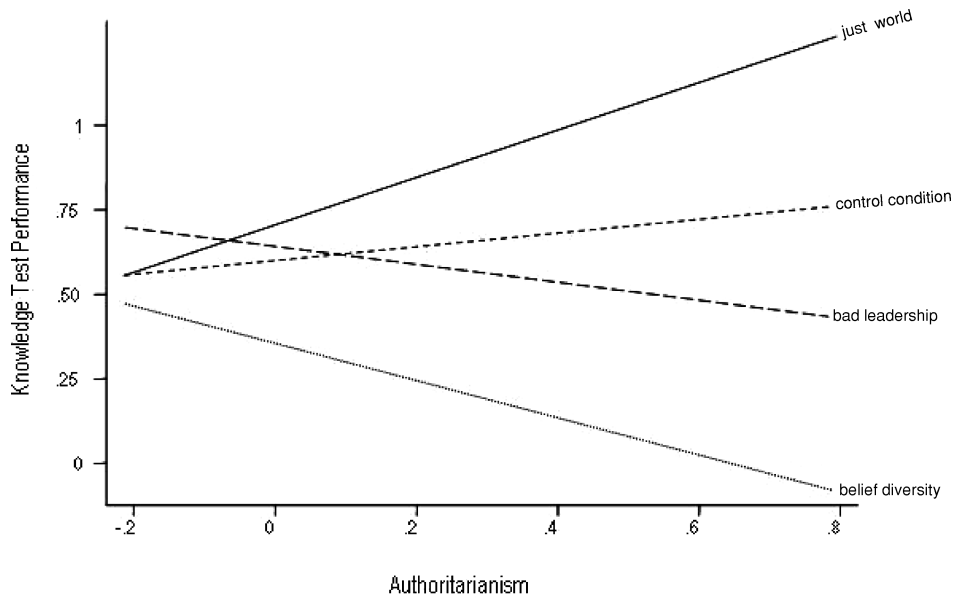


Figure 4. Effects of authoritarianism on knowledge test performance given experimental manipulation of threat/reassurance. Source: *Cultural Revolution Experiment 1995*; see Appendix C, Table C.7 at <http://www.karenstenner.com>.

Note

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