

The authoritarian syndrome as an attempt to restore control and its mediating role in anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Germany

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Abstract

For many people, the coronavirus pandemic meant an enormous and existential loss of control. At the same time, an increase in right-wing extremist attitudes like xenophobia could be observed in Germany. In this study, we hypothesize that the loss of control caused by the pandemic has contributed to the rise in xenophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany. We propose that this occurs through an attempt to restore control via elements of a revised authoritarian syndrome understood as both the classic authoritarian dynamic of aggression, submission and conventionalism on the one hand, and a general belief in conspiracy theories on the other. In a representative, probability-based study, $N = 2522$ participants were surveyed on locus of control, right-wing authoritarianism, conspiracy mentality, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. It was found that right-wing authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality mediated the relationship between external locus of control and xenophobia (partial mediation) and anti-Semitism (full mediation). Surprisingly, internal control beliefs had a direct effect on

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right-wing authoritarianism—an effect that also leads to increased resentment. We conclude that social crises make people particularly vulnerable to regaining control via conspiracy theories and authoritarianism, which harbors dangers such as right-wing extremism as a consequence. Limitations are discussed.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, conspiracy mentality, locus of control, anti-semitism, xenophobia, structural equation modelling

Public significance statement

This study examines how a perceived loss of control during the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to rising xenophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany. Findings suggest that individuals may attempt to regain control through authoritarian attitudes and a general belief in conspiracy theories, reinforcing prejudice. We conclude that social crises make people particularly vulnerable to these dynamics, which harbors dangers such as right-wing extremism as a consequence.

INTRODUCTION

Societies worldwide are confronted with multiple, overlapping crises—a phenomenon increasingly referred to as a polycrisis (Tooze, 2022). Among these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic not only triggered a public health emergency but also precipitated a profound collective loss of control. In Germany, for example, the temporary expansion of executive powers to combat the crisis was accompanied by significant restrictions on individual freedoms, leaving citizens feeling powerless in the face of an invisible, potentially lethal threat. One's own dependence on the state, science, and on chance as well as the anomie that accompanies it, became very salient during the pandemic. This loss of control is not merely situational; it strikes at a fundamental human need (Brehm, 1966). Extensive research has demonstrated that a sense of control is vital for well-being, whereas its absence is associated with increased anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions (Fritzsche et al., 2008). When an entire society experiences a diminished internal belief in personal control, the political consequences can be profound. Theories linking a deprived need for control with political radicalization suggest that feelings of powerlessness may foster right-wing extremist attitudes, including xenophobia and anti-Semitism (Decker, Kiess et al., 2022; Zick & Mokros, 2023).

Empirical studies provide further support for this idea. For instance, research indicates that individuals with an external locus of control—those who believe that outcomes are determined by external forces—are more likely to endorse xenophobic and anti-Semitic views (Holtmann &

Görl, 2007; see also Duckitt, 1984, for similar results regarding racist attitudes). This phenomenon is observable in various groups, such as voters of the right-wing extremist German party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD; Mays et al., 2020) and right-wing extremist adolescents (Sturzbecher et al., 2001).

Building on these findings, we propose that this devaluation of outgroups—a central element of German right-wing extremist ideology (Kreis, 2007)—can be understood partly as a dysfunctional attempt to restore a lost sense of control via an authoritarian detour. We thereby refer to a recent conceptualization of authoritarianism, called the authoritarian syndrome, which was developed by a group of German researchers (Decker et al., 2020). The authoritarian syndrome is understood as the dynamic of authoritarian aggression, submission and conventionalism (nowadays mainly referred to as Right-Wing Authoritarianism; RWA; see Altemeyer, 1981) on the one hand, complemented by a general belief in conspiracy theories on the other.¹ Most importantly, we hypothesize that the attempt to re-establish control through the authoritarian syndrome is dysfunctional: although these mechanisms may temporarily alleviate feelings of powerlessness, they simultaneously contribute to the marginalization of outgroups, thereby posing a threat to democracy.

In this paper, we investigate these interrelationships in greater detail using structural equation modeling. We hypothesize that internal and external control beliefs are positively related to two outgroup derogatory attitudes that hold particular significance in right-wing extremist ideology: that is xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Furthermore, we assume that these effects are mediated by the aforementioned elements of the authoritarian syndrome.

Loss of control and control restitution

Rotter's (1955, 1966, 1975) concept of the locus of control suggests that individuals attribute outcomes either to their own actions (internal control) or to external forces (external control)—which are not traceable to one's own behavior—such as luck, fate or other external influences. Empirical findings from the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate that social crises can shift these control beliefs: during the pandemic, individuals' external control scores increased while internal control scores decreased, a change that was associated with heightened psychological distress, lower mental well-being and an increased perception of threat (e.g., Krampe et al., 2021; Tagini et al., 2021; Würtzen et al., 2021).

Compensatory control theory (Kay et al., 2008, 2009; Landau et al., 2015) states that such a perceived loss of control motivates individuals to seek alternative sources of control—ranging from increased reliance on religious or governmental structures or by identifying patterns in noise, for example, by holding on to superstitions and conspiracy theories.

Rothbaum et al. (1982) introduced a two-process model of control in which people seek control not only through direct manipulation of the environment (*primary control*) but also, if this is not possible—in particular, when there is perceived uncontrollability—by adapting the self to the environment (*secondary control*). According to the authors, secondary control can be perceived as safer, more continuous and associated with fewer disappointments and can also be preferred for these reasons. In most cases, however, forms of primary and secondary control are intertwined.

¹ Superstition, that is, the belief in supernatural, magical powers, is also included as part of the dimension projectivity by Decker et al. (2020). However, in this paper, we focus on sadomasochist authoritarianism/RWA and conspiracy mentality and their relevance as potential mediators between Locus of Control and xenophobia and anti-Semitism respectively.

Secondary control is regarded by the authors as being close to the concept of external Locus of Control and can be expressed in four different forms: (a) predictive control, a limitation of one's own expectations by attributing an event to one's own limited abilities and passivity, (b) illusory control via magical thinking such as belief in luck or fate and the active attempt to bring luck to one's side, (c) vicarious control through identification with powerful leaders, and (d) interpretive control by attributing a deeper meaning to uncontrollable events. However, Rothbaum et al.'s thesis in their influential paper is not uncontroversial (Skinner, 1996). The model of group based control restoration (Fritzsche et al., 2011; Stollberg et al., 2017), points out that processes of control restoration through group identification are anchored in the self and can therefore not be clearly labeled as secondary, arguing for extended primary control mechanisms.

However, our focus is not on the debate whether the control restoration is secondary or extended primary. We propose that elements of the revised authoritarian syndrome (Decker et al., 2020) may represent an attempt at restoring a diminished sense of control. This can manifest in two ways: through identification with powerful leaders, as inherent in the "classic" understanding of authoritarianism as already described by the seminal works of Erich Fromm (1987 [1936]) and in the form of magical thinking and the tendency to attribute deeper meaning and agency to uncontrollable events—which is particularly present in a general belief in conspiracies.

The revised authoritarian syndrome

Right-wing extremist attitudes like xenophobia and anti-Semitism (as defined by Heller et al., 2020; Kreis, 2007) are multifaceted and deeply rooted social phenomena, extensively investigated across diverse theoretical traditions and disciplines at various levels (Eicker, 2021). Initial attempts on theorizing authoritarianism go back almost a century (e.g., Fromm, 1987; Stagner, 1936). Ever since the *Authoritarian Personality* of the so-called Berkeley group surrounding Adorno et al. (1950), authoritarianism has been considered one of the most influential predictors of right-wing extremist attitudes.² Seeking to explain the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in Europe, the authors proposed an individual susceptibility to prejudice and fascist tendencies, rooted in early childhood family dynamics and hindering the development of a stable moral value system within the personality. This *ego weakness*, they argued, fosters identification with and submission to authority while redirecting repressed aggression toward out-groups in the form of discrimination and prejudice. The Berkeley group developed their California F-Scale, an influential but highly criticized (Christie, 1991; for an overview, see Funke, 2002 and Iser, 2006) measure that originally captured authoritarianism in nine psychoanalytically based facets. In keeping with the empiricist trend, Altemeyer (1981) discarded the developmental-psychodynamic and social-theoretical model and instead adopted a pragmatic approach. He focused on the facets with the highest discriminatory power and reduced the scale to three subfacets: conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission. His right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale has been shown in previous research to be an important and reliable predictor of anti-democratic and far-right—in particular anti-Semitism and Xenophobia—and sexist attitudes, as well as support for military violence and war (for an overview, see Duckitt, 2022; for Germany, see also Decker, Kiess et al., 2022).

² Other explanatory approaches include the modernization loser thesis (Spier, 2010), the impact of various facets of deprivation (Rippl & Baier, 2005), and the cultural backlash thesis (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

While Altemeyer's three-dimensional scale is still a suitable and widely used operationalization of what Fromm (1987, [1936]) understood as a "sodomasochist"³ psychodynamic, his rather pragmatic conceptualization of authoritarianism may, however, overlook aspects crucial for understanding contemporary authoritarianism (e.g., Aho, 2020; Funke, 2002). This is highlighted by the variety of theoretical approaches that exist today. Examples of recognized theories include the authoritarian reaction (Oesterreich, 1996), which emphasizes authoritarianism as a reaction to perceived threats; Feldman's (2003) exploration of authoritarianism in the context of social conformity and the Dual-Process Motivational Model (DPM; Duckitt, 2001, 2006), which situates authoritarianism within a broader framework of social and ideological attitudes.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying protests that were particularly prominent in Germany and Austria, have reignited the academic debate in Germany about the dimensionality of authoritarianism. These protests revealed a mix of conspiracy beliefs, well-known authoritarian attitudes, and even openness to overt neo-Nazism—an overlap of phenomena already considered by the Berkeley group.

Conspiracy theories usually propose intentional malevolent forces operating in the background as an explanation for an event, and, although legally protected by freedom of expression, are regarded as a threat to democracy: they are associated with political extremism (van Prooijen et al., 2015)—especially with right-wing extremist attitudes and group-based enmity (Dilling et al., 2023; Imhoff & Decker, 2013; Rees & Lamberty, 2019). Individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory usually believe in multiple conspiracy theories, even if they contradict each other (Goertzel, 1994; Wood et al., 2012). Imhoff and Bruder (2014) therefore postulate a general conspiracy mentality (Moscovici, 1987) that should be distinguished from specific conspiracy theories due to its greater stability and less ideological coloration. Although the relationship between authoritarianism and conspiracy beliefs is ambiguous (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Baier & Manzoni, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015), most studies indicate a positive correlation (Dilling et al., 2023; Đorđević et al., 2021; Decker et al., 2020; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009; Richey, 2017).

The overlap between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism is not confined to the German context; it can also be observed in phenomena such as post-factual politics and Trumpism, highlighting the need to adjust the RWA concept to contemporary times. Drawing on classic studies of authoritarianism, some scholars argue for renewed theoretical focus on conspiracy beliefs, related phenomena, and the broader social context (see Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2024; Heidemeyer et al., *in preparation*; Henkelmann et al., 2020; Jäger, 2022; King, 2021). This scientific reorientation and reconceptualization are reflected in the concept of the authoritarian syndrome (Decker et al., 2020), which we highlight in this study. Decker et al. (2020) suggest that the general belief in conspiracy theories or in the omnipresent existence of sinister and evil machinations should be (re-)integrated into this concept of contemporary authoritarianism. They present a two-factor model, with the 'authoritarian syndrome' as higher order factor encompassing both the classic "sodomasochistic" authoritarianism (aggression, submission and conventionalism) and conspiracist alongside superstitious beliefs as lower order factors, thus proposing two distinct yet authoritarian social dynamics. With reference to the Berkeley group, they call this second dimension "projectivity", which, psychoanalytically speaking, represents a denial of reality. It is based

³ Within the Studies on Authority and the Family, Erich Fromm (1987 [1936]) used the term sodomasochism to describe both the "masochist" aspect of the renouncing and voluntary authoritarian submission on one hand and the "sadist" aspect which is expressed in the authoritarian aggression against the weak on the other. Oesterreich later pointed out that the term "sodomasochism" evokes a clinical association for everyday, non-pathological processes—a problem that Fromm himself later addressed by replacing the term "sodomasochism" with authoritarianism (cf. Oesterreich 1996, p. 37).

on the defense mechanism of splitting into “good” and “bad” parts, followed by the identification with the “good” parts of one’s own self or group and the externalization of the “bad” parts onto “others”. In the debate on the dimensionality of authoritarianism, we follow the analysis of Decker et al. (2020) and understand conspiracy beliefs in the following as a sub-dimension of the authoritarian syndrome.⁴

The authoritarian syndrome as an attempt to restore control

We argue that the revised authoritarian syndrome may represent an *attempt* to restore control, especially in the case of feeling dependent on external forces or losing control. In *Studies on Authority and Family* (Horkheimer, 1987 [1936]), Fromm already spoke of the reassuring function and “prosthetic” security (p. 124) of authoritarianism, through which the world would lose its chaotic character for the individual. Rothbaum et al. (1982) state that “by aligning themselves with more powerful others, individuals can share in their victories and in their accomplishments—in short, in their control.” (p. 20) and compare their concept of vicarious control to Fromm’s (1941) process of deindividuation, in which the individual flees from their own individual freedom due to an “unbearable state of his powerlessness and loneliness” (p. 139) in order to gain power through identification with authorities. According to Fromm, however, this mechanism is only a temporary relief (p. 238), which cannot establish permanent control, but leads to a vicious circle of dependency, insecurity and powerlessness. The previously mentioned approaches by Oesterreich (1996), Feldman (2003), and Duckitt (2001, 2006) also support this idea as they all link authoritarianism to uncertainty, threat, and the desire for stability and security, all of which are ultimately related to control in some way.

As for the empirical relationship between LoC and RWA, the literature is sparse and inconclusive. Some older studies primarily show no relationship between the constructs (Baron, 1968; McCollaum & Lester, 1995; Nicol, 2007), while others indicate positive relationships with internal, rather than external, locus of control (Diakonova & Gilgen, 1998), particularly in relation to the dimension of conventionalism (Chertkova et al., 2017). However, the idea that authoritarianism in particular could also be used as a control restitution mechanism in uncertain times of crisis is supported by a large body of literature that shows that RWA reacts strongly to and interacts with societal threats (e.g., Duckitt, 2022; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Haase et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2019 provides an overview). In line with these findings, increasing RWA scores were observed during the pandemic (e.g., Golec de Zavala et al., 2021). Hartman et al. (2021) even showed that as fear of the pandemic increased, RWA had a stronger effect on the expression of nationalistic or anti-immigrant attitudes. In Germany in particular, it has been observed that the pandemic has led to a social division into the two camps of the unvaccinated and the vaccinated, with Decker, Kalkstein et al. (2022) identifying authoritarian dynamics in both. While many unvaccinated individuals sought to restore their sense of control via projection in the form of conspiracy beliefs, a small portion of the vaccinated—most of whom were moderate, non-authoritarian—also attempted to do so through a sadomasochistic reaction (Decker, Kalkstein et al., 2022, p. 120), characterized by identification with state-imposed COVID-19 regulations and exhibiting hostility towards rule violators.

⁴ However, we do acknowledge that the study of conspiracy beliefs itself is a broad and independent field of research that recognizes the phenomenon not as a form of authoritarian attitudes, but as a phenomenon *sui generis*.

In terms of conspiracy mentality, the idea that belief in almighty conspirators can be an attempt to deal with an external locus of control or loss of control might appear contradictory at first glance. However, it can be explained well by their underlying existential, epistemic and social motivations (Douglas et al., 2019): Conspiracy theories give order to the world, because they divide the world into good and evil and place external control in the hands of powerful others. Thus, “the world loses its chaotic character” (Fromm, 1987 [1936], p. 124). Especially during crises and uncertain situations—for instance, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—perceived loss of control not only heightens risk perception but also foster greater belief in pandemic-related and general conspiracy beliefs (Šrol et al., 2021; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Conspiracy beliefs may restore control at least on an intrapsychic level (Lamberty, 2017), as they provide the feeling of “having uncovered the conspiracy” and the belief that historical processes can be controlled and planned (Celik et al., 2023). Instead of feeling powerless against the “system” as a whole, they offer a kind of abbreviated critique of capitalism while also enhancing the status of one’s own group. In this regard, a substantial body of research suggests that a diminished sense of control is strongly linked to a propensity for conspiracy beliefs (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), a finding that is complemented by evidence linking political (Bruder et al., 2013; Kofta et al., 2020) and economic deprivation as well as insecure employment (Imhoff & Decker, 2013) with conspiracy mentality. On the other hand, reinforcing individuals’ sense of control may help to reduce these tendencies (Mao et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015).

However, it remains unclear whether the desired control restitution, should it be sought, actually occurs. While Van Prooijen (2020) contends that conspiracy theories exacerbate feelings of existential threat, leading to an even stronger belief in further conspiracies and a general conspiracy mentality, Stojanov et al. (2020) critique conspiracy theories as ineffective for control restoration. They argue that such theories are not socially accepted, offer too much control, and compete with more credible explanations. In later work (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020; Stojanov et al., 2021, 2023), they find evidence that this effect is domain-specific and only occurs if other, less stigmatized sources of control are unavailable. Jolley and Douglas (2014a, 2014b) further show that rather than restoring control, conspiracy theories can actually increase political powerlessness—questioning direction of causality. Regardless of their success, however, the literature to date suggests that conspiracy beliefs can be a *problematic attempt* to cope with lack of control, indicating both phenomena are positively associated.

The theoretical model and present study

Based on the literature, we argue that external control beliefs activate a need for control restitution, the satisfaction of which can be approached in a functional as well as dysfunctional ways. This paper focuses on a dysfunctional and problematic process: Coping with lack of control through authoritarian compensation. Previous research suggests that there is also a direct link between external locus of control beliefs and anti-Semitism and xenophobia, however, we explicitly hypothesize that this effect is at least partially mediated by authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality.

The following hypotheses can be summarized:

Hypothesis 1a/b. External LoC directly predicts conspiracy mentality/RWA.

Hypothesis 2a/b. External LoC directly predicts anti-Semitism/xenophobia.

Hypothesis 3a/b. Conspiracy mentality predicts anti-Semitism/xenophobia.

Hypothesis 4a/b. RWA predicts anti-Semitism/xenophobia.

Hypothesis 5a/b. External LoC is hypothesized to have an indirect effect on Xenophobia / anti-Semitism through the mediator conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 6a/b. External LoC is hypothesized to have an indirect effect on Xenophobia / anti-Semitism through the mediator RWA.

As previously mentioned, the evidence on the relationship between authoritarianism and internal control beliefs in particular is unclear. Since we build on the argument that authoritarianism and right-wing extremism increase as a result of an experienced loss of control and that internal control beliefs do not represent a loss of control, we would not expect a positive correlation at this point. However, since there are ambivalent research results (Chertkova et al., 2017; Diakonova & Gilgen, 1998), we nevertheless test the path exploratively.

METHOD

STATA 16.1 as well as IBM Statistics SPSS 29.2.0 (20) were used for the subsequent analyses.

Sample

The probability-based dataset of the German population used in this paper was collected as part of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies (Decker, Kiess et al., 2022). These studies have been conducted in Germany since 2002 and aim to survey authoritarian and far-right attitudes. The dataset, collected between March and May 2022, was gathered while the country was still under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents of the New Federal States (*Neue Bundesländer*) were overrepresented. The minimum age of participation was 16. The dataset was collected using the paper-pencil method in face-to-face interviews by the independent polling firm USUMA. To ensure randomness, Germany was divided into 258 sample points, and households were randomly selected via random route method. The target respondents within these households were selected using the Kish selection grid, a method for randomly selecting respondents from households with more than one person. In order to reduce the social desirability bias for items that are subject to such an effect in Germany (such as classic anti-Semitism in particular), respondents completed their questionnaire independently and were able to hand it over to the interviewers sealed in an envelope if they wished. Informed consent was obtained by all participants, at least one parent and/or legal guardian was informed as well in case of minors. The response rate was 47.3%. The samples include persons with an immigrant background and persons without German citizenship. The sample consists of 2,522 individuals, with a nearly equal distribution of females (50.12%) and males (49.72%), and a small percentage identifying as other (.16%). The age range of participants spans from 16 to over 75 years, with an average age of 49.25 years ($SD = 17.65$). In terms of education, 24.66% of participants have a university entrance qualification or higher. Regarding income, the average equivalent household income is €2,087.23 ($SD = €989.25$), with 43.93% of households earning between €1,000 and €2,000 per month. Unemployment in the sample is

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Demographic variable	<i>N</i>	%
Sex		
Female	1264	50.12
Male	1254	49.72
Other	4	.16
Age		
16–24 years	209	8.29
25–34 years	408	16.18
35–44 years	451	17.88
45–54 years	417	16.53
55–64 years	489	19.39
65–74 years	341	13.52
≥75 years	207	8.21
Employment status		
Unemployed	100	3.97
Education		
University entrance qualification or higher educational attainment	622	24.66
Missing	10	.40
Income		
≤1000 EURO	188	7.45
> 1000–2000 EURO	1108	43.93
> 2000–3000 EURO	757	30.02
> 3000 EURO	435	17.25
Missing	34	1.35

Note: *N* = 2522. Missing values are indicated for some variables.

relatively low at 3.97%. The sample is representative of the population in terms of key demographic variables. Table 1 above provides a more detailed overview of the demographic characteristics.

Instruments

A full overview of the following instruments, their wording and scaling, can be found in Appendix A.

Locus of control

We use the IE-4, a two-dimensional conceptualization of Kovaleva et al. (2012, 2014), which measures control beliefs using four items on a five-point-Likert scale, two of which capture internal control (“I am my own boss.”, “If I work hard, I will succeed.”) and two that capture external control (“Whether at work or in my personal life: What I do is mainly determined by others.”, “Fate often gets in the way of my plans.”).

Right-wing authoritarianism

We use the KSA-3 (Beierlein et al., 2014), a nine-item German modern version of the RWA Scale. Three items each are assigned to the dimensions: authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submissiveness, and conventionalism. The scale was developed to address problems of traditional RWA scales due to a) their time and context boundedness and b) the non-distinctness of their sub-scales. Example items include “Traditions should absolutely be cultivated and maintained.” and “We need strong leaders in order to live safely in society”. The scale has a five-point Likert format.

Conspiracy mentality

We captured conspiracy mentality (CM) using a three-item short form of the Conspiracy Mentality Scale (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) on a seven-point Likert scale. Items are “Most people do not recognize to what extent our life is determined by conspiracies that are concocted in secret.” and “Politicians and other leaders are nothing but the string puppets of powers operating in the background”.

Anti-Semitism and xenophobia

We used the Questionnaire on Right-Wing Extremist Attitudes—Leipzig Form (FR-LF) (Decker et al., 2013; Heller et al., 2020), which captures right-wing extremism on six dimensions on a five-point Likert Scale. Xenophobia and anti-Semitism represent two dimensions of this scale, each measured with three items. Example items are “The foreigners only come here to exploit our welfare state” for xenophobia and “Even today the influence of the Jews is too great” for anti-Semitism.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis

Descriptive statistics for every item can be found in Appendix-Table A. Skewness lies between -0.91 (internal LoC) and 1.03 (anti-Semitism), while kurtosis ranges from -0.85 (Xenophobia) and 0.89 (internal LoC).

Reliability and correlation analysis

The reliability of the scales used was tested using both Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω . The indices can be seen in Table 1. Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω range from $.84$ (anti-Semitism) to $.93$ (Conspiracy Mentality). These indices indicate a good to very good internal consistency of the scales used.

A full correlation matrix for all items can be found in Appendix-Table B. Additionally, a correlation matrix of mean indices for measures used can be found in Table 2. The mean index of

TABLE 2 Mean values, standard deviations, internal consistencies, and intercorrelations of the measures.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Loc-E</i>	<i>Loc-I</i>	<i>Xeno</i>	<i>AS</i>	<i>AGR</i>	<i>SUB</i>	<i>CONV</i>	<i>CM</i>	<i>RWA</i>
<i>Loc-E</i>	2.33	.87	/								
<i>Loc-I</i>	4.12	.77	-.40**	/							
<i>Xeno</i>	1.77	.73	.15**	-.03	(.87; .88)						
<i>AS</i>	1.32	.52	.18**	-.08**	.58**	(.84; .84)					
<i>AGR</i>	3.07	1.07	.03	.06	.45**	.33**	(.87; .87)				
<i>SUB</i>	2.60	1.01	.15**	-.01	.49**	.47**	.55**	(.88; .89)			
<i>CONV</i>	3.10	.97	.06**	.07*	.39**	.35**	.48**	.53**	(.87; .87)		
<i>CM</i>	2.92	1.73	.23**	-.12**	.35**	.44**	.14**	.28**	.24**	(.93; .94)	
<i>RWA</i>	2.93	.84	.09**	.05	.54**	.47**	.83**	.84**	.80**	.27**	(.89; .89)

Note: *N* = 2380; due to the listwise deletion, the number of cases differs here from the total data set. The number of cases here corresponds to that used later in the SEM. Because the missing values for each indicator do not exceed 5%, we assume that exclusion did not bias our results (Schafer & Graham, 2002).

* = *p* < .05; ** = *p* < .01 (two-tailed); Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels. *Loc-E*, external locus of control; *Loc-I*, internal locus of control; *Xeno*, xenophobia; *AS*, anti-Semitism; *AGR*, authoritarian aggression; *SUB*, authoritarian submission; *CONV*, conventionalism; *CM*, conspiracy mentality; *RWA*, mean index of the indicator items of *SUB*, *AGR*, *CONV*; Cronbach's alpha (first) and McDonald's omega (second) are presented in parentheses. McDonald's omega and Cronbach's alpha require at least three variables for estimation, so not applicable for locus of control (see Appendix-Table B for pairwise correlation).

internal locus of control is not significantly correlated with the mean index of xenophobia. The sub-dimension of conventionalism and internal locus of control are positively correlated. All other correlation coefficients are statistically significant at $p < .001$ and their direction is in line with the theory.

SEM analysis

Since the relationship and mediation of effects of multidimensional constructs are to be investigated, the procedure of structural equation modeling (SEM) with mediator effects (Hayes, 2018) is used. For this purpose, the assumed dimensionality of the constructs is first examined confirmatory with a measurement model. Based on the theoretical considerations, the measured indicator items are then assigned to different factors and transferred into a structural model. Since the indirect effect of the mediator effect is the product of two regression coefficients, the assumption of normal distribution of these effects in the population may be violated (Hayes, 2018). Additionally, the Doornik-Hansen omnibus test rejects the null hypothesis of multivariate normality ($\chi^2(44) = 201.21; p < .000$). To test our indirect effects we therefore make use of a bootstrap with 2000 replications. The results of the SEM are presented in Figure 1 and Table 3.

In the model depicted in Figure 1, we permitted two additional correlations among the residuals. Firstly, there is a correlation ($r_{\epsilon_{13}, \epsilon_{21}} = .39$) between the residuals of xenophobia and anti-Semitism latent constructs ($MI = 20.27$), reflecting their position as interconnected facets within a broader syndrome of right-wing extremist attitudes or group-focused enmity (e.g., Heller et al., 2020). Additionally, we allowed for a residual correlation between internal and external locus of control constructs, correlating $r_{\text{internal, external}} = -.53$ ($MI = 211.64$), reflecting their theoretically contrasting positions as suggested in the literature.

All factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$. The likelihood-ratio- χ^2 -test compares our model with a saturated model ($df = 0$), which always perfectly fits the data. Our model significantly differs from a saturated model by $\chi^2(263) = 1749.99$ with $p < .001$. Given the test's sensitivity to sample size (Bollen, 1989), global fit indices provide a more accurate evaluation. The CFI for the measurement model is .96, and the TLI is .95, indicating a good model fit. The RMSEA is .049 [$CI = .047; .051$; $pclose = .83$], also suggesting an adequate fit. Finally, the SRMR of .053 indicates a good model fit. Overall, these results suggest a good model fit (see Appendix-Table C for comparison with a model without permitted residual correlations).

Direct effects

Based on the structural equation model (Table 3), hypotheses $H1_{a/b}$ can be accepted, as we observe a positive direct effect of external control beliefs on conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .32$) and RWA ($\beta = .27$). In contrast, the exploratively tested direct paths between internal control beliefs and conspiracy mentality, anti-Semitism and Xenophobia are not significant. Surprisingly, internal locus of control has a medium-strength positive direct effect on RWA, which is significant at $p = .18$. The direct effect of external locus of control on anti-Semitism is not significant ($p = .051$), therefore hypothesis $H2_a$ must be rejected. Hypothesis $H2_b$ can be accepted: external locus of control directly predicts Xenophobia ($\beta = .07$). However, this is due to full mediation (in terms of anti-Semitism), and partial mediation (in terms of Xenophobia) by RWA and Conspiracy Mentality. Unsurprisingly, the direct effects of conspiracy mentality and RWA on xenophobia and

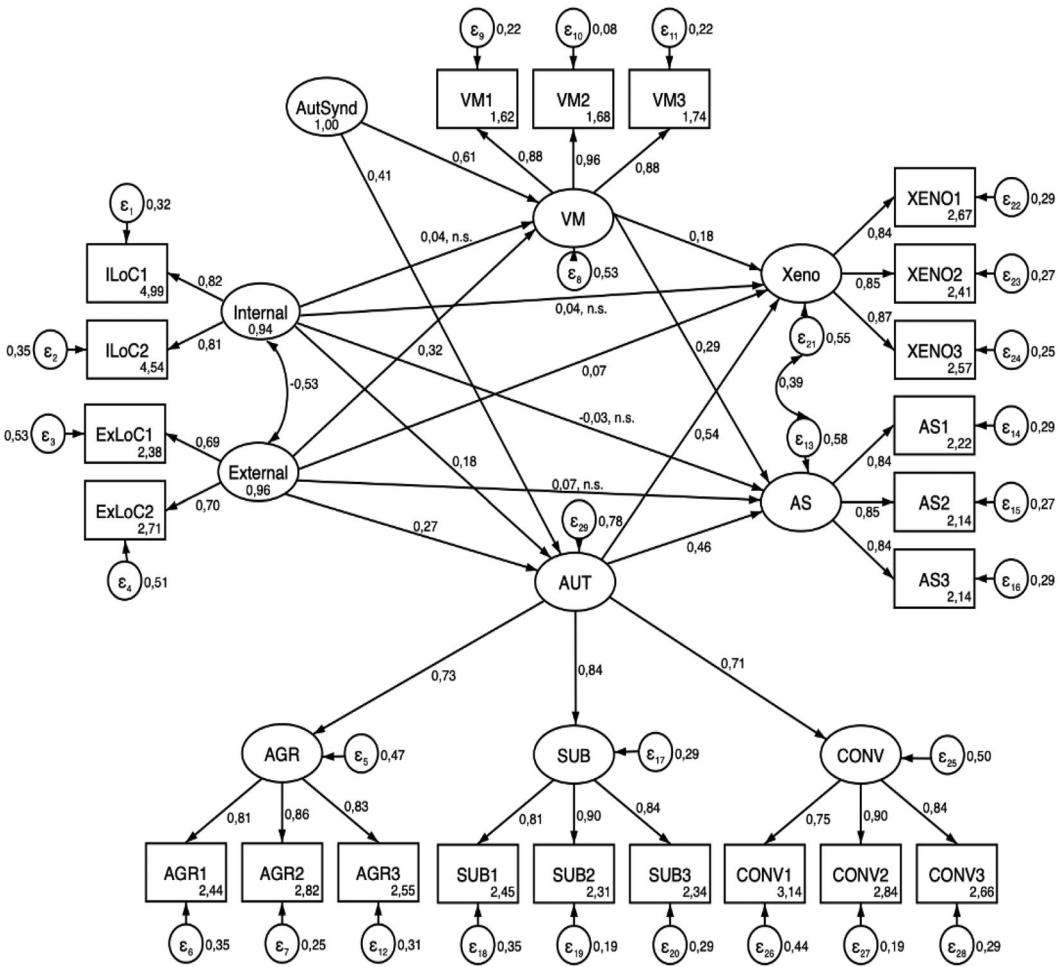


FIGURE 1 Path diagram of the SEM analysis.

Note: $N = 2380$. Standardized factor loadings. AGR, authoritarian aggression; SUB, authoritarian submission; CONV, conventionalism; AUT, authoritarianism/RWA; Xeno, xenophobia; AS, anti-Semitism; VM, conspiracy mentality; Internal, internal locus of control; External, external locus of control.

anti-Semitism are positive and significant, with standardized coefficients ranging from $\beta = .18$ to $\beta = .55$ —Hypotheses H3_{a/b} and H4_{a/b} can be accepted. In comparison, the effect of RWA is significantly stronger ($\beta = .46$; $\beta = .55$), but the effect of conspiracy mentality on anti-Semitism ($\beta = .29$) and on xenophobia ($\beta = .18$) is nevertheless not negligible.

Indirect effects

Given that the exploratively tested direct effect of internal locus of control on RWA was significant, an indirect effect was also tested. Indeed, our model reveals two significant indirect effects of internal locus of control on RWA, with an effect of $\beta = .10$ on xenophobia and $\beta = .08$ on anti-Semitism. We will discuss these surprising effects in the discussion.

TABLE 3 Direct, indirect and total effects of our SEM.

→ Dependent variable			
Independent variable	ML-estimator (standardized coefficients)	SE	z
Direct effects			
→ Conspiracy mentality			
Internal LoC	.04	.08	1.25
External LoC	.32**	.10	7.37
→ RWA			
Internal LoC	.18**	.04	4.08
External LoC	.27**	.05	5.07
→ anti-Semitism			
Internal LoC	−.03	.04	−1.11
External LoC	.07	.04	1.96
Conspiracy mentality	.29**	.01	11.97
RWA	.46**	.03	15.86
→ Xenophobia			
Internal LoC	.04	.05	1.21
External LoC	.07*	.05	2.13
Conspiracy mentality	.18**	.02	7.43
RWA	.55**	.04	19.67
Indirect effects (bootstrap = 2000)			
I-LoC → CM → Xenophobia	.01, 95 % CI [−.01, .02]	.01	1.25
I-LoC → CM → anti-Semitism	.01, 95 % CI [−.01, .03]	.01	1.25
I-LoC → RWA → xenophobia	.10**, 95 % CI [.05, .15]	.02	4.13
I-LoC → RWA → anti-Semitism	.08**, 95 % CI [.04, .12]	.02	4.05
E-LoC → CM → xenophobia	.06**, 95 % CI [.04, .08]	.01	5.84
E-LoC → CM → anti-Semitism	.09**, 95 % CI [.07, .12]	.01	7.08
E-LoC → RWA → xenophobia	.15**, 95 % CI [.09, .20]	.03	5.36
E-LoC → RWA → anti-Semitism	.12**, 95 % CI [.08, .17]	.02	5.19
Total effects			
→ Xenophobia			
Internal LoC	.14**	.06	3.71
External LoC	.28**	.07	6.23
→ Anti-Semitism			
Internal LoC	.06	.05	1.47
External LoC	.28**	.06	6.27

Note: $N = 2380$. In the model, we controlled for gender (1 = woman), age, university entrance qualification and the equivalent household income. For reasons of clarity and better readability, we do not show the corresponding paths in the model. Modification indices (MI) < 16. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The mediation effects ($H5_{a/b}$ und $H6_{a/b}$) are statistically significant and, there is even a full mediation of the effect of external locus of control on anti-Semitism through the mediators RWA and conspiracy mentality. The indirect effects of external control beliefs mediated by conspiracy

mentality are $\beta = .06$ (xenophobia), and $\beta = .09$ (anti-Semitism). In the case of mediation via RWA, the indirect effects are $\beta = .15$ (xenophobia) and $\beta = .12$ (anti-Semitism).

Total effects

The significant total effect of external control beliefs—mediated by RWA and conspiracy mentality—is $\beta = .28$ for both xenophobia and anti-Semitism. The total effect of internal locus of control, which is only mediated by RWA, is $\beta = .14$ for xenophobia and is significant, and $\beta = .06$ for anti-Semitism. The latter total effect, however, is not significant ($p = .14$).⁵

DISCUSSION

We have argued that xenophobia and anti-Semitism can be seen as a possible outcome of an authoritarian and problematic attempt to re-establish control. In line with this argumentation, our data from a comprehensive probability-based sample showed that external LoC, mediated by elements of the authoritarian syndrome (Decker et al., 2020), predicts xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Building on this finding, it may be precisely times of crisis and uncertainty that—due to an increase in external locus of control—can make people susceptible and vulnerable to authoritarian and right-wing radicalization, as the example of the COVID-19 pandemic shows, and require special political sensitivity. However, a loss of control may not inherently result in coping in terms of the authoritarian syndrome. Individuals can respond in different ways, with some exhibiting authoritarian tendencies while others engaging in alternative coping strategies, such as collective action. Certain predispositions might make individuals more likely to follow the authoritarian path, though further research is needed to explore these mechanisms. In this context, it is likely that groups of people who are already economically or politically deprived and are therefore limited in their ability to exercise control are particularly vulnerable to this dynamic. Further research is needed to explore these mechanisms. It is particularly striking that there is no *direct* effect between external locus of control and anti-Semitism ($p = .051$) when we control for RWA and conspiracy mentality, and the direct effect between external locus of control and xenophobia is only slightly larger and just barely significant ($p = .033$). This underlines all the more that it is not the loss of control itself, but the authoritarian reaction to it, that poses a particular danger to democracy. Thus, since a loss of control does not necessarily lead to right-wing extremist attitudes in forms of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, future research should investigate whether, in addition to the problematic attempt to restore control discussed in our model, potentially “healthy” and functional alternatives of (extended) primary and secondary control could counteract authoritarian and far-right dynamics in uncertain times. In doing so, vulnerable groups should also be identified and addressed. Strengthening primary control in another area could also be effective: Kiess and Schmidt (2024), for example, report that participation, recognition and solidarity in the workplace—also known *democratic efficacy at the workplace*—can strengthen democracy and

⁵ Loeys et al. (2015) point out that the test for indirect effects has a higher power than the test for total effects. Although it has already been discussed in the past that a significant total effect should be a prerequisite for the test of an indirect effect, Loeys and colleagues point out that this need not be a prerequisite in studies whose research interest is primarily focused on the mediation process. Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, we draw attention to the non-significant total effect.

counteract right-wing extremist tendencies. With respect to their concept of extended primary control, Fritzsche et al. (2011) argue that group identification can also counteract the heightened ethnocentric response when group norms endorse diversity and nonviolence.

As expected, there is no direct effect of internal control on conspiracy mentality or our measures of right-wing extremist resentments. However, it is surprising that internal locus of control, fully mediated by RWA (not CM), also predicts xenophobia and anti-Semitism, since internal control beliefs have been mostly associated with protective factors, with exception for the findings of Diakonova and Gilgen (1998) and Chertkova et al. (2017). While we observe a direct relationship between the latent factor of RWA and internal control beliefs in the measurement error-adjusted SEM, the measurement error-unadjusted bivariate correlations indicate that this may be traceable to the sub-dimension of conventionalism, as already observed by Chertkova et al. (2017). The question that arises is that of causality, as our study cannot determine whether internal control promotes authoritarianism or whether authoritarianism can successfully restore internal control, at least temporarily, or whether the identification with external norms rather causes an even stronger shift towards an external LoC. Future research should address this question using longitudinal or experimental studies. From a more methodological point of view, a closer look to our applied IE-4 scale might shed light on this phenomenon, as the internal control belief items seem to exhibit an intersection with neoliberal beliefs (“I am my own boss” and “If I try hard, I will succeed”). This capitalistic affirmation of performance and success closely aligns with what Amlinger and Nachtwey (2024) describe as characteristic of a new and contemporary libertarian authoritarianism that submits to neoliberal norms such as their own autonomy. Such beliefs appear to be less detached from traditional authority figures than one might initially assume. While it is important to acknowledge potential implications for construct validity at this point, it is equally crucial to emphasize that we have utilized a well-validated and widely established scale, aligning with best practices in psychological measurement. Kovaleva et al. (2012) themselves discuss this in the context of the construct validity of the IE-4, pointing out that, in the literature, there appear to be positive correlations between internal locus of control and the importance of various aspects of the workplace (Borg & Noll, 1990). The observed overlap might not be a matter of construct validity of our scale, but this overlap might indicate that both constructs are theoretically intertwined. Future research should explore this further.

Apart from a possible overlap with neoliberal beliefs, another plausible explanation could be that people who excessively believe they have complete control over their lives deny reality as they fail to recognize the complexity of certain situations—especially during the pandemic in 2022, from which our data set originates. While they may not need the fantasy that other groups control everything (in terms of external locus of control and conspiracy mentality), they still require identification with a strong authority—an identification that corresponds well with the idea of extended primary control—and subsequent devaluation of outgroups. Future research should explore whether unhealthy and healthy forms of crisis management exist in both groups (scoring high in internal respectively external locus of control). Person-centered approaches, rather than variable-centered methods, could identify patterns among individuals with high and low external and internal loci of control.

Lastly, following Decker et al. (2020), we assumed the relationship between the 3rd order factor of the authoritarian syndrome and selected latent sub-dimensions (conspiracy mentality and RWA) of the authoritarian syndrome to be reflective. However, considering both the different dynamics that locus of control has on these syndrome elements as well as the moderate correlations between the manifest indicators of conspiracy mentality and those of sadomasochistic authoritarianism/RWA, the question arises as to whether alternative modeling strategies, such

as a formative relationship between the 3rd order factor and its lower order constructs is also applicable—but this has to be discussed on a theoretical level first, since causality between the higher order factor and its lower order constructs would be reversed in such a model.

With the present study, we aim to contribute to the understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying contemporary authoritarianism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia during societal crises. By pointing out their roles in restoring the fundamental need for controls, we also hope to provide a foundation for future research to address these potential threats to democracy.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset analyzed in the current study was generated as a joint project of several different universities. Due to missing consent of all parties involved, we are unable to make the dataset publicly available. The parts supporting the findings of this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND TRANSLATED ENGLISH WORDING OF THE ITEMS

Constructs				
Indicator variables at the individual level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Conspiracy mentality				
Most people do not recognize to what extent our life is determined by conspiracies that are concocted in secret.	2.84	1.86	1 “strongly disagree”	7 “strongly agree”
There are secret organizations that have great influence on political decisions.	2.98	1.88	1 “strongly disagree”	7 “strongly agree”
Politicians and other leaders are nothing but the string puppets of powers operating in the background.	2.97	1.80	1 “strongly disagree”	7 “strongly agree”
Authoritarian aggression				
Outsiders and under-performers in society should be severely punished.	2.95	1.23	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Troublemakers should clearly feel the effects of the fact that they are unwanted in the society.	3.33	1.20	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Social rules should be enforced without compassion.	2.93	1.17	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Authoritarian submission				
We need strong leaders in order to live safely in society.	2.79	1.16	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
People should leave important decisions to those in charge/their leaders.	2.56	1.13	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
We should be grateful for leaders who tell us exactly what we should do.	2.47	1.07	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”

(Continues)

Constructs				
Indicator variables at the individual level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Conventionalism				
Traditions should absolutely be cultivated and maintained.	3.35	1.08	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Established conducts should not be questioned.	3.08	1.10	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
It’s always best to do things in the usual way.	2.87	1.09	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Xenophobia				
Foreigners only come here to abuse the welfare system.	2.75	1.28	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
When jobs are scarce, foreigners should be sent home.	2.40	1.27	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Germany is losing its identity because of the large number of foreigners.	2.61	1.28	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
anti-Semitism				
The influence of the Jews is still too strong.	1.90	1.03	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
More than other people, the Jews use dirty tricks to achieve their goals.	1.76	1.01	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
The Jews just have something peculiar about them and don’t really fit in with us.	1.78	1.01	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
External locus of control				
What I do is mainly determined by others.	2.21	1.02	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Fate often gets in the way of my plans.	2.47	1.00	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
Internal locus of control				
I am my own boss.	4.21	.82	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”
If I work hard, I will succeed.	4.03	.87	1 “strongly disagree”	5 “strongly agree”

APPENDIX B: CORRELATION MATRIX

	AGRI	AGR2	AGR3	SUB1	SUB2	SUB3	CONV1	CONV2	CONV3	XEN01	XEN02	XEN03	VM1	VM2	VM3	AS1	AS2	AS3	ILoC1	ILoC2	ExLoc1	ExLoC2
AGRI	1																					
AGR2	.69***	1																				
AGR3	.65***	.71***	1																			
SUB1	.46***	.48***	.52***	1																		
SUB2	.40***	.40***	.45***	.71***	1																	
SUB3	.35***	.38***	.42***	.65***	.77***	1																
CONV1	.30***	.37***	.33***	.38***	.37***	.40***	1															
CONV2	.37***	.43***	.42***	.43***	.42***	.43***	.67***	1														
CONV3	.34***	.36***	.39***	.40***	.45***	.45***	.61***	.75***	1													
XEN01	.40***	.35***	.32***	.40***	.37***	.32***	.30***	.31***	.28***	1												
XEN02	.39***	.33***	.33***	.44***	.44***	.40***	.27***	.34***	.32***	.72***	1											
XEN03	.38***	.36***	.34***	.45***	.41***	.40***	.32***	.35***	.31***	.75***	.74***	1										
VM1	.12***	.07***	.14***	.27***	.24***	.18***	.20***	.21***	.21***	.28***	.28***	.31***	1									
VM2	.11***	.06***	.11***	.27***	.22***	.16***	.19***	.18***	.18***	.28***	.27***	.31***	.86***	1								
VM3	.14***	.09***	.14***	.27***	.22***	.19***	.19***	.20***	.21***	.31***	.30***	.33***	.78***	.85***	1							
AS1	.29***	.22***	.27***	.38***	.38***	.35***	.27***	.29***	.30***	.50***	.54***	.50***	.37***	.36***	.37***	1						
AS2	.30***	.24***	.30***	.39***	.40***	.37***	.23***	.28***	.29***	.44***	.51***	.46***	.38***	.35***	.37***	.72***	1					
AS3	.29***	.22***	.29***	.42***	.42***	.40***	.24***	.29***	.28***	.40***	.50***	.49***	.40***	.38***	.38***	.70***	.74***	1				
ILoC1	.06*	.09***	.04	.03	.03	-.01	.13***	.05*	.03	-.00	-.04*	-.01	-.09***	-.10***	-.12***	-.05*	-.06**	-.07***	1			
ILoC2	.06*	.08***	.03	.02	-.00	-.03	.12***	.04	.01	-.01	-.05**	-.025	-.09***	-.11***	-.13***	-.07***	-.08***	-.10***	.65***	1		
ExLoC1	.07***	-.00	.02	.07**	.10***	.13***	.01	.04	.09***	.09***	.14***	.12***	.15***	.15***	.18***	.16***	.15***	.14***	-.38***	-.31***	1	
ExLoC2	.02	-.01	.03	.12***	.15***	.12***	.05*	.05*	.06**	.13***	.14***	.14***	.23***	.24***	.22***	.14***	.15***	.16***	-.30***	-.29***	.49***	1

Note: N = 2,380.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels.

APPENDIX C: MODEL COMPARISON

Model	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	BIC
Model 1 (with residual correlations)	.956	.947	.049	.053	198293.910	198871.395
Model 2 (no residual correlations)	.947	.935	.054	.051	198607.764	199219.899

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