Editorial

Not All Conspiracy Theories Are Created Equal

The Relationship, Differences, and Commonalities of General Conspiracy Mindsets Versus Specific Conspiracy Beliefs

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Conspiracy theories and the reasons why people adopt them are a hot topic. From the protests against health measures to curb the COVID-19 pandemic across the world to the attack on the US Capitol, the adherence to conspiracy-based explanations (e.g., a secret elite trying to impose a vaccination regime; e.g., Rahlf, 2023; or steal the election from the legitimate winner Donald Trump; e.g., Dover, 2023) has been suspected as the central motivating force behind such expressions of discontent. It is, thus, no surprise that the psychological sciences have taken up the challenge to provide a better understanding of what motivates such beliefs. This has led to a proliferation of psychological research on the psychology of conspiracy beliefs. Whereas the topic was limited to a few seminal publications before 2000 (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Graumann & Moscovici, 1987; Zonis & Joseph, 1994), it gained momentum in the following years (possibly due to prominent conspiracy theories around 9/11 and the death of Princess Diana; e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2008) and literally exploded in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pilch et al., 2023). While this acceleration of research has led to many important insights and valuable data, theoretical progress has sometimes been hampered by the eclectic nature of individual findings. Rather than building a cumulative and integrative understanding of the phenomenon, the field has cast spotlights on it from many different angles and dimensions (e.g., individual/collective/cultural, cognitive/motivational, causes/consequences, …) in a wide array of contexts.

One major roadblock toward theoretical integration and advancement is the lack of precision observed regarding the concepts involved. Some of the earliest writing on conspiracy theories (e.g., Moscovici, 1987; Popper, 1945, 1963, 2002) and some of the earlier empirical contributions (Bruder et al., 2013; Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012) had alerted to the fact that conspiracy beliefs cling together: Their endorsement forms a tightly knit net (Williams et al., 2022) and sorts respondents into distinct classes of approvers or deniers, regardless of the exact content of the addressed conspiracy theories (Frenken & Imhoff, 2021). This has led scholars to speculate about a more generalized worldview, mindset, or belief system behind the endorsement of individual conspiracy theories, often referred to as conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Although this has prompted the development of several scales tapping into this more general propensity, for the longest time, these scales have been used almost interchangeably to each other and also to more specific conspiracy beliefs. This had led to critical discussion about the epistemic state and pragmatic usefulness of the concept (Sutton & Douglas, 2020) and about the equivalence of the measurement approaches (Imhoff, Bertlich, & Frenken, 2022). The current special issue seeks to continue this debate and add empirical substance. Empirically we were interested in data that might speak to the differences, commonalities, and the relationship between different approaches to conspiracy beliefs. On the conceptual level, we sought to solidify the field's shared understanding of

the generalized concept referred to as conspiracist ideation, conspiratorial worldview or mindset, or simply conspiracy mentality.

In their empirical research spanning four studies and nearly 1,000 participants, Trella and colleagues (2024, this issue) follow the recommendations that are charted in the second research spotlight by Sutton et al. (2024, this issue), as a way to delineate between general and specific conspiracy beliefs. First, the authors show that the statements from conspiracy mentality scales (CMQ: Bruder et al., 2013; CMS: Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019) are best regarded as general rules, whereas Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory (BCTI; Swami et al., 2017) statements should be viewed as specific examples of these rules. In the remaining studies, the authors employ different designs to investigate the relationship between both constructs in realistic and fictional contexts. Trella and colleagues conclude by showing experimental evidence that the investigated relationship is likely bidirectional, whereby conspiracy mentality might serve as a predictor and an outcome variable, one that precedes or succeeds exposure to specific conspiracy theories.

Strömbäck and colleagues (2024, this issue), in contrast, rely on a different approach to examining the relationship between conspiracy mindset and beliefs in specific conspiracy theories. Using factor analyses and validity tests, they show that conspiracy mindset and specific conspiracy beliefs are related but different constructs. Crucially, they analyze their associations in a *three-wave longitudinal survey*. With a random-intercept cross-lagged panel model, Strömbäck et al. demonstrate that within-person variations in conspiracy mindset are more likely to predict subsequent changes in variations in beliefs in specific conspiracy theories rather than the other way around. The findings shed light on the nature of conspiracy mentality and suggest that it might underlie belief in specific conspiracy theories.

The differentiation of conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs – although at the heart of the current issue – was not the only contrast we were interested in. In the call for papers (Imhoff, Cichocka, et al., 2022), we also asked whether there were meaningful differences between different conspiracy beliefs that are associated with differential antecedents, functions, and consequences. Bertin (2024, this issue) conducted five experiments examining the causal relationship experiences of *victimhood* have with both conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs. He observed no effects of exclusive victimhood manipulations on conspiracy beliefs, potentially challenging the idea that collective victimhood might lead to greater reliance on conspiracy theories. His subsequent studies tested a reverse causal relationship, examining whether exposure to conspiracy theories might increase victimhood perceptions. Indeed, he obtained evidence for this pattern. However, exposure to conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy theories increased self-oriented, rather than collective, victimhood. These findings suggest that conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs can have similar consequences in terms of victimizing individuals.

Bogatyreva (2024, this issue) provides a unique peek inside of an underrepresented context in the study of conspiracy beliefs: Russia. Here, she shows that the relatively frequently endorsed *pro-state conspiracy theories* show a positive relationship to institutional trust in that context. Further adding to the issue of the generalized mindset, these data indicate that while pro-state conspiracy beliefs show a positive relationship with most subfacets of a scale aiming to tap into the general propensity to endorse conspiracy beliefs (Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale; Brotherton et al., 2013), this relationship reverses for the *government malfeasance* subfacet. This empirical finding mirrors the warning that enriching conspiracy belief items with concrete context will introduce other sources of variance than the mere propensity to endorse a conspiracy-based explanation (see Imhoff, 2024, this issue).

During the process of editing this issue, it soon became clear that it will provide a unique opportunity to not only assemble empirical contribution, but provide a much-needed space for collegial debate. We thus decided to invite commentaries to a critical comment submitted by Nera (2024a, this issue). In his research spotlight, Nera (2024a, this issue) challenges the notion of conspiracy mentality. The ensuing commentaries by Sutton and colleagues (2024, this issue), Pummerer (2024, this issue), and Imhoff (2024, this issue) offer an opportunity to reassess the concept, and they are followed by concluding remarks from Nera (2024b, this issue). In this debate, the authors discuss the exact meaning of the conspiracy mentality concept, whether and in which ways it is different from (the general or isolated) belief in specific conspiracy theories, and what the causal relation between the two might be.

Taken together, the current issue takes up many open threads and solidifies our understanding of the differences and similarities of general conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs, thereby approximating a more cumulative approach to science than the eclectic gathering of empirical bits and pieces. All papers converged in showing that indeed some conspiracy beliefs are more equal (to each other) than others and that there might be good reasons to differentiate between conspiracist worldview (or mentality) and the endorsements of (often epistemically risky) specific conspiracy theories. Another emergent insight is that the latter are susceptible to be confounded with surplus meaning (beyond suspecting conspiracies at play) that may change their meaning and correlates depending on the exact

context. A third point of consensus is that the causal relationship between specific conspiracy beliefs and more generalized worldviews can go both ways.

Curating this special issue was only possible due to the collegial and constructive approach exhibited by many colleagues. In the process of putting the special issue together, several potential sources of conflicts of interest had to be laid open and pro-actively managed. For a contribution by one of the guest editors, we secured an external handling editor and a review process completely outside of the guest editorial team. For several other submissions, individual guest editors had to flag potential conflicts of interest due to active collaborations or mentoring relationships with authors (while, in constant expansion, research on the social psychology of conspiracy beliefs is still a small world!). We navigated these to the best of our abilities, handling all potentially concerning issues with utmost care, so as to avoid inviting a full submission, let alone processing of paper, for which a potential conflict was identified. It is our hope that the cautious safeguarding of the review process helped us in our striving to reach unbiased and objective regard on the topical issue.

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