

How Social Identity Shapes Conspiratorial Belief

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Abstract

While conspiracy theories may offer benefits to those who believe in them, they can also foster intergroup conflict, threaten democracy, and undercut public health. We argue that the motivations behind conspiracy theory belief are often related to social identity. Conspiracy theories are well-positioned to fulfill social identity needs such as belongingness goals, the need to think highly of one's in-group, and the need to feel secure in one's group status.

Understanding the social motives that attract people to conspiracy theories should be a focus of future research, and may be key to creating more successful interventions to reduce socially harmful conspiracy theories.

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Introduction

From the Unabomber and Alex Jones to the mysterious “Q”, popular media has represented conspiracy theorists as lone, often eccentric individuals. However, these depictions are not always reflective of reality. As the internet and social media create an increasingly connected world, conspiracy theories can spread through large and often diffuse communities (Sternisko et al., 2020). While conspiracy theories about President Kennedy’s assassination, the moon landing, or the flat earth likely have little bearing on society, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a growing awareness of the potential damage of conspiracy theories—termed an “infodemic” by the World Health Organization (Zarocostas, 2020). This has generated a great deal of interest in the social and psychological factors that make people more likely to believe and share misinformation (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Harris, Rathje et al., 2022). In the current paper, we argue that a social identity framework may be useful for understanding the causes, consequences, and potential interventions for these types of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are defined as a singular secret plot by a group of powerful elites to gain undue power over the economy, political system, or other institutions (Douglas et al., 2019). Many prevalent conspiracies (like QAnon or the Covid-19 Truther movement) are made up of a network of interrelated conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). These networks of beliefs create narratives about peoples’ unjustly victimized in-groups and malevolent, adversarial out-groups (van Prooijen, 2020). While several studies have suggested that the belief in conspiracies is related to an individual's conspiratorial mindset (Đorđević et al., 2021; Bruder et al., 2013), group-based motivations also appear to play an important role. Here, we argue that conspiracy theories often develop in response to threats to people’s social identities, whether those identities are racial, political, or religious.

A Social Identity Framework For Conspiracy Theory Belief

Social identity describes people's tendency to identify strongly with groups they belong to, melding group identity with the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Forming strong social identities helps individuals feel like they belong and make sense of the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Xiao et al., 2016). To maintain a positive social identity, people are motivated to believe content that bolsters their in-group and derogates their out-group (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018) and share this content with others (Rathje et al., 2021; Sternisko et al., 2021). When events threaten the reputation of their in-group some group members may be motivated to seek out or believe information that reestablishes their group as a superior, even when the information is dubious (Pereira, Harris, & Van Bavel, 2021, Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Marchlewska et al., 2019). This may be especially true when the outcomes of the threat are more severe (e.g. a mysterious event results in the death of a leader; Leboeuf & Norton, 2012; van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014).

Conspiracy theories are well suited to alleviate identity related threats because they reduce the blame or failure attributed to their group, and are often unfalsifiable (Bezalel, 2021). Indeed, citizens whose political party loses an election are more likely to believe conspiracy theories (Uscinski & Parent 2014). Thus, certain *contents* of conspiracy theories may make them especially appealing to social identity motivations, like feelings of group superiority, by creating narratives in which negative outcomes are not the fault of the in-group, but rather a powerful and malevolent out-group (Sternisko et al., 2020; van Prooijen, 2020).

Evidence

Past work has found that social identity-related goals (e.g. the desire to belong within a group) increase belief in conspiracy theories, such that people are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories after suffering social exclusion (Poon et al., 2020). This suggests that social identity motivations are important drivers of conspiracy belief, along with motivations such as epistemic goals (e.g., making sense of reality), and existential goals (e.g., feeling safe and in

control; Douglas et al., 2017). The Identity-Based Model of Belief (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018) posits that whether or not people believe an identity-relevant piece of (mis)information depends on the importance they ascribe to their accuracy goals (i.e., wanting to believe things that are true) and their identity-based goals (e.g., wanting to feel like they belong to their group, that their group is higher status than relevant out-groups, etc.). As such, people are more prone to believe (mis)information when group-based concerns outweigh accuracy concerns (Borukhson et al., 2022; Rathje et al., 2022; Batailler et al., 2022). These identity-based motivations become stronger when their in-group is threatened (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). For instance, Catholics who believed in conspiracies to undermine traditional gender roles showed more hostility towards gender equality activists (Marchlewska et al., 2019). Additionally, international research suggests that people were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when their political group was not in power (Imhoff et al. 2022). In this respect, conspiracy theories are uniquely attractive because they would seem to alleviate threats to one's group identity and sense of group superiority.

Some of the most striking evidence of the role of identity comes from studies exploring the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and collective narcissism. Collective narcissism is the belief that one's group is not recognized for their inherent greatness (Golec De Zavala et al., 2009) and has been consistently associated with social identity threat (Bagci et al., 2021) and conspiracy theory beliefs (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Sternisko et al., 2021; Marchlewska et al., 2019). For instance, a recent international study across 56 countries found that people with higher collective narcissism were much more likely to believe a variety of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Sternisko et al., 2021). People high in collective narcissism are also more likely to believe groups of conspiracy theories within one topic rather than across topics (Stasielowicz, 2022). This may be because they are most committed to believing conspiracy theories that elevate their in-group, but care less about conspiracy theories unrelated to their social identities.

The relevance of social identity in conspiracy theory belief is also suggested by studies linking conspiracy belief and political attitudes. For instance, political actors may use conspiracy theories to foster strong partisan identities, crafting narratives that pit malevolent elites against the common people (van Prooijen, 2018). Belief in conspiracy theories has been associated with populist attitudes and political extremism—especially when the conspiracy theories are partisan (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Indeed, those who hold extreme partisan views are the most likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Imhoff et al. 2022). Moreover, identities enhanced by conspiracy theories are often designed to foster hostility specific out-groups (Rousis et al., 2020), leading to resentment and prejudice (Jolley et al., 2020; Kofta et al., 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019). Mentions of conspiracy theories are abundant across writings and speeches of ideologically radical groups (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Conspiracy theories have been used throughout history as a rhetorical device to justify many of humanity’s worst atrocities, including the Holocaust, the 2003 invasion of Iraq based on the threat of “mass destruction weapons”, and, more recently, the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine in 2022 (Basit, 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Conspiracy theory belief is associated with suspicion of the government and institutions (van Prooijen et al., 2022), and mistrust in conventional democratic means of political participation (Imhoff et al., 2021). Conspiracy believers report feeling a lack of political control (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; Kofta et al., 2020), and increased powerlessness (Bruder et al., 2013).¹ Conspiracy theory believers are also more likely to experience social ostracism from the non-conspiracy majority (van Prooijen et al., 2021). Exposure to conspiracy theories can reduce prosocial behavior (van der Linden, 2015), while increasing intentions to engage in anti-social behavior such as petty crime (Jolley et al., 2019). Conspiracy theory belief also increases intentions to participate in violent political action (Imhoff et al., 2021), especially when combined

¹ It should be noted that these findings are correlational.

with strong pre-existing social identities such as partisanship (Armaly et al., 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2015) Hence, counter terrorist officials in the European Union and the United States have warned about “new forms of terrorism” motivated by conspiracy theories (Anon, 2019; Pantucci, 2020).

New Directions

Many prior interventions for conspiracy and misinformation belief have focused on inducing people to be motivated to be more accurate (Pennycook et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2021). However, these interventions may be less effective for extreme partisans (Rathje et al., 2022; Pretus et al., preprint). Our proposed framework suggests that conspiracy theories are, at least in part, responses to group-based threats. Therefore, identity-based motivations may outweigh individual motivations in conspiracy theory belief and sharing. For example, people report higher intentions to share conspiracy theories they know may be *inaccurate* online when they anticipate high social reward, suggesting that identity-based goals might be important to consider when mitigating the spread of conspiracy theories (Ren et al, 2021). Prior work has also found that people can change their behavioral motivations when different social identities are activated (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018; Van Bavel et al., 2020). Thus, interventions which highlight a person’s social identity (i.e. their identity as a teacher or doctor rather than as a QAnon believer) or highlight accuracy norms and incentives may help combat conspiracy theory belief.

The ways in which conspiracy theories spread should also be examined. People who face identity threats may cluster into online communities that support an identity-protective worldview, and conspiracy theories may spread widely online because they appeal to social identity motives. Other recent work has found that social media posts that are negative about out-group members tend to receive more engagement on social media (Rathje et al., 2021). Since conspiracy theories tend to feature a counternormative and novel narratives about a malevolent out-group, they might be more likely to go “viral” online (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Past

work has found that expressions of negativity (Robertson, Pröllochs et al., 2022) and moral outrage (Brady et al., 2017, 2021) tend to receive more engagement online, which may also contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories. Indeed, “other-condemning” emotions such as outrage or disgust increased the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy theories on Twitter (Solovev & Pröllochs, 2022). Thus, the structure of conspiracy theories—which focus on out-group misdeeds—may be particularly likely to spread on certain social media platforms.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are an ever-changing phenomenon. While not all conspiracy theories are wrong, there is accumulating evidence that those who believe in conspiracy theories are at risk for a host of anti-social outcomes, harming both themselves and broader society (Anon, 2019; Imhoff et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2019; Pantucci, 2020; van der Linden, 2015). We argue that understanding the dynamics of social identity will be critical to fully understanding why people believe in conspiracy theories, how they spread, and what scholars and policy makers might do to mitigate the spread of conspiratorial information. Understanding and addressing the social identity needs that conspiracy theories can fulfill may play a crucial role in mitigating future public health crises and sustaining a healthy society.

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Annotated References

1. Sternisko, A., Cichočka, A., Cislak, A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2021). National Narcissism predicts the Belief in and the Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From 56 Countries. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 01461672211054947.

Using a massive representative sample from 56 countries, researchers found that National Narcissism, or the belief that one's country does not get the respect it deserves predicted both belief in and dissemination of conspiracy theories about Covid-19.

2. Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L., & Lamberty, P. (2021). Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases nonnormative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(1), 71-79.

Found that individuals who were experimentally manipulated to think about the world as being controlled by a small group of elites were less likely to want to engage in normative political action, but were more likely to want to engage in non-normative political action. They also found evidence of a curvilinear relationship between high, medium, and low assigned conspiracy worldview and general political action, such that those in the medium conspiracy worldview group were the most likely to participate in political action.

3. Kofta, M., Soral, W., & Bilewicz, M. (2020). What breeds conspiracy antisemitism? The role of political uncontrollability and uncertainty in the belief in Jewish conspiracy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(5), 900

Across three studies, researchers found that a feeling a lack of political control (but not political uncertainty) predicted endorsement of antisemitic conspiracy beliefs in Polish participants. The results replicated in a fourth study using a British sample, such that participants who felt a lack of political control were more likely to endorse antisemitic conspiracy theories, but not anti-German or anti-Russian conspiracy theories.

4. Rousis, G. J., Richard, F. D., & Wang, D. Y. D. (2020). The Truth Is Out There: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory Use by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-19.

Using text analysis, researchers found that radical violent extremist groups were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories and advocate for violence in their propaganda, compared to nonviolent extremists or moderates. They also found that nonviolent extremists were more likely to use conspiracy theories in their propaganda than moderates.

5. Marchlewska, M., Cichočka, A., Łozowski, F., Górska, P., & Winiewski, M. (2019). In search of an imaginary enemy: Catholic collective narcissism and the endorsement of gender conspiracy beliefs. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(6), 766-779.

In a series of two studies, researchers found that Catholic collective narcissism predicted belief in gender conspiracy theories. The researchers also found that the relationship between Catholic collective narcissism and a desire for physical distance from gay men and lesbians was mediated by gender conspiracy beliefs.

6. Sternisko, A., Cichocka, A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2020). The dark side of social movements: Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current opinion in psychology*, 35, 1-6.

Identifies two possible motives for conspiracy belief – attraction to the content of conspiracy theories, and attraction to the qualities of conspiracy theories. Argues that social identity motives may be especially important for attracting people to the content of conspiracy theories, while epistemic motives like need for uniqueness may attract people to the qualities of conspiracy theories.