

Tearing apart the “evil” twins: A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs

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Abstract

Although sometimes used interchangeably, the present review highlights the important differences between generalized worldviews suspecting conspiracy at play (conspiracy mentality) and specific beliefs about the existence of a certain conspiracy (conspiracy theory). In contrast to measures of beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, those of conspiracy mentality are more stable, less malleable, less skewed in their distribution and less contaminated by other ideological content. These differences have important implications for empirical research and the theorizing of conspiracy beliefs. Building on an analogy of personality traits, we argue that conspiracy mentality is a relatively stable readiness to interpret world events as being caused by plots hatched in secret, whereas specific conspiracy beliefs are then manifest indicators (partially contaminated by other dispositions).

Conspiracy theories exist for virtually any class of events – from natural disasters, celebrity death, (lack of) technological progress, to pandemics [1,2]. Although such specific conspiracy theories appear as diverse as the events they seek to explain, their endorsements cling together in a seemingly close-knit network of conspiracy beliefs [3,4]. People who show relatively strong endorsement of one conspiracy theory also show relatively strong endorsement of many other conspiracy theories [5]. This pattern has led several scholars to assume a monological belief system [3] or a conspiracy mentality [6]. Whereas the emphasis of the former is on the notion that specific beliefs reinforce each other, the latter operates on the assumption that people reliably differ in their general view of the world as determined by malicious plots hatched in secret. Although specific conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality are already markedly different in their definition, psychological research has often used the two concepts interchangeably [7]. In the present paper, building on earlier work [8], we seek to provide a better understanding of both the similarities and differences between specific conspiracy beliefs and broader conspiracy mentality.

1.1 Similarities...

To a certain extent, it is difficult to draw a firm line between measures of endorsement of a specific conspiracy theory and those tapping into a more general conspiracy mindset. First, items tapping into specific conspiracy theories are typically not very detailed but express rather broad suspicions. Second, some “specific” conspiracy theories are newly created, fictitious conspiracy theories purpose-designed for the current study [9,10]. In this situation, respondents could base their agreement on their attitude toward the allegedly conspiring group (e.g., Red Bull [9]). However, if that group is made up [10], the most plausible explanation for their agreement would be their general intuition whether such secret plots are believable and frequent phenomena. And finally, some measures of a broader conspiracy mindset are the average endorsement of a range of specific conspiracy theories [11,12,13,14]. In contrast, scales measuring conspiracy mentality [6,15,16] or similarly

labelled general mindsets [17] typically ask participants to indicate their agreement with broader statements about how likely and frequent conspiracies are, without explicitly mentioning specific events or culprits. Independent of the measure, they seem to form coherent groups that systematically differ in their relative degree of either rejecting or accepting statements reflecting conspiracy theories or conspiracy mentality [5]. The nomological networks of conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs are largely overlapping. Measures of specific conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality or general conspirational mindsets [17,18] typically show reliable correlations with automatic cognitive thinking styles, many facets of internal and external threat, as well as need for uniqueness or narcissism (for a recent meta-analysis, see Biddlestone M). Lower formal education is associated with both specific conspiracy beliefs [19], as well as conspiracy mentality [20]. People who feel deprived of control show stronger endorsement of specific conspiracy theories [21] as well as items tapping into conspiracy mentality [6,22].

1.2 ... and differences

In light of these similarities, it is not surprising that many researchers have used the two variables rather interchangeably. As our core contribution in the present review, however, we want to caution against this confusion by highlighting important differences. In a recent unpublished meta-analysis by M. Biddlestone, for instance, measures of specific conspiracy beliefs correlate with low cognitive ability, low personal control, and defensive ingroup identity, while measures of conspiracy mentality did not (see also [8]). There are several ways to explain such differential correlations. We will discuss one explanation based on what we call content-contamination in a later section but focus first on one that is a basic difference between measures of conspiracy mentality and endorsement of conspiracy theories: the distribution of agreement across participants.

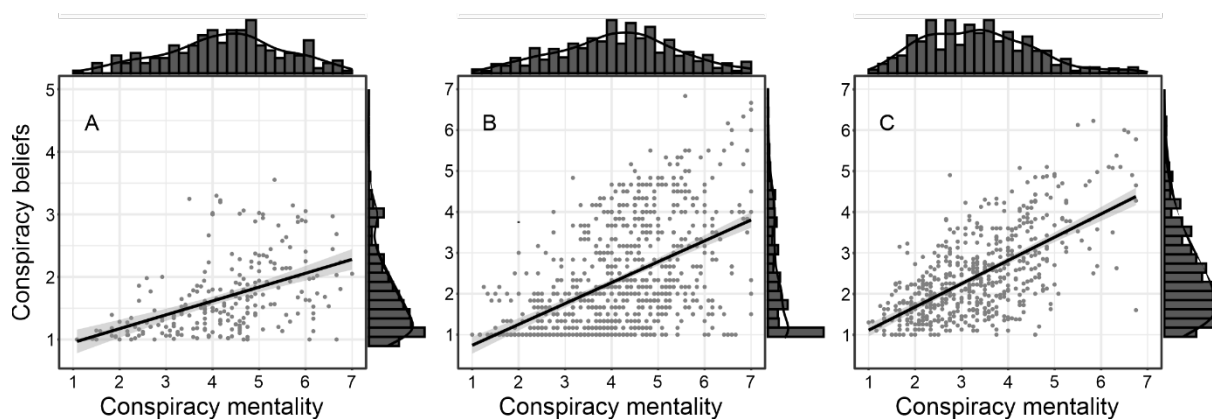


Figure 1. *Distributions and Scatterplots of conspiracy mentality and conspiracy beliefs. All panels from three different publications show skewed distributions for specific conspiracy beliefs and approximately normal distributions for conspiracy mentality. Both variables correlate rather strongly. The specific beliefs represent in Panel A the mean of the endorsement of 99 diverse conspiracy theories (Study 1, [9]), in Panel B the mean of six conspiracy theories about the COVID pandemic (all studies, [27]), and in Panel C the mean of two conspiracy theories about the COVID pandemic (Study 3 t1, [28]). All scales have a range from 1 (strong disagreement) to 7 (strong agreement), except the specific beliefs in Panel A (1 to 5).*

1.2.1 Response distributions and their (potential) consequences

As can be seen on the vertical dimension in Figure 1, the distribution of the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories tends to be skewed due to large parts of samples considering conspiracy theories as rather implausible or totally rejecting them [23,24,25]. This is generally most often true even if there are exceptions where many people agree with a conspiracy claim, such as one about the suppression of new technologies [5]. Logically, the more a specific narrative contradicts the common-sense, the more skewed is the distribution. The three panels in Figure 1 plot this endorsement of specific conspiracy theories in relation to respondents' general conspiracy mentality. The consistent positive correlation indicates that conspiracy mentality reflects the general propensity to endorse specific conspiracy theories. More important for the current argument and markedly different from specific conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy mentality is normally distributed, often around the mid-point of the scale [26]. Due to its normal distribution, conspiracy mentality thus fans out the variance in a more fine-grained manner than the relatively skewed (and coarse) distribution of specific beliefs.

This very basic difference has important implications. First, measures of conspiracy mentality are well suited to differentiate across the whole range from nearly naïve gullibility

and endless trust in elites to an almost paranoid suspicion about conspiracies at play behind virtually any event (with most respondents placed in between these two). Hence, correlations with such measures contain information across a whole spectrum. In contrast, correlations with specific conspiracy theories are heavily influenced by only a very small fraction of respondents who deviated from the option to reject the theory completely.

This might be of particular interest for research not interested in the whole spectrum of differing proclivities to see conspiracies, but in the identification of active believers, of “conspiracy theorists”, but the skewed distribution of specific conspiracy beliefs can also create problems. In panel A, most people reject the specific conspiracy theories and a decreasing number of respondents show some agreement. There is, however, a bump of respondents just around the midpoint of the scale. The reason for this anomaly is not clear, but a rather parsimonious explanation could be that some respondents just answer questions randomly and their average score thus reflects the midpoint of the scale. While it is a feature that this is detectable (in contrast to conspiracy mentality where random responding would lead to inclusion in the mode in the center), a major disadvantage is that these careless respondents have an undue influence on correlations due to the greater leverage of more extreme values in skewed distributions like this. In extreme cases, careless responders scoring in the middle of respective scales may drive correlations between specific conspiracy beliefs and any other (equally skewed) variables almost entirely. The same is not true for conspiracy mentality, as careless responders in the middle of the scale have virtually no influence on correlations. Thus, already on very basic psychometric levels, the two measures differ substantially, potentially effecting their correlations with other variables.

1.2.2 Stability and malleability

Also conceptually, there are important differences. While conspiracy mentality is typically thought of as an enduring individual disposition to interpret the world and events therein, specific conspiracy theories arise in response to a specific event unfolding and seek to

provide an explanation. As such, in contrast to the endorsement of specific theories, conspiracy mentality should be a rather temporally stable disposition difficult to change. We will discuss both aspects in light of the (scarce) empirical literature. Several studies suggest that indeed conspiracy mentality taps into a more stable disposition than specific conspiracy beliefs. For instance, a recent study measuring both—concrete conspiracy beliefs about the respective outgroup and generalized conspiracy mentality among US American participants from both partisan camps across five measurement waves—showed that specific conspiracy beliefs did change on average over time, while conspiracy mentality did not (as estimated by growth curve models, unpublished study by H. Wang). This is in line with other findings suggesting that specific conspiracy beliefs can change over time [29,30]. However, it is a topic of ongoing research on how stable conspiracy mentality is. Recent work highlighted that even though conspiracy mentality might stay stable on average, intraindividual change could still take place [29,31].

Given that conspiracy mentality is supposed to be rather stable, it should also prove less susceptible to (typically small-scale) experimental manipulations. A recent meta-analysis on the effects of experimental control deprivation on conspiracy beliefs [32] concluded that there is only limited support for conspiracy beliefs functioning as compensatory control mechanism. Importantly, the data did provide (weak) evidence for experimental effects on specific measures of conspiracy beliefs, but none on generic measures of conspiracy mentality. Other studies also yielded no support for experimental main effects on conspiracy mentality [26, 33] or other broad measures [34].

1.2.3 Content-contamination

As already alluded above, one of the most central differences between generic conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs is that the former seeks to tap into the (relatively pure) tendency to see plausibility in secret plots behind world events, whereas the latter are almost necessarily content-contaminated. Content-contamination refers to the fact

that any specific conspiracy theory is an application of the general idea that important events are affected by plots hatched in secret to a specific context with a specific target (the conspirator) and a specific identified goal of the target. These context-specific targets and their goals carry surplus meaning. For instance, endorsing the idea that immigration from Muslim countries to Western Europe is part of a larger plan to create a European caliphate carries notions of islamophobia, and opposition to migration. It is not just an expression of the tendency to believe in conspiracies per se. It might just be a conspiracy-unrelated sentiment phrased in the form of a conspiracy theory.

This content-contamination can inflate (or deflate) correlations with other measures. A positive correlation between anti-Black attitudes and the endorsement of the conspiracy belief that former US-president Obama forged his birth certificate [35] may not be motivated by the conspiracy aspect involved in this statement, but rather the negative evaluation of Obama. It may be that a statement tapping into the very same evaluative sentiment (e.g., “Obama is an untrustworthy person”) would show an identical correlation. Likewise, a positive association of national identification with the relatively greater tendency to endorse conspiracy theories involving the outgroup (vs. the ingroup) [36] might be an example of ingroup bias that has little to do with conspiracy beliefs per se. We would thus argue that these findings are surely relevant, but tell us little about the nature of general conspiracy beliefs. Even further, very basic cognitive styles and biases seem to be associated with some specific belief, but not with others [37]. In these data, general conspiracy mentality was the only variable associated with these cognitive styles on the one hand and almost every single specific conspiracy theory on the other hand.

1.3 Conspiracy mentality as a latent disposition behind specific conspiracy beliefs

In summary, conspiracy mentality seems to be a relatively stable, not highly malleable distal predictor of specific conspiracy beliefs. It taps into meaningful individual differences in the very basic worldview that the fate of the world is determined by plans hatched in secret

rather than chance or openly negotiated conflicts. As such, it is probably a relatively pure measure of accepting the existence of conspiracy beliefs. It has been shown to reliably correlate with subclinical paranoia [23], increased agency detection [6], and most importantly: the endorsement of specific conspiracy beliefs [21]. Even after controlling for other variables, a general conspiracy mindset typically remains the most robust correlate of specific conspiracy beliefs [24,37,38,39]. The endorsement of specific conspiracy theories, however, also depends on other factors that share content with the theories. This does not invalidate the idea of a latent disposition. An analogy would be that the personality trait extraversion shows robust correlations with the frequency of going out or calling friends on the phone, but each of these specific behaviors does also depend on other factors (e.g., one's economic situation or whether one's friends live out-of-town or all close-by). Future research should thus better differentiate between specific theories and a general mindset and justify why they use one measure rather than the other.

1990 words

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The high intercorrelation of diverse conspiracy beliefs might be either due to a shared underlying disposition (conspiracy mentality) or because the separate theories somehow reinforce each other (monological belief system). The authors of this paper try to critically test both explanations against each other in a registered report employing network modelling. Their data speak against a single-factor model behind all instances of conspiracy beliefs, which leaves the network idea of mutual reinforcement, although the authors concede that their data do not support this notion directly.

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Employing participant-based latent profile analyses rather than variable-based techniques like factor analyses the five studies reported in this paper demonstrate how both aggregate measures of specific conspiracy theories as well as conspiracy mentality scales sort participants into distinct classes that consistently differ in their relative agreement with conspiracy ideas. It thus provides strong evidence that there are not different subsets of respondents endorsing one conspiracy belief but not the other and vice versa.

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This opinion paper also discusses the relation of specific conspiracy beliefs and general conspiracy mindsets with a specific focus on its relevance to better understand political ideology. The authors discuss the unclear theoretical status of the mindset construct as either descriptive or explanatory and caution against ignoring what we discuss in relation to the skewed distribution of specific beliefs: That specific conspiracy beliefs are reflective of a greater susceptibility to implausible beliefs. While the authors lament that this aspect gets lost in more abstract measures, the present paper takes the position that this is a feature, not a bug, of conspiracy mentality scales.

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