

**Analysing the Causation Between Conspiracy Mentality and Conspiracy Beliefs:  
Potential Pitfalls and Leads to Address Them**

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**Abstract**

The dispositional approach to conspiracy mentality suggests that it causally precedes belief in conspiracy theories. I identify two potential pitfalls when analysing this causal relationship: *Circular reasoning* (in which the two constructs are conflated and interchangeable) and *black box explanations* (in which conspiracy mentality is merely defined as a disposition to believe in conspiracy theories). I argue that avoiding black box explanations requires theoretical and empirical works to clarify the content and antecedents of conspiracy mentality. To guide future research, I formulate two hypotheses based on a philosophical analysis of conspiracy thinking as well as empirical research. In doing so, I question common assumptions on conspiracy mentality. First, against the assumption that conspiracy mentality is unidimensional, I propose that it may be better conceptualised as a multidimensional construct. Second, against the assumption that conspiracy mentality unidirectionally causes conspiracy theory beliefs, I propose that this relationship might be bidirectional.

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Conspiracy theories – claims that the public is being pervasively deceived to allow some group(s) to enact a self-serving, harmful agenda (Nera & Schöpfer, 2022) – are indisputably a prominent phenomenon in the ideological and informational landscape. One of the most strongly established features of conspiracy theories is that their endorsement is strongly and positively intercorrelated (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011), to the point that they can be interpreted as reflecting a single underlying construct (Klein & Nera, 2020; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Many authors have interpreted such an underlying construct as a disposition to believe in conspiracy theories (Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Imhoff et al., 2022). Recent research emphasised that this disposition (henceforth conspiracy mentality) is conceptually and empirically distinct from belief in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff et al., 2022).

Still, the nature of the relationship between (general) conspiracy mentality and belief in (specific) conspiracy theories remains unclear. Conspiracy mentality is typically defined as a relatively stable *tendency* (Bruder et al., 2013; Brotherton et al., 2013), *propensity* (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), or *trait-like disposition* (Imhoff et al., 2022) to believe in conspiracy theories. While these terms intuitively suggest that conspiracy mentality somehow causes conspiracy theory beliefs (see Sutton & Douglas, 2020), they do not rule out a non-causal approach. Indeed, while some stable dispositions can be interpreted as causing certain outcomes (e.g., an anxious attachment style developed during childhood may cause feelings of insecurity in future relationships), it is not the case for others (e.g., a genetic predisposition to develop a disease might not have a causal impact on the development of the disease – rather, it might increase the risk of developing the disease in the presence of other environmental factors). In general, the conditions under which latent variables (e.g., dispositional variables) can be viewed as *causing* their manifest indicators are debated (e.g.,

VanderWeele & Vansteelandt, 2022; see also Kitrick, 2005, for a philosophical analysis of the causal relevance of dispositions).

In this contribution however, I endorse the assumption that conspiracy mentality has a direct causal impact on belief in specific conspiracy theories for two reasons. First, numerous elements in influential contributions on conspiracy mentality seem to carry this causal assumption. For instance, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) state that “Belief in [conspiracy] theories is largely *determined* by a general propensity towards conspirational thinking” (p. 25, my emphasis). Bruder et al. (2013) paraphrase this notion by stating that “the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories *depends to a large extent on* individual differences in the general tendency to adopt such beliefs, that is, a general conspiracy mentality” (p. 2, my emphasis). Similarly, the notion that conspiracy theory beliefs are *underpinned* by a conspiracy mentality (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013) suggests that conspiracy mentality somehow causes conspiracy beliefs (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Second, if conspiracy mentality consists in a specific worldview (Dagnall et al., 2015) or in a generalised political attitude (Imhoff et al., 2022), it would certainly directly influence how individuals navigate information in their environment and assess the plausibility of conspiracy theories, through confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). In such an approach, the assumption that conspiracy mentality causally impacts conspiracy theory beliefs seems warranted.

The conceptual ambiguities surrounding conspiracy mentality might explain why its relationship with conspiracy theory beliefs has been seldom investigated (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). The goal of this contribution is to identify – and hopefully, partly address – obstacles impeding the investigation of this relationship. First, based on past contributions (Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Imhoff et al., 2022), I identify two potential pitfalls when reasoning about the causal impact of conspiracy mentality on the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories: *Circular reasoning* – an explanation in which the cause and the consequence are one and the

same – and what I propose to call *black box explanations* – explanations in which the cause is a disposition merely defined by its consequences (i.e., belief in conspiracy theories). I argue that avoiding the black box explanation pitfall requires further theoretical and empirical work aimed at clarifying the nature of conspiracy mentality, that is, its content (“What is conspiracy mentality?”) and causes (“How do individuals develop a conspiracy mentality?”).

Finally, to guide future efforts to answer these questions, I formulate two generic hypotheses based on philosophical analysis of conspiracy thinking and past empirical research. First, regarding its content, I propose that conspiracy mentality may be a multidimensional construct. Second, regarding its causes, I propose that exposure to specific conspiracy theories may reinforce conspiracy mentality, and that the causal relationship between the two constructs might be bidirectional. These hypotheses challenge common assumptions on conspiracy mentality.

### **The Potential Pitfalls of Conspiracy Mentality**

#### ***Circular Reasoning***

Despite existing theoretical discussions surrounding the nature of conspiracy mentality and how it arguably differs from belief in conspiracy theories, the concepts of conspiracy mentality and conspiracy beliefs tend to be used interchangeably in empirical research (Imhoff et al., 2022). For instance, Swami et al. (2017) have reported several measurements of “individual differences in conspiracist ideation” (p. 2) that consist in inventories of specific conspiracy theories (e.g., about 9/11 or the moon landing). On a similar note, the expressions “conspiracy mentality” and “conspiracy beliefs” are often used as synonymous in the literature (e.g., Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). This interchangeability may lead to circular reasoning if one wishes to propose a causal analysis of the relationships between the two constructs. Indeed, if the constructs are viewed as interchangeable, the cause

and the consequence are conflated, resulting in an inoperative explanation (Sutton & Douglas, 2020).

It is safe to assume that few scholars, if any, engage in this kind of causal explanation, as it is obviously flawed. Rather, the equivalence between conspiracy mentality and conspiracy theory beliefs is likely to be found in research that does *not* examine the relationships between the two constructs (e.g., because it is assumed that they are one and the same, Sutton & Douglas, 2020). However, the fact that conspiracy mentality is commonly defined as a stable disposition to believe in conspiracy theories (suggesting causality), combined with the fact that the concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, may convey the sense that psychologists fall for circular reasoning (e.g., Butter & Knight, 2015).

Avoiding the pitfall of circular reasoning necessitates to acknowledge the conceptual and empirical discrepancies between belief in specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy mentality (see Imhoff et al., 2022). Accordingly, the concepts and their measurements should not be used interchangeably.

### ***Black Box Explanations***

Even if one clearly distinguishes the cause from the consequence, there is still a risk of what I propose to call *black box explanations*. I define them as explanations that mobilise a cause only defined by its outcome (e.g., conspiracy theory beliefs) to explain said outcome. Even if the cause (a *disposition* to believe in conspiracy theories) and the consequence (beliefs in conspiracy theories) are clearly distinguished, such a causal reasoning may only

bring an illusion of clarification, as the nature of the cause remains unclear.<sup>1</sup> This kind of situation may arise if one sticks to the minimal definition of conspiracy mentality (i.e., a stable disposition to believe in conspiracy theories) when analysing its causal relationship with beliefs in conspiracy theories.

To illustrate how black box explanations differ from circular explanations, let me consider the example provided by Kitrick (2005). If I throw a baseball in a window, the fact that the glass breaks can be explained by one of its properties, namely, fragility. Even though I may define fragility as a disposition to break (i.e., the outcome I wish to explain), it still refers to some internal properties of the glass – even if these properties need to be properly defined (McKitrick, 2005). Similarly, saying that Bill believes in conspiracy theories because he has some kind of *conspiracy mentality* (black box explanation) is not equivalent to saying that he believes in conspiracy theories because he tends to believe in conspiracy theories (circular explanation). Contrary to the second explanation, the black box explanation points to certain psychological properties in Bill that make him more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. While circular reasoning leads to intrinsically void explanations, black box explanations may be viewed as the first step of the causal analysis. However, even though this first step is necessary, it has very little explanatory power in and of itself.

Plausibly, black box explanations also impede the investigation of the antecedents of conspiracy mentality. Indeed, it might be difficult to formulate precise hypotheses regarding the causes of conspiracy mentality if one does not know clearly what it is – except that it is *a disposition that causes belief in conspiracy theories*. Relatedly, black box explanations make

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<sup>1</sup> We may note that similar criticisms have been addressed to outdated definitions of social power, which defined power as a capacity to exert influence (for a summary of this controversy, see Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

it difficult to precisely assess conceptual overlap between the cause and related constructs (e.g., in the case of conspiracy mentality, anti-elitism or distrust of authorities).

While avoiding circular reasoning is easy, avoiding the pitfall of black box explanations may necessitate conceptual and empirical work. That said, some authors have already engaged in efforts to overcome the minimal definition of conspiracy mentality. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) proposed that conspiracy mentality can be characterised as a generalised political attitude capturing individuals' propensity to "interpret world events as being caused by plots hatched in secret" (Imhoff et al., 2022). This political attitude is characterised by "disliking powerful societal groups and perceiving them as responsible for political and economic events with negative implications" (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014, see also Popper, 1963).

This ideological approach may be viewed as a first look into the black box. Nonetheless, there is still much room to further analyse and define the nature conspiracy mentality. To further open the black box, future research on conspiracy mentality may need to examine 1) the content of conspiracy mentality (i.e., its ideological components) and 2) the antecedents of conspiracy mentality (i.e., what processes shape it). However, the investigation of these two aspects might be obfuscated by common assumptions on conspiracy mentality. In the following sections, I question these assumptions and propose generic hypotheses aimed at guiding future research on these two aspects.

### **Clarifying the Nature of Conspiracy Mentality**

#### ***Conspiracy Mentality as a Multidimensional Construct***

Currently, conspiracy mentality is conceptualised as a unidimensional construct (Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian et al., 2016). While it statistically makes sense given the strong reliability of conspiracy mentality scales (e.g., Sutton &

Douglas, 2020; see however Swami et al., 2017), this unidimensional approach is questionable. Notably, even though they are supposed to capture the same construct, the items included in conspiracy mentality scales are remarkably diverse. Some items gauge participants' distrust of "official narratives" (e.g., Lantian et al., 2016). Others measure the perception that the public is ignorant that they are being manipulated (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), that seemingly unrelated events are secretly connected (Bruder et al., 2013), or that humankind's fate is determined by plots hatched by powerful groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Hence, experimental manipulations of conspiracy mentality (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2021) involve the manipulation of numerous variables: Trust in the media, trust in the government, belief that citizens are monitored by intelligence agencies, and so on.

Given this diversity, sticking to a unidimensional approach may impede efforts to provide a clearer conceptualisation of conspiracy mentality. Thus, future research may explore the possibility that it is a multidimensional construct. Notably, some works suggest that conspiracy mentality not only involves a specific perception of powerful groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), but also derogatory attitudes towards the public, which is viewed as gullible (Franks et al., 2017; Harambam & Aupers, 2016; Nera et al., 2022). Besides, interview-based research suggest that a core component of conspiracy mentality may be the assumption that the population is kept ignorant by "official narratives", and that one ought to see through those lies and look for hidden truths (Franks et al., 2017; Harambam & Aupers, 2016).

These two aspects – negative attitudes towards the public and the belief that the population is purposely maintained in ignorance – are remarkably captured in Popper's (1963, 2002) analysis of the *conspiracy theory of ignorance*, defined as the tendency to interpret "ignorance not as a mere lack of knowledge but as the work of some mischievous power [...]" (p. 3). This tendency, he argued, stems from the naïve assumption that truth, once revealed, is self-evident. Under this assumption, if some truth is not accepted by the

population, it must be because there are some “powers conspiring to keep us in ignorance” (p. 7), or alternatively because of “our own sinful refusal to see the manifest truth” (p. 7). Thus, the conspiracy theory of ignorance captures the belief that the population is intentionally maintained in ignorance, as well as the belief that the public *refuses* – or is unable – to see the truth. As such, the conspiracy theory of ignorance may be a useful conceptual tool to build a multifaceted, refined conceptualisation of conspiracy mentality.

Developing a multidimensional understanding of conspiracy mentality, let alone implementing it in measurement tools, would certainly be an exciting and challenging agenda for future research. I acknowledge that it is also possible that this investigation will ultimately lead to the conclusion that a unidimensional approach to conspiracy mentality is superior to the proposed multidimensional approach. However, regardless of the outcome of the investigation, considering the possibility that conspiracy mentality might be multidimensional would certainly help the conceptual refinement of conspiracy mentality.

### ***The Antecedents of Conspiracy Mentality***

To further clarify the nature of conspiracy mentality and better understand its causal relationship with belief in specific conspiracy theories, there is also a need to reflect on the development of conspiracy mentality within individuals. How do individuals end up adopting a generic conspiratorial understanding of the world?

In this regard, research investigating the individual trajectories of conspiracy believers offer some insights (Franks et al., 2017; see also Wagner-Egger et al., 2022). These works describe the development of conspiracy mentality as a journey in which individuals progressively drift apart from a consensually shared understanding of society, to endorse a conspiracist worldview (Franks et al., 2017). Similarly, Sutton and Douglas (2022) suggested that the radicalization of (some) conspiracy believers may follow a “rabbit hole” dynamic, in

which they inadvertently “fall” for conspiracy theories and end up trapped into a conspiracist belief system. These works suggest that while many factors may favour the development of a conspiracy mentality (e.g., perception of inequalities, Casara et al., 2022), exposure to specific conspiracy theories also seem to play a role. Hence, these works question the assumption that conspiracy mentality causally precedes belief in specific conspiracy theories.

These works are in line with an alternative interpretation of the positive intercorrelation between conspiracy beliefs, namely, the self-reinforcing web of beliefs (Goertzel, 1994). In this approach, conspiracy beliefs are not interrelated because they are underpinned by a latent variable, but because they causally impact each other (Williams et al., 2022). This interpretation, which was questioned by the finding that contradictory conspiracy beliefs are positively correlated (Wood et al., 2012; Sutton & Douglas, 2014), found renewed support in network analyses (Williams et al., 2022). An implication of this approach is that *conspiracy mentality may sometimes be a consequence, rather than a cause, of belief in conspiracy theories*. Indeed, belief in a specific conspiracy theory (e.g., about 9/11 attacks) may foster the endorsement of other conspiracy theories, leading to a generalised endorsement of conspiracy theories which may coalesce into a worldview in which conspiracies are pervasive, namely, a conspiracy mentality.

Hence, rather than postulating a unidirectional causation between conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories, acknowledging that specific conspiracy theories are susceptible to reinforce conspiracy mentality may shed a new light on the antecedents of conspiracy mentality. Such a novel perspective would integrate both causal interpretations of the intercorrelation between conspiracy beliefs – the self-reinforcing network of beliefs and the dispositional approach. In this new perspective, individuals may develop a relatively stable conspiracy mentality through long term exposure to specific

conspiracy theories (e.g., through conspiracist videos, articles, ...). In turn, conspiracy mentality may facilitate the endorsement of other specific conspiracy theories.

Endorsing the assumption of a bidirectional causality would open-up various venues for future research. For instance, future research could examine the conditions under which exposure to conspiracy theories is susceptible to foster the endorsement of others, and ultimately, to the formation of a conspiracy mentality. Examining the factors that drive the inferential leap from specific conspiracy theories to conspiracy mentality would certainly be an extremely valuable contribution to the discipline.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, the conceptual vagueness surrounding the notion of conspiracy mentality impedes the investigation of its relationship with belief in specific conspiracy theories. It also surely impedes the investigation of the antecedents of conspiracy mentality. If one seeks to distinguish conspiracy mentality from conspiracy theory beliefs and analyse their causal relationship, it is crucial to open the black box of conspiracy mentality and overcome the simplistic view according to which it is merely a disposition to believe in conspiracy theories. Defining the content and dimensionality of conspiracy mentality may help researchers to formulate hypotheses regarding how such a predisposition appears in the first place, and through which processes it affects – and is affected by – the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories.

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