THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES: THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SITUATIONAL FACTORS

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There is no easy explanation for why some people believe in conspiracy theories. Susceptibility to conspiracy theories can be associated with a range of various factors in which both psychological and situational components play a significant role. In this article, I aim to provide a review of potential psychological and situational factors that fuel conspiracy theorising, focusing primarily on examples relating to politics. Moreover, I aim to analyse the effects of conspiracy theories on society and politics. At the beginning, I will define the key terms used in psychology research. Then, I will discuss psychological factors. I will review current research on predispositions that drive people to believe conspiracy theories. These may comprise psychological motives (epistemic, existential, and social), cognitive factors (e.g. intuitive thinking style), personality traits (e.g. maladaptive traits), or worldviews (e.g. authoritarian worldviews). In the next section, I aim to illuminate situational factors. Large-scale and threatening events may drive people to seek explanations in the wrong places, specifically, in conspiracies. A notable example is the COVID-19 pandemic when the popularity of conspiracy theories greatly increased. Overall, a combination of specific predispositions and situations may significantly contribute to higher levels of conspiracy beliefs, which, consequently, severely impact society.

Key words: conspiracy theories; conspiracy beliefs; politics; predictors; consequences.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are widespread in society. Many surveyed respondents worldwide believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). In 2020, 25% of US adults agreed that 'the coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans' (Uscinski et al. 2022, 6). In turn, in Germany, the endorsement of pro-Russian conspiracy narratives increased between the spring and fall of 2022 (Lamberty and Frühwirth 2023, 4). For instance, in April, 12% of respondents agreed that 'Putin is acting against a global elite that is pulling the strings behind the scenes'; in October, it increased to 18%. Moreover, 20–26% of respondents partly agreed and partly disagreed with this statement. As another example, the GLOBSEC study conducted in Central and Eastern European countries in 2022 demonstrated that around 30–50% of respondents believe in conspiracy theories related to democracy, for example, that democracy does not exist, and the world is ruled by hidden elites (Hajdu et al. 2022). These percentages were particularly high in Bulgaria and Slovakia, reaching 54% in both countries.

First, to properly characterise the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, it is crucial to present key terms and definitions. In psychology, conspiracy theories are often defined as beliefs about a group of people collaborating secretly to illegitimately achieve malevolent goals related to harming others (Zonis and Joseph 1994). Another definition describes conspiracy theories as unverified belief in a conspiracy in a situation for which this does not seem to be a particularly convincing and plausible explanation of the event (Brotherton 2013). Another definition of conspiracy theories was proposed by Nera and Schöpfer (2023), who characterised conspiracy theories as claims that the public is ubiquitously lied to about certain aspects of reality to allow certain groups to achieve a harmful goal that serves their own benefit. Furthermore, some definitions of conspiracy theories are epistemologically agnostic, whereas others are epistemologically normative (ibid.). The first group do not stake claims about the truth of conspiracy theories. They assume that any suspected conspiracy can be treated as a conspiracy theory, even if some of these claims turn out to be true (e.g. the Watergate scandal), like the definition by Zonis and Joseph (1994). In contrast, epistemologically normative definitions assess the truth value of conspiracy theories, that is, whether suspicions of conspiracy are justified (e.g. Brotherton 2013). However, it is difficult to judge with certainty whether a given conspiracy claim is true or false. In this article, I rely on the epistemologically agnostic approach to conspiracy theories, which researchers often use.

1.1 Conspiracy Mentality and Specific Conspiracy Theories

Beliefs in conspiracy theories can be studied in reference to the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories on a particular topic or in reference to more general worldviews, specifically, conspiracy mentality (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022).

Specific conspiracy theories are focused on specific issues or events (ibid.). They concern beliefs about the existence of a conspiracy related to a particular phenomenon. Most often, these are topics related to important social and political events, like the war in Ukraine (Lamberty and Frühwirth 2023) or the COVID-19 pandemic (Uscinski et al. 2022). Thus, specific conspiracy theories are an application of the idea that there are conspiracies behind important events that are hatched in a specific context by specific people for particular purposes

(Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022). Specific conspiracy theories refer to particular content; hence, they may be related to other variables in various ways. For instance, belief in conspiracy theories about 'gender ideology' was correlated with social distance towards gay men and lesbians (Marchlewska et al. 2019). Moreover, specific conspiracy theories may change over time and, compared to conspiracy mentality, are more susceptible to experimental manipulation (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022).

In turn, conspiracy mentality can be described as the general proneness of seeing the world in conspiracist terms, creating a monological belief system (ibid.). It is a relatively stable predisposition that varies from individual to individual. Conspiracy mentality takes the form of a continuum, in which one extreme represents paranoid suspicion and a strong tendency to endorse conspiracy theories, while the other extreme represents the unreflective acceptance of all official versions of events. The essence of the conspiracy mentality is that people who believe in one conspiracy theory are likelier to endorse others, even if they are unrelated or contradictory (Galliford and Furnham 2017). Therefore, conspiracy mentality remains a strong predictor of belief in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bertlich and Frenken 2022). It should be noted that conspiracy mentality is also referred to as 'conspiracist ideation' or 'conspiracy thinking' (Douglas et al. 2019).

2 PREDICTORS OF BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Explaining why people believe in conspiracy theories is not easy. Various psychological, political, and social factors may underlie conspiracy beliefs (ibid.). In the sections below, I describe some of the most important psychological and situational factors that can make a person more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories.

2.1 Psychological Factors

Motivations

Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka (2017) proposed a classification of motives behind conspiracy beliefs focusing on epistemic, existential, and social needs essential to healthy psychological and social functioning. Deprivation of those needs can worsen well-being and result in maladaptive, harmful psychological responses as well as deterioration of mental health (Biddlestone et al. 2022). As a result, it can increase the tendency to accept simplified explanations offered by conspiracy theories since they seem to satisfy frustrated needs, point out the enemy responsible for all misfortunes, and help to make sense of the situation.

Epistemic motives of conspiracy beliefs refer to the psychological need for certainty and knowledge (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Feelings of uncertainty inhibit people's capacity to predict and anticipate potentially threatening events (Biddlestone et al. 2022). Conspiracy theories offer consistent explanations for complex phenomena; therefore, they especially appeal to people who experience unpleasant feelings of uncertainty. They help deal with the unpredictability of events, and, at the same time, they can protect one's beliefs in the face of threatening information and alternative views (Douglas et al. 2019). For instance, in previous research, conspiracy beliefs related to intolerance of uncertainty (e.g. Larsen et al. 2021) and a higher need for cognitive closure (e.g. Marchlewska, Cichocka and Kossowska 2018), which is a desire to have certain

and unambiguous knowledge about a given topic and an ambiguity aversion. People prone to believe in conspiracy theories also tend to look for patterns, meanings, and agency in the environment, which may help to deal with uncertainty. For instance, participants with a higher tendency to conspiracy beliefs perceived non-existing, illusory patterns in chaotic paintings (van Prooijen, Douglas and De Inocencio 2018) and deeper meaning in statements that were grammatically correct and seemed profound, but they were nonsense (i.e., pseudo-profound bullshit) (Pennycook et al. 2015). Moreover, people who endorse conspiracy theories look for agency and intentionality in events (e.g. Douglas et al. 2016) and are more prone to believe in paranormal phenomena (e.g. van Prooijen, Douglas and De Inocencio 2018). Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs are related to a lower ability to analytic thinking, overreliance on intuitive thinking, and susceptibility to cognitive biases (e.g. Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020), which I will discuss in more detail in the section on cognitive factors.

Existential motives of conspiracy beliefs refer to the need for security and control (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Feelings of lack of control, powerlessness, or fear can increase the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories since they can be used to cope with existential threats and insecurities (Biddlestone et al. 2022). Alternative explanations of conspiracy theories can provide a sense of illusion of control and power (Douglas et al. 2019). Previous studies found positive associations of conspiracy beliefs with the need for control (e.g. Gligorić et al. 2021), perceived lack of socio-political control (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013), and anomie (e.g. Enders et al. 2023), which is a belief that social conditions and institutions are irreversibly crumbling. Also, endorsement of conspiracy theories was connected with depression and anxiety (e.g. Bowes et al. 2021). Additionally, some studies suggest that chronic lack of control and dispositional anxiety can be associated with conspiracy beliefs more than situational anxiety and acute lack of control (Krüppel, Yoon and Mokros, 2023; Stojanov, Bering and Halberstadt 2020). However, it should be noted that threats in real life, like disasters, may arouse a higher threat to perceived control than experimental manipulations (ibid.).

Social motives of conspiracy beliefs concern the need to maintain a positive image of self and the groups that one belongs to (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Conspiracy theories offer the opportunity to attribute one's failures to others, which protects one's image and releases one from responsibility for an unfavourable position. Conspiracy theories may support people in enhancing self-esteem and defending this positive image through the conviction that they possess accurate, important information that others do not have. Previous research demonstrated that higher levels of conspiracy beliefs were associated with the need for uniqueness (e.g. Imhoff and Lamberty 2017), individual narcissism (e.g. Cichocka, Marchlewska and Biddlestone 2022), and collective narcissism (e.g. Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). Collective narcissism is the belief that one's group (e.g. nation or religious group) is great and unique but not appreciated enough by others (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). In particular, groups that perceive themselves as threatened or undervalued tend to believe that others conspire against them (Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Overall, previous meta-analyses confirmed that epistemic, existential, and social motives are associated with conspiracy beliefs (Biddlestone et al. 2022; Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Moreover, in a meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022), the variables included in the motives were often more strongly related to specific conspiracy theories than to conspiracy mentality. For

example, anomie, which is an existential motive, was not significantly associated with conspiracy mentality. Instead, anomie may lead to the adoption of specific conspiracy theories that relate to current socio-political conditions.

Cognitive factors

Conspiracy beliefs are also rooted in cognitive processes, such as thinking patterns or cognitive styles (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). People who believe in conspiracy theories are characterised by a lack of reflection and excessive reliance on intuition (e.g. Binnendyk and Pennycook 2022). They rely on simple explanations offered by conspiracy theories and avoid looking for information from reliable sources, especially since official narratives are often complex and ambiguous (Douglas et al. 2019). At the same time, they overestimate their capacity to understand complex causal relationships. In previous research, endorsement of conspiracy theories was related to higher intuitive thinking (e.g. Swami et al. 2014) and lower analytic thinking (e.g. Čavojová, Šrol and Ballová Mikušková 2022; Swami et al. 2014), as well as a lack of critical thinking ability (e.g. Lantian et al. 2021) and scientific reasoning (e.g. Čavojová, Šrol and Ballová Mikušková 2022). Negative relationships between reflective thinking and conspiracy beliefs were confirmed in a recent meta-analysis (Yelbuz, Madan and Alper 2022). Another study worth mentioning is the one by Caroti and others (2023), which demonstrated that critical thinking education interventions in school students decreased the level of conspiracy beliefs. Thus, cognitive style is a significant factor underlying conspiracy beliefs, which may be susceptible to intervention.

Furthermore, cognitive biases and heuristics are also prevalent among conspiracy believers. Heuristics are part of intuitive thinking that can be characterised as mental shortcuts that enable quick and efficient evaluation of complex information (van Prooijen, Klein and Milošević Đorđević 2020). Heuristics are useful and allow people to function with minimal mental effort, but can lead to false judgments and cognitive biases. For instance, conspiracy beliefs were associated with conjunction fallacy (e.g. Brotherton and French 2014), jump-to-conclusions bias (e.g. Pytlik, Soll and Mehl 2020), and 'major event-major cause' bias (e.g. Leman and Cinnirella 2007). The conjunction fallacy is a tendency to perceive implausible casual connections between coinciding events that are probably not directly related (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). Jumping to conclusions is a tendency to make rash decisions that are not based on enough evidence (Pytlik, Soll and Mehl 2020). The 'major event-major cause' bias refers to inferring that big-scale and significant events (e.g. the death of a famous person) are more likely to have a major cause (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). An attractive explanation for such an event may be a conspiracy theory that clearly indicates the perpetrator and the cause of the event. Conspiracy beliefs were also connected with stereotyping, which arises from heuristics (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020).

Additionally, the endorsement of conspiracy theories can be related to reflexive open-mindedness, an inflated openness to possibilities, and the tendency to naively accept new information as valid (Binnendyk and Pennycook 2022; Pennycook and Rand 2020). In this case, people high in reflexive open-mindedness may unreflectively accept alternative conspiracist claims and, at the same time, be sceptical toward all official non-conspiracist narratives. People who avoid assessing their beliefs based on various evidence are more open to conspiracy theories. Overall, cognitive factors, including thinking skills, usage of heuristics, and cognitive biases, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

Personality Traits

Furthermore, research to date suggests that some personality traits may contribute to the endorsement of conspiracy theories. For instance, in previous studies, conspiracy beliefs were associated with maladaptive traits, like Dark Triad or Dark Tetrad personality traits (e.g. Kay 2021; Teličák, Halama and Kohút 2023). The Dark Triad is composed of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism. In turn, the Dark Tetrad consists of these three traits plus sadism. What they have in common is their undesirable, socially problematic, and maladaptive nature, which results in difficult relationships with others. They are maladaptive, but they are distinct from clinical psychopathology. In general, all those traits were associated with conspiracy beliefs in previous research, although the results were not always consistent, especially in the case of sadism (e.g. Teličák, Halama and Kohút 2023). Moreover, some approaches suggested that the potential explanation for the connection with conspiracy theories may differ for each of the Dark Tetrad traits, and some indicated that they have a similar background. For instance, Kay (2021) suggested that conspiracist ideation may result from the common core of Dark Tetrad traits rather than features unique to each trait. In his study, most of the relationships between facets of Dark Tetrad traits and conspiracist ideation were explained by the propensity to entertain odd beliefs, be fatalistic, and distrust others.

Another common area of research regarding the relationship between personality and conspiracy beliefs was personality factor models, such as the Big Five model, which consists of five traits: neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. Nejat, Heirani-Tabas and Nazarpour (2023) hypothesised that the Big Five traits could refer to motives of conspiracy beliefs in specific ways. Neuroticism could be related to existential motives of conspiracy beliefs due to increased anxiety and stress vulnerability. High levels of agreeableness could be negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs since increased optimism and trust toward others may suppress the impact of existential motives. In the case of extroversion, social motives could be crucial, as this trait is related to the significant role of social relationships. In turn, openness and conscientiousness could refer to epistemic motives. People open to experience could be less prone to conspiracy beliefs since openness is the opposite of the need for closure, which is a part of epistemic motives. Conscientiousness, as a striving for order and accuracy, may be negatively related to conspiracy beliefs and their epistemic motives. However, in the study, only extraversion positively predicted conspiracy beliefs. Furthermore, meta-analyses conducted in recent years have provided inconsistent results (Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023; Goreis and Voracek 2019; Stasielowicz 2022). Goreis and Voracek (2019) indicated that none of the Big Five traits were correlated with conspiracy beliefs. In another meta-analysis, low agreeableness and high neuroticism were related to conspiracy beliefs, but those relations were weak (Stasielowicz 2022). In a meta-analysis by Bowes, Costello and Tasimi (2023), agreeableness and conscientiousness were negative correlates, while neuroticism and extraversion were positive correlates of conspiracy beliefs. However, these relationships were weak. Overall, results indicate that relationships between the Big Five traits and conspiracy beliefs are weak or negligible.

In addition, belief in conspiracy theories was associated with psychopathology factors such as schizotypy, paranoia, psychoticism, and the disposition to have unusual experiences (ibid.). Taken together, the research findings on personality

factors and conspiracy beliefs are somewhat inconsistent, but some traits, like the Dark Tetrad traits, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

Worldviews and Ideology

Other factors that may play an essential role in the endorsement of conspiracy theories are worldviews and ideology. Ideology is a set of beliefs through which people perceive and understand the world (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020). It affects cognitive processes, affective reactions, and behaviour, including conspiracy beliefs. Thus, ideology, such as political beliefs, can drive a person's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Moreover, increased sensitivity to information that conflicts with one's worldview may lead to attempts to defend one's beliefs using conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

It is worth noting that political beliefs can be studied as unidimensional or dimensional constructs (Czarnek, Szwed and Kossowska 2019). The unidimensional approach covers the left-right continuum, whereas the dimensional approach includes two dimensions encompassing economic and cultural views. In the cultural dimension, right-wing views are related to a preference for traditional values, whereas left-wing views refer to a preference for social change and personal freedom. In turn, the economic dimension includes a right-wing preference for a free-market economy versus a left-wing preference for the welfare state. The two-dimensional approach is especially common in post-communist countries such as Hungary and Poland (Bilewicz et al. 2015). In addition, those dimensions are often negatively correlated, which means that people with right-wing views on cultural issues may have left-wing views on economic issues.

Much of the research to date has examined links between conspiracy beliefs and political ideology. For instance, some studies indicated that conspiracy beliefs were connected with right-wing views (e.g. Galliford and Furnham 2017). People on the right are usually more close-minded, have a higher need for cognitive closure, and perceive threats in the environment more often than people on the left (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020). For this reason, right-wing views may be associated with epistemic motives of conspiracy beliefs and the need for threat reduction. Regarding the dimensional approach to political views, people with right-wing cultural views may be particularly prone to conspiracy beliefs. For instance, right-wing cultural views were linked to negative attitudes toward vaccinations (Kossowska, Szwed and Czarnek 2021). Moreover, religious fundamentalism, as a part of cultural right-wing views, was also related to the endorsement of conspiracy theories, like coronavirus conspiracy theories (Łowicki et al. 2022). However, it should be noted that the relationship between religiosity and conspiracy beliefs is not clear. It occurs that probably only religious fundamentalism is related to conspiracy beliefs, not general religiosity.

However, it turns out that left-wing people may also endorse conspiracy theories (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022; van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015). In general, especially people in the extremes of the political spectrum are more prone to conspiracy thinking, and it can be either right or left extreme. A meta-analysis by Imhoff and colleagues (2022) confirms this conclusion; the results suggest that the relationship between political ideology and conspiracy endorsement may be quadratic. Moreover, in a study by van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (2015), belief in simple political solutions was a mediator in the quadratic relationship between political orientation and conspiracy beliefs. The authors concluded that the relationship between political extremism and conspiracy beliefs results from

a thinking style focused on seeking sense in societal events. Thus, conspiracy beliefs are not limited to right-wing views and may depend more on the level of extremity, regardless of the political side. Both extremes may be predisposed to conspiracy mentality and share similar features, such as distrust and negative attitudes toward outgroups with alternative views (Imhoff et al. 2022). In addition, both right and left extremes may strive to maintain their beliefs rigid because of crippled epistemology (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet 2015). However, they may endorse different types of conspiracy theories. For instance, people on the left may believe more in conspiracies about capitalism, whereas people on the right may endorse conspiracy theories about science or immigrants. Overall, political ideology is related to conspiracy beliefs, but it should be noted that this relationship is still stronger for the right side of the political spectrum (Imhoff et al. 2022).

Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs were linked to right-wing authoritarianism (e.g. Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is characterised by submission toward established authorities, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism (Altemeyer 2004). It is also connected with ethnocentrism, prejudice, and hostility toward minorities and homosexuals. Conspiracy beliefs were also related to belief in a dangerous world, which can be perceived as a precursor to RWA (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). This belief concerns perceiving the social world as threatening, where bad people menace good people. Moreover, people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to believe that the world is a competitive jungle, which is a conviction that weak people are always dominated by those stronger (ibid.). In turn, this worldview can form the basis for social dominance orientation (SDO), which can be defined as a support for hierarchy in society and beliefs that lower-status groups should be dominated since they pose a threat to higher-status groups (Pratto et al. 1994). Indeed, previous studies demonstrated that people high in SDO are likelier to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g. Bowes, Costello and Tasimi 2023). Overall, conspiracy beliefs, RWA, and SDO have a common feature: the desire to maintain the socio-political status quo (Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel 2020).

Many studies also linked conspiracy beliefs to national collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). I described this issue in this section since national collective narcissism is embedded around right-wing views and authoritarianism. National collective narcissism describes a need for recognition of its nation and concerns about its good image (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021). It is related to right-wing extremism, populism (ibid.), RWA, and SDO (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). A recent meta-analysis confirmed that collective narcissism is associated with conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories, especially conspiracy theories about out-groups like immigrants (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). People high in collective narcissism are sensitive to signals of insufficient in-group appreciation and often experience intergroup threats (Biddlestone et al. 2020). Consequently, they tend to believe that out-group members are conspiring against the in-group. Conspiracy theories can provide specific targets on which to blame the in-group's failures and negative experiences. At the same time, they allow for maintaining a positive image of the in-group. These aspects are related to the social motives of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al. 2019). Furthermore, national collective narcissism is also related to the endorsement of other conspiracy theories. For instance, national collective narcissism was related to belief in coronavirus conspiracy theories and their spreading during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sternisko et al. 2023). This may happen since conspiracy theories can protect

the professed beliefs and function as meaning-making activity, which is important for collective narcissists due to being constantly concerned about the in-group's greatness and its recognition (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). Taken together, some worldviews, especially those characterised by extremity, may drive conspiracy beliefs.

2.2 Situational Factors

In addition to psychological predispositions, situational factors can be essential in predicting conspiracy beliefs. Some social and political situations are conducive to developing and spreading conspiracy theories. Moreover, psychological and situational factors may interact and, as a result, increase the endorsement of conspiracy theories. Thus, the combination of psychological and situational factors may be crucial in explaining succumbing to conspiracy theories. In the following section, I will discuss the role of situational factors and their connections with individual predispositions.

Large-Scale Events

Conspiracy theories emerge especially after large-scale and distressing events, such as social and economic crises, terrorist attacks, wars, natural disasters, pandemics, rapid societal changes, or even the death of a famous person (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). Those circumstances may contribute to the increase in the popularity of some conspiracy theories in society, which most concern people susceptible to conspiracy claims. Belief in conspiracy theories during times of crisis can satisfy epistemic, existential, and social motives. Conspiracy theories arise when people experience feelings of existential threat, uncertainty, fear, or powerlessness, which are present during a societal crisis (van Prooijen 2020). A meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that the association between conspiracy beliefs and perceived threats is particularly strong for external rather than internal threats, consistent with the conclusion that conspiracy theories emerge during societal crises. Moreover, in difficult situations, people try to cope with unpleasant feelings and look for a sense of the situation in conspiracies, which are usually simple and certain, in contrast to official narratives (van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). In this way, conspiracy explanations can appeal to people who do not tolerate ambiguity, think intuitively, and are prone to cognitive biases; the 'major event-major cause' bias may be of particular importance (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). Generally, an increase in conspiracy beliefs could be observed during various significant social and political events throughout human history (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Referring to specific examples, conspiracy theories emerged after the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attack, or, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was a circumstance that affected the whole world and enabled the natural observation of the emergence of conspiracy theories in times of crisis. Conspiracy theories were focused, for instance, on the government, 5G radiation, public figures like Bill Gates, pharmaceutical companies, or vaccinations (Grimes 2021). They also often refer to the origins, spread, and treatment of the coronavirus (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Generally, COVID-19 conspiracy theories have started to appear on social media since the pandemic outbreak (Douglas 2021). These times were challenging for societies and affected all areas of life. Therefore, people were experiencing fear, worries about their relatives, and uncertainty about the future. Additionally, various preventive measures, including social isolation, were necessary, which also had a negative impact on well-being. Some people sought answers to difficult questions in conspiracy

theories, attempting to deal with thwarted psychological needs. Moreover, research demonstrated that certain individual factors, like national collective narcissism, predicted a tendency to believe in and spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Sternisko et al. 2023). Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may reveal weaknesses in a nation's leadership and health care; hence, this threatens a national image important to collective narcissists. Thus, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic could serve to manage this identity threat. COVID-19 conspiracy theories also had numerous adverse outcomes, which I will mention below.

Socio-Political Situation

Conspiracy theories are common in politics and may attract people for political reasons (Douglas and Sutton 2023). Populist leaders and authoritarian regimes favour the development of conspiracy theories since they may serve strategic functions (Giry and Gürpinar 2020). Conspiracy theories can be used to manipulate people and their attitudes, especially those with extreme views. Populism can be defined as a 'political mentality that construes society as a dichotomous struggle between "the people" versus "the establishment"' (van Prooijen 2018, 83). According to Thielmann and Hiblig (2023, 791), populism and conspiracy mentality have a common basis, which is generalised dispositional distrust, defined as 'a belief that others are untrustworthy, exploitative, and self-serving to one's own disadvantage'. Both populism and conspiracy theories deepen societal division and are based on 'us versus them' narratives. Furthermore, authoritarianism promotes political conspiracy theories, especially if they protect the status quo (Osborne et al. 2023). People high in right-wing authoritarianism try to protect the in-group and their beliefs, which are propagated and reinforced by in-group leaders. Thus, right-wing authoritarians especially believe in pro-establishment conspiracy theories (Wood and Gray 2019).

Moreover, in populist and authoritarian regimes, conspiracy theories may take the form of propaganda aimed at finding and combating alleged ubiquitous enemies, which reinforces and legitimises their power (Giry and Gürpinar 2020). The relationship between conspiracy beliefs and discrimination of certain groups may be conditional on various situational factors, like political elections, during which the motivation to defend in-group power may be higher (Biddlestone et al. 2020). Scapegoats may be various groups depending on the socio-political situation, for instance, immigrants, Jews, or the LGBT community (Giry and Gürpinar 2020; Soral et al. 2018). Thus, depending on their goals, politicians can spread specific conspiracy theories and contribute to their prevalence in society. For instance, if the LGBT community in Poland were not pointed out as a threat to the nation by some far-right populist political leaders and their constituencies, conspiracy theories about 'LGBT ideology' might not be so widespread. Belief in this conspiracy theory in Polish public discourse was initially visible mainly in the Catholic and far-right-wing political environments (Soral et al. 2018). Later, it gained more attention, for instance, from concerned parents who feared the 'LGBT ideology', which allegedly threatens traditional family values and encourages immorality among children (Korolczuk and Graff 2021).

Additionally, a characteristic significantly related to susceptibility to populist slogans and conspiracy theories, especially these accusing out-groups, is national collective narcissism. People high in national collective narcissism more often support right-wing populist parties (Golec de Zavala and Keenan 2021) and may believe in conspiracy theories, which they spread. Collective narcissism and

conspiracy theories share the same political functions: they create threatening environments that undemocratic leaders exploit for their own benefits. Therefore, the use of undemocratic practices, coercion, and violence can be justified (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022).

Socio-Political Exclusion

Moreover, factors related to socio-political exclusion and lack of political power play an essential role in proneness to conspiracy beliefs. People more often endorse conspiracy theories targeted at their political rivals, and this tendency is especially salient when people perceive that their political group is threatened (Douglas and Sutton 2023). For instance, some political conspiracy theories may emerge during elections, which can be related to increased feelings of uncertainty (Douglas et al. 2019). However, they can also be prevalent after elections, when rivals win, since people who are political losers more often believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Furthermore, people who experience political distrust (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022), powerlessness (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013; Uscinski and Parent 2014), lack of socio-political control (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013), feelings of not being represented within the political system (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014), and who reject the political system (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022) are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. In line with these findings, a meta-analysis by Imhoff and colleagues (2022) indicated that deprivation of political control strengthens the relationship between ideology and belief in conspiracy theories. Such theories may help regain a sense of control, so they are appealing to political losers and those who feel powerless.

Furthermore, the experience of ostracism, belonging to minority groups (e.g. ethnic or religious minorities), and low social status also predispose to conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Graeupner and Coman 2017; Uscinski and Parent 2014). Conspiracy beliefs may be higher in low-status groups due to attempts to explain their position and status (Douglas et al. 2019). A meta-analysis by Biddlestone and colleagues (2022) confirmed that a sense of deprivation and societal marginalisation were significant risk factors for conspiracy beliefs. Thus, conspiracy theories help excuse disadvantaged positions of self and in-group. They protect the socio-political status quo and help people cope with difficult life situations (Jolley, Douglas and Sutton 2018).

New Media

The Internet and social media are further situational factors facilitating the transmission of conspiracy theories (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvée 2020). In these times, conspiracy explanations can be widely transmitted, making gaining new supporters easier. The availability of conspiracy claims increases the risk of potential exposure to them and their endorsement by individuals. However, according to Enders, Uscinski and colleagues (2023), the Internet may be less affected by conspiracy theories than is often assumed, and the relationship between social media use and conspiracy beliefs may depend on individual-level predispositions, such as conspiracy thinking. Other studies demonstrated that conspiracy thinking is related to using non-mainstream media (e.g. Walter and Drochon 2022) and the tendency to share false information online (Enders et al. 2023). Overall, the transmission process of conspiracy theories may depend on individual differences, situational factors, and the specific content of conspiracy theories. These factors may affect belief in conspiracy theories and the intention to spread them (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger and Delouvée 2020).

3 CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories have serious adverse consequences and are associated with various maladaptive behaviours. Some scholars suggest that potential benefits of conspiracy theories may exist, yet numerous studies confirm their negative impact on individuals and societies, especially democratic societies (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020).

Although conspiracy theories attempt to meet psychological needs, they do not do this effectively and may worsen individuals' well-being (ibid.). Belief in conspiracy theories may lead to greater deprivation of those needs rather than satisfying them. For instance, conspiracy theories can increase feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty (Jolley and Douglas 2014), and existential threat (van Prooijen 2020). Instead of satisfying the existential need, conspiracy theories can be a source of existential threat. In addition, conspiracy beliefs are related to increased feelings of intergroup threat, and they may strengthen feelings of alienation, which frustrate social motives of conspiracy beliefs (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020).

Conspiracy theories also lead to various societal harms (Biddlestone et al. 2022). They are related to the deterioration of public health, which could be observed during the COVID-19 pandemic**.** For instance, a meta-analysis by Bierwiaczonek, Gundersen and Kunst (2022) confirmed associations between conspiracy beliefs and unwillingness to follow public health guidelines, rejection of COVID-19 vaccines, and support for alternative treatments like chloroquine. Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs were generally associated with science denialism, for example, in the domains of global warming and vaccinations (Jolley, Mari and Douglas 2020). Conspiracy theories can also pose a threat to social cohesion since they are related to the support of political violence (e.g. Enders et al. 2023), civic disengagement, such as disengaging from voting (e.g. Jolley and Douglas 2014), extremist ideology (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022), and populism (e.g. Thielmann and Hilbig 2023). Populism and conspiracy beliefs are integral parts of societies, and they both are based on us vs. them narratives, so they deepen societal division and have harmful consequences for societies (ibid.).

Additionally, conspiracy beliefs have intergroup consequences and may lead to problematic intergroup relations in the form of prejudice, intergroup discrimination, and the legitimisation of injustice (Biddlestone et al. 2020). They offer an opportunity to justify immoral acts toward out-groups accused of conspiracies. The reason for this may be an attempt to reduce the alleged control assigned to the out-group, regardless of the actual status of the group: both powerful and powerless groups can be accused of conspiring. Relationships with negative intergroup attitudes are especially visible in the context of collective narcissism, which is strictly connected with out-group conspiracy theories and sensitivity to in-group threats (Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). A meta-analysis by Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski (2022) indicated that out-group conspiracy theories often mediated the relation between collective narcissism and prejudice or discrimination of specific out-groups. For instance, Catholic collective narcissism predicted outgroup hostility, and this effect was mediated by gender conspiracy beliefs (Marchlewska et al. 2019). Conspiracy theories allow collective narcissists to blame others for in-group failures and justify the out-group hostility as a necessary defence against out-groups that undermine the in-group's greatness (Biddlestone et al. 2020;

Golec de Zavala, Bierwiaczonek and Ciesielski 2022). Thus, conspiracy beliefs can be a defensive reaction to protect the in-group image.

4 CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to provide an overview of psychological and situational factors that may increase the endorsement of conspiracy theories. First, I discussed the role of psychological factors, including motivational underpinnings, cognitive factors, personality traits, worldviews, and ideology. In the following section, I focused on situational factors, covering large-scale events, socio-political situation, socio-political exclusion, and ways of conspiracy theories transmission that may foster the development of conspiracy theories in society, particularly among susceptible individuals. Finally, I discussed the consequences of conspiracy beliefs, highlighting their harmful effects on individuals, public health, social cohesion, and intergroup relations. Taken together, the individual's susceptibility combined with the specific socio-political situation may particularly translate into greater acceptance of explanations offered by conspiracy theories, which, in consequence, may have a harmful impact on society. In summary, conspiracy beliefs are complex phenomena stemming from various psychological and situational factors. More research, especially experimental, is needed to understand the mechanisms of conspiracy beliefs and to develop potential ways to prevent them, thereby protecting society from their harmful consequences.

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POLITIČNI POTENCIAL TEORIJ ZAROTE: VLOGA PSIHOLOŠKIH IN SITUACIJSKIH DEJAVNIKOV

Ni enostavne razlage, zakaj nekateri ljudje verjamejo v teorije zarote. Dovzetnost za teorije zarote je lahko povezana z vrsto različnih dejavnikov, pri katerih igrajo pomembno vlogo tako psihološke kot situacijske komponente. V tem članku želimo ponuditi pregled možnih psiholoških in situacijskih dejavnikov, ki spodbujajo teorije zarot, pri čemer se osredotočamo predvsem na primere v zvezi s politiko. Poleg tega želimo analizirati učinke teorij zarot na družbo in politiko. Na začetku opredelimo ključne pojme, ki se uporabljajo v psihološkem raziskovanju, nato razpravljamo o psiholoških dejavnikih. Pregledali bomo trenutne raziskave o predispozicijah, zaradi katerih ljudje verjamejo v teorije zarote. Ti lahko vključujejo psihološke motive (epistemične, eksistencialne in socialne), kognitivne dejavnike (npr. intuitivni stil razmišljanja), osebnostne lastnosti (npr. neprilagojenost) ali poglede na svet (npr. avtoritarnost). V naslednjem razdelku želimo osvetliti situacijske dejavnike. Obsežni in grozeči dogodki lahko ljudi spodbudijo k iskanju

pojasnil na napačnih mestih, torej v zarotah. Pomemben primer je pandemija COVID-19, ko so teorije zarote postale priljubljene, zato bomo izpostavili tudi vlogo omenjene pandemije. Na splošno lahko kombinacija posebnih predispozicij in situacij bistveno prispeva k višjim stopnjam prepričanj o zaroti, kar ima posledično močan vpliv na družbo.

Ključne besede: teorije zarot; zarotniška prepričanja; politika; napovedovalci; posledice.