

# Kent Academic Repository

## Full text document (pdf)

### Citation for published version

Sternisko, Anni and Cichocka, Aleksandra and van Bavel, Jay J. (2020) The dark side of social movements: Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. ISSN 2352-250X. (In press)

### DOI

### Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/80196/>

### Document Version

Pre-print

#### Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

#### Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

#### Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

[researchsupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:researchsupport@kent.ac.uk)

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

# **The dark side of social movements:**

## **Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories**

Anni Sternisko<sup>1\*</sup> Aleksandra Cichocka<sup>23</sup> Jay J. Van Bavel<sup>1</sup>

### **Addresses**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA

<sup>2</sup>School of Psychology, University of Kent, CT2 7NZ Canterbury, UK

<sup>3</sup>Institute of Psychology, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Torun, Poland

\*Corresponding author: Van Bavel, Jay J. ([jay.vanbavel@nyu.edu](mailto:jay.vanbavel@nyu.edu))

### **Citation**

Sternisko, A., Cichocka, A. & Van Bavel, J. J. (in press). The dark side of social movements: Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*.

### **Acknowledgements**

*We thank members of the Social Identity and Morality Lab for valuable feedback on a previous version of this article. We thank our research assistants Sahar Hafezi and Akiva Thalheim for their help with literature research and proofreading the article.*

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### **Author Contributions**

All authors contributed to conceptualization, writing, review & editing. AS created the visualization.

## **Abstract**

*Social change does not always equal social progress--there is a dark side of social movements. We discuss conspiracy theory beliefs –beliefs that a powerful group of people are secretly working towards a malicious goal—as one contributor to destructive social movements. Research has linked conspiracy theory beliefs to anti-democratic attitudes, prejudice and non-normative political behavior. We propose a framework to understand the motivational processes behind conspiracy theories and associated social identities and collective action. We argue that conspiracy theories comprise at least two components – content and qualities— that appeal to people differently based on their motivations. Social identity motives draw people foremost to contents of conspiracy theories while uniqueness motives draw people to qualities of conspiracy theories.*

## **Highlights**

- Conspiracy theories claim that a powerful group is secretly pursuing an evil goal
- Conspiracy theories can foster anti-democratic social movements
- Conspiracy theories attract people with both their content and qualities
- Content and qualities appeal to people differently based on their motivations

## **The dark side of social movements:**

### **Social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories**

Social change is mostly equated with social *progress* brought about by revolutionary movements such as the Arabic Spring or #MeToo. However, social change is often destructive. Take the rising U.S. anti-vaccination movement. While measles vaccination rates have been steadily decreasing in many parts of the U.S. [1], the numbers of measles cases have skyrocketed from 86 cases in 2016 to 1,282 cases in 2019 [2]. Recent statistics from Europe provide another example of potentially dangerous social change. The current European Parliament holds as many as nine far-right parties [3]. These parties include Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, Italy's The League and France's National Rally [4] -- all of which exhibit xenophobic thought and pursue anti-Islamic political agendas [4–7]. What motivates social movements that threaten social health, economic prosperity, and democratic principles? We argue that conspiracy theories -- theories that a powerful group of people are secretly working towards a malevolent or unlawful goal [8\*\*] can be one reason. Though not all conspiracy theories are wrong, irrational, or harmful for society, many of them are in fact closely intertwined with some of today's most powerful, destructive social movements. For example, "The Great Replacement" conspiracy theory about a secret plot to ethnically and culturally replace White Europeans is one of the fastest growing far-right movements in Europe advocating to deport European immigrants [9]. In

this article, we will explain how conspiracy theories can foster anti-democratic social movements. Our article will exclusively focus on the destructive social movements associated with conspiracy theories, although we do acknowledge that certain (true) conspiracy theories can foster democratic and progressive social movements such as anti-corruption movements.

## **1. Conspiracy Theories as a threat to democracy**

While healthy skepticism of government and elites is necessary for a functioning democracy, beliefs in certain conspiracies can pose a serious threat to democracy. Conspiracy theory beliefs<sup>1</sup> are linked to political alienation and cynicism [10–12], decreased intentions to volunteer for a charity [13] and demotivate people to engage in normal, democratic practices [see 14] like voting [15, but see 16].

Conspiracy theories can even motivate unlawful anti-democratic political behavior (e.g., attacking people in power; [17\*\*,18]. Conspiracy beliefs have been linked to right-wing authoritarianism [19], political extremism across the political spectrum [20] and grandiose beliefs about the nation [21, 22, 23\*].

People holding stronger conspiracy theory beliefs are more open to everyday crimes [24] and hold stronger hostile intentions towards outgroups [23\*]. For instance, Jewish conspiracy theory beliefs are related to prejudice and discrimination against Jewish people [25-28] and several other outgroups [29\*\*].

## **2. The two motivational allures of conspiracy theories: content and qualities**

---

<sup>1</sup> Studies differ in their focus on beliefs in real-world conspiracy theories, novel conspiracy theories, conspiracy thinking, and conspiracy mentality. It goes beyond this paper to discuss and address psychological differences between these constructs. We will use “conspiracy theory beliefs” as an overarching, simplifying term.

To understand why and how conspiracy theory beliefs fuel anti-democratic social movements it is crucial to understand their motivational underpinnings and relationship to social identity. Recent reviews [30,8\*\*] distilled three main motivators behind conspiracy theory beliefs: conspiracy beliefs are higher when people want to (1) feel good about themselves and the groups they belong to [31,32, 21], (2) make sense of their environment [33–35], or (3) feel safe and in control [36–38].

Yet, an overarching framework that captures how these motives are linked to belief in conspiracy theories is missing. We propose that conspiracy theories comprise at least two motivational allures – content and qualities – that draw people toward them. We argue that motives behind conspiracy theories are qualitatively different for those who are enticed by the content of the conspiracy theory as opposed to those enticed by the qualities of the conspiracy theory. Using this distinction, also clarifies the relationship between different motives (e.g., social identity motives, uniqueness motives) and conspiracy theory beliefs. Social identity motives draw people foremost to the content of a conspiracy theory while uniqueness motives draw people foremost to the qualities of a conspiracy theory.

One may think about endorsing conspiracy theories like choosing a movie to watch. Someone who enjoys a good thriller might be more inclined to randomly pick a movie from the “horror” genre because its defining qualities (e.g., creepiness) promise to give them similar feelings. When and where the plot takes place might be inconsequential. Conversely, someone might be a fan of an actress (e.g., Julia Roberts) and picks a movie she’s starring in, regardless of its genre. Conspiracy theories can be understood as a genre of belief systems that is defined by certain qualities. Each individual conspiracy theory is a film with a unique content.

*Content* refers to the unique narrative elements of each conspiracy theory. While conspiracy theories all share the premise that a nefarious group is secretly working towards a malicious or unlawful goal, individual conspiracy theories vary in the specific group (e.g., Illuminati; government), which goal is pursued (e.g., New World Order, war) and which events can be explained (e.g., 2008 financial crisis, 9/11 terrorist attacks). This is similar to the contents of specific movies that people find appealing, like your favorite actor.

*Qualities* on the other hand refer to the structural properties that all conspiracy theories have in common. For example, regardless of their specific content, most conspiracy theories are epistemic (i.e., explain most events) and counter-normative (i.e., challenge agreed upon knowledge). This is similar to the specific qualities that define a genre of movies and that certain people find appealing, like the creepiness of horror movies or the silliness of comedy movies.

We argue that depending on context and motivational states, different contents or qualities are more alluring. For instance, people who are prejudiced against Muslims might be motivated to believe any sort of false information that presents this group in a negative light, including conspiracy theories. This is consistent with evidence that participants' beliefs in conspiracy theories depended on who the alleged conspirator was [39, 40, 41\*\*]. In contrast, the belief in a flat earth might primarily emerge from the psychological benefits of holding contrarian beliefs rather than compelling physical arguments. This is consistent with findings that participants who believed in one conspiracy theory were also more likely to believe in others, even when they were contradictory [42, 43].

We illustrate our argument by the means of discussing two motives behind conspiracy theory beliefs in more detail: social identity motives and uniqueness motives.

## **2.1. Content drawn motives: Social identity motives**

People are prone to form social identities in which group membership becomes part of the self. Social identities are connected with different motives including the need to hold positive beliefs about ingroups and negative beliefs about outgroups [44]. We argue that these motives draw people primarily to certain *contents* of conspiracy theories.

Prior to the 2012 U.S. Presidential election, Democrats and Republicans equally expected that electoral fraud would occur. Once President Obama was re-elected, however, Republicans were more likely to believe that electoral fraud had occurred [45]. After the elections, fraud beliefs might have helped Republicans to uphold a positive partisan identity [see 46\*\*]. In another line of research conducted in the United States, a chronic need for the recognition of national greatness (i.e., collective narcissism) was associated with a conviction that foreign governments (outgroup members), but not the U.S. government, are involved in conspiracies [21]. In both of these examples, the specific content of the conspiracy theory (e.g., who conspired) is crucial for its appeal.

In these cases, conspiracy theory beliefs psychologically greatly overlap with other kinds of false beliefs and can be explained by affiliated psychological models. For instance, in line with the identity-based model of political beliefs [46\*\*], social identity motives increased participants' likelihood to believe in fake news that represented their own political party as moral [47]. Likewise, participants were more likely to believe conspiracy theories that aligned with their party's political stances and vilified the opposite party [39–41,48,49,50]. Sometimes people may be predominantly drawn to conspiracy theories because their content allows them to legitimize and enforce pre-existing beliefs and attitudes.



## **2.2. Quality drawn motives: Examples of Epistemic & Uniqueness Motives**

Various psychological needs may draw people to conspiracy theories, primarily because their *qualities* promise [see 30] to meet these needs. For instance, conspiracy theories imbue events with meaning and help people to make sense of events. Notably, research suggests that conspiracy theories might only be epistemically relevant when a situation is uncertain and conspiracy theory explanations are particularly salient [34; see also 52]. If alternative explanations for events are present, conspiracy theories can forfeit their epistemic allure. We take this as preliminary evidence that people sometimes turn to conspiracy theories foremost because of their qualities (here: ability to explain an event).

Further, all conspiracy theories assert to know of secret information [32] and are unconventional (i.e., challenge social agreed upon knowledge and beliefs). This way, holding conspiracy theory beliefs means to be special and unique. Unsurprisingly, studies found that stronger uniqueness needs were linked to stronger conspiracy theory beliefs [31,32,36]. Important for our distinction between content and qualities, participants with high (vs. low) uniqueness needs were only more likely to believe in a novel conspiracy theory if it was supported by a minority (vs. majority) of people [31]. It seems that for people with high uniqueness needs, the content of the conspiracy theory could be secondary to its qualities.

## **3. Implications and predictions for social movements**

The distinction between content and qualities allows us to make several predictions regarding conspiracy theory beliefs and associated social movements. For brevity, we discuss predictions pertaining to social identity motives and uniqueness motives.

Social identity motives might be a major driver of conspiracy movements that are concerned with the loss of status such as “The Great Replacement”. Indeed, research suggests that people who believe in their group’s superiority but are anxious about its recognition are drawn to conspiracy theories about outgroup members [21, see also 22,23\*].

Social identity concerns might also foster social movements that advance political polarization and intergroup aggression. For instance, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to endorse Qanon – the far-right theory that a Deep State is conspiring against President Trump [53]. In contrast, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an inside job [54]. These differences might emerge from motivations to defend one’s ingroup from external threats and represent outgroups as morally inferior. Together with evidence that conspiracy theories that implicate outgroups can further prejudices, discrimination, and inter-group hostility [23,25–29] social identity motives might foster a vicious cycle where conspiracy theories intensify inter-group conflict and inter-group conflict fosters conspiracy theories.

Uniqueness needs may be particularly relevant for understanding people’s engagement in fringe movements. People might be allured by these movements because their ideas are extremely unusual and non-normative rather than substantive (e.g., chemtrails)<sup>2</sup>. Uniqueness needs may also partly explain why conspiracy theories are often connected to movements that deviate from democratic norms. Similar to why people with high uniqueness needs are more likely to choose unusual products [55], they might also be more likely to choose political actions that deviate from social norms (e.g., shadowing alleged conspirators).

---

<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theory that water condensation trails from airplanes are actually trails of chemicals spread by the government (often: as a means to make citizen obedient).

Our motivational distinction is a theoretical one. In the real world, none of the mentioned constructs operate in isolation. People are driven by multiple motives and conspiracy theories can meet these various motives at the same time. Further, motives can interact with each other, as can the content and qualities of conspiracy theories. This has important implications for the dynamics of conspiracy movements. For instance, the need for uniqueness may be understood as an innocuous pursuit of originality. However, by challenging official narratives conspiracy theories can actually undermine people's trust in broader societal structures [cf. 56] leading to alienation and anomie [10-12, 57, 58] which in turn is linked to non-normative political activism [17\*\*,18].

Further, people are likely most allured by conspiracy theories and movements that promise to fulfill the highest number of relevant needs at the same time [see 30]. For instance, because liberals tend to have stronger uniqueness needs [59], they might be especially drawn to conspiracy theories and related movements that are both unpopular and identify the "correct" conspirators (e.g., business people [60]).

#### **4. Closing Remarks**

Conspiracy theories pose a threat to democratic systems. With the development of social media, conspiracy theorists acquired a new platform to spread unsubstantiated claims at an unprecedented rate and organize dangerous social movements. In fact, false information on Twitter travels faster and reaches larger audiences than accurate information [61]. Social media has allowed for destructive beliefs to spread and fester in large communities. For instance, within the same time period, the hashtag #Qanon has been used almost as many times (15 million) as #metoo, one of the most transformative social movements in recent memory. Recently, the FBI

labeled Qanon as “conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists” threatening domestic safety [62]. Motivationally distinguishing between content and qualities of conspiracy theories will be crucial to stopping the spread of pernicious beliefs.

## References

1. Pilkington, E. **US states saw drop in vaccine rates for children as anti-vaxx theories spread.** *The Guardian* 2019,
2. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. **Measles Cases 2019.** 2019,
3. BBC. **Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide.** 2019,
4. Deutsche Welle. **Far-right parties form new group in European Parliament.** 2018,
5. Wildman, S. **Meet the far-right party that's bringing racism and xenophobia back to Germany.** *Vox* 2017,
6. Rankin, J. **MEPs create biggest far-right group in European parliament.** *The Guardian* 2019,
7. Al Yafai, F. **The far-right's influence in Europe is much greater than its new EU Parliamentary group suggests.** *Euractive* 2019,
8. \*\* Douglas KM, Uscinski JE, Sutton RM, Cichocka A, Nefes T, Ang CS, Deravi F: **Understanding Conspiracy Theories.** *Polit Psychol* 2019, **40**:3–35.  
*Provides a thorough review of research on conspiracy theories. It covers work on the psychological and socio-economic factors behind conspiracy theories, communication of conspiracy theories, and their consequences for society.*
9. Aljazeera. **What is Generation Identity?** 2018,
10. Swami V, Chamorro-Premuzic T, Furnham A: **Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs.** *Appl Cogn Psychol* 2010, **24**:749–761.
11. Swami V, Furnham A: **Examining conspiracist beliefs about the disappearance of amelia earhart.** *J Gen Psychol* 2012, **139**:244–259.

12. Vitriol JA, Marsh JK: **The illusion of explanatory depth and endorsement of conspiracy beliefs.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2018, **48**:955–969.
13. Van der Linden S: **The conspiracy-effect: Exposure to conspiracy theories (about global warming) decreases pro-social behavior and science acceptance.** *Pers Individ Dif* 2015, **87**:171–173.
14. Imhoff R, Lamberty P: **Conspiracy theories as psycho-political reactions to perceived power.** In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. Edited by Butter M, Knight P. Taylor & Francis Inc; 2020.
15. Jolley D, Douglas KM: **The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint.** *Br J Psychol* 2014, **105**:35–56.
16. Kim Y: **How conspiracy theories can stimulate political engagement.** *J Elections, Public Opin Parties* 2019, **0**:1–21.
17. \*\* Imhoff R, Dieterle L, Lamberty P: **Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases non normative political engagement.** *Soc. Psychol. Pers. Sci.* [accepted for publication 2019],

*Found that a high (vs. low) conspiracy theory mentality decreased participants' intention to take normative political action but increased their intention to take non-normative political action. This finding reconciles previous conflicting research on conspiracy theories and political engagement.*

18. Lamberty P, Leiser D: **»Sometimes you just have to go in « – The link between conspiracy beliefs and political action.** [unpubslihed results, 2019]

<https://psyarxiv.com/bdrxc/>,

19. Wood MJ, Gray D: **Right-wing authoritarianism as a predictor of pro-establishment versus anti-establishment conspiracy theories.** *Pers Individ Dif* 2019, **138**:163–166.
20. Krouwel A, Kutiyiski Y, van Prooijen J-W, Martinsson J, Markstedt E: **Does extreme political ideology predict conspiracy beliefs, economic evaluations and political trust? Evidence from Sweden.** *J Soc Polit Psychol* 2017, **5**:435–462.
21. Cichocka A, Marchlewska M, Golec de Zavala A, Olechowski M: **“They will not control us”:** Ingroup positivity and belief in intergroup conspiracies. *Br J Psychol* 2016, **107**:556–576.
22. \* Golec de Zavala A, Federico CM: **Collective narcissism and the growth of conspiracy thinking over the course of the 2016 United States presidential election: A longitudinal analysis.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2018, **48**:1011–1018.

*Found that American collective narcissism – the belief that the United States is magnificent, yet underappreciated -- but not non-narcissistic in-group identification predicted an increase of conspiracy-theory thinking over the course of the 2016 U.S. election campaign. This finding validates previous work suggesting that narcissistic in-group positivity is a stronger predictor for out-group conspiracy theories than non-narcissistic in-group positivity (Cichocka et al., 2016)*

23. \* Marchlewska M, Cichocka A, Łozowski F, Górska P, Winiewski M: **In search of an imaginary enemy: Catholic collective narcissism and the endorsement of gender conspiracy beliefs.** *J Soc Psychol* 2019, **159**:766–779.

*Is one of the rare articles that targets inter-group conspiracy theories beyond races, nations, and political parties. Found that Catholic collective narcissism predicted the belief that gender studies, theory and activism is a conspiracy to secretly destroy Christian tradition. This belief mediated the relationship between Catholic collective narcissism and hostile intentions towards people who undercut the values of the Catholic church.*

24. Jolley D, Douglas KM, Leite AC, Schrader T: **Belief in conspiracy theories and intentions to engage in everyday crime.** *Br J Soc Psychol* 2019, **58**:534–549.

25. Bilewicz M, Winiewski M, Kofta M, Wójcik A: **Harmful Ideas, The Structure and Consequences of Anti-Semitic Beliefs in Poland.** *Polit Psychol* 2013, **34**:821–839.
26. Kofta M, Soral W, Bilewicz M: **What Breeds Conspiracy Antisemitism? The Role of Political Uncontrollability and Uncertainty in the Belief in Jewish Conspiracy.** *J Pers Soc Psychol Advanced o.* 2020,
27. Golec de Zavala A, Cichocka A: **Collective narcissism and anti-Semitism in Poland.** *Gr Process Intergr Relations* 2012, **15**:213–229.
28. Nyhan B, Zeitzoff T: **Conspiracy and misperception belief in the Middle East and North Africa.** *J Polit* 2018, **80**:1400–1404.
29. **\*\*Jolley D, Meleady R, Douglas KM: Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups.** *Br J Psychol* 2019, **00**:1-19.

*Found a causal relationship between conspiracy theory beliefs and prejudices and discrimination. Specifically, exposure to conspiracy theories pertaining to minorities intensified prejudices and discrimination towards them. Importantly, researchers found that inter-group conspiracy theories increase prejudices beyond the implicated group. Exposure to Jewish conspiracy theories was indirectly linked to increased prejudices towards other social groups including Arabs and Asians.*

30. Douglas KM, Sutton RM, Cichocka A: **The psychology of conspiracy theories.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 2017, **26**:538–542.
31. Imhoff R, Lamberty PK: **Too special to be duped: Need for uniqueness motivates conspiracy beliefs.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2017, **47**:724–734.
32. Lantian A, Muller D, Nurra C, Douglas KM: **“I know things they don’t know!” the role of need for uniqueness in belief in conspiracy theories.** *Soc Psychol* 2017, **48**:160–173.



33. Douglas KM, Sutton RM, Callan MJ, Dawtry RJ, Harvey AJ: **Someone is pulling the strings: hypersensitive agency detection and belief in conspiracy theories.** *Think Reason* 2016, **22**:57–77.
34. Marchlewska M, Cichocka A, Kossowska M: **Addicted to answers: Need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2017, **48**:109–117.
35. van Prooijen JW, Douglas KM, De Inocencio C: **Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2018, **48**:320–335.
36. Imhoff R, Lamberty P: **How paranoid are conspiracy believers? Toward a more fine-grained understanding of the connect and disconnect between paranoia and belief in conspiracy theories.** *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2018, **48**:909–926,
37. Poon K, Chen Z, Wong W: **Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Following Ostracism.** *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 2020,
38. van Prooijen JW, Staman J, Krouwel APM: **Increased conspiracy beliefs among ethnic and Muslim minorities.** *Appl Cogn Psychol* 2018, **32**:661–667.
39. Smallpage SM, Enders AM, Uscinski JE: **The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs.** *Res Polit* 2017, **4**:1-7.
40. Enders AM, Smallpage SM, Lupton RN: **Are All ‘Birthers’ Conspiracy Theorists? On the Relationship Between Conspiratorial Thinking and Political Orientations.** *Br J Polit Sci* 2018, **00**:1-18
41. **\*\*Enders AM, Smallpage SM: On the measurement of conspiracy beliefs.** *Res Polit* 2018, **5**:0–3.

*Offered two crucial insights. First, conspiracy theory beliefs shifted as a function of the identity of the implicated conspirator (here: Democrats or Republicans). Second, previous findings of ideological difference in conspiracy theory beliefs could be a measurement artifact. Specifically, Republicans were less likely than Democrats to believe in a conspiracy theory when it implicated President Bush. The reverse pattern occurred when the same conspiracy theory implicated President Obama.*

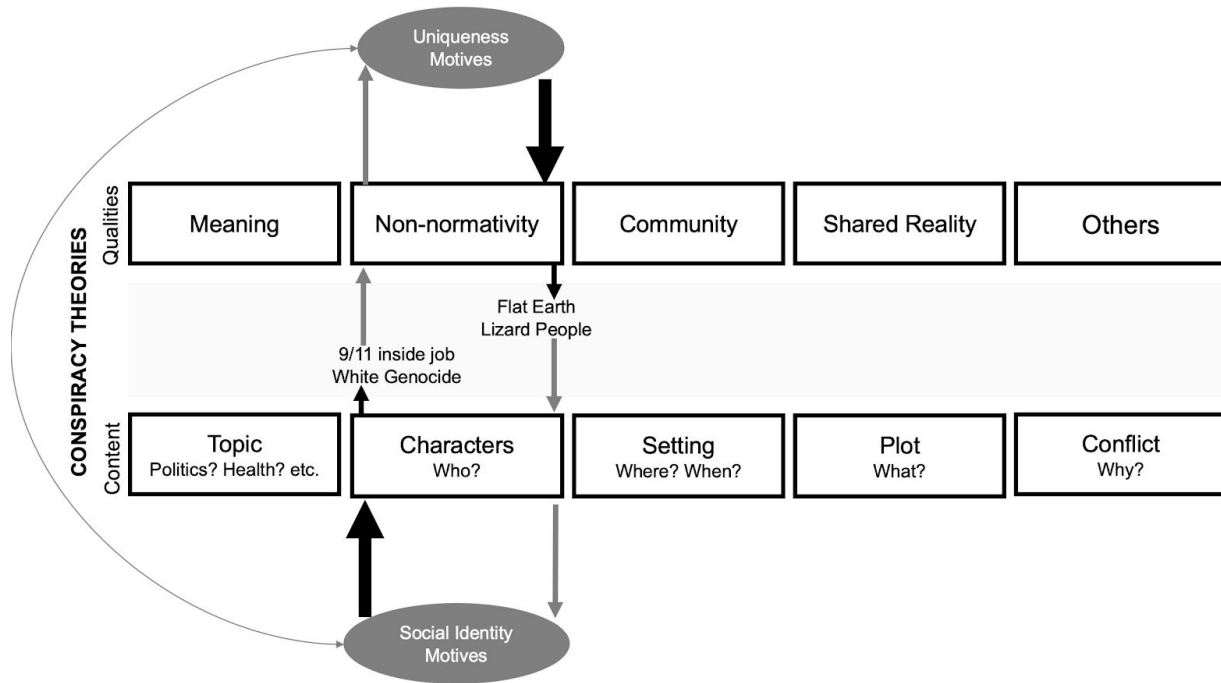
42. Lukić P, Žeželj I, Stanković B: **How (Ir)rational is it to believe in contradictory conspiracy theories?** *Eur J Psychol* 2019, **15**:94–107.
43. Wood MJ, Douglas KM, Sutton RM: **Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories.** *Soc Psychol Personal Sci* 2012, **3**:767–773.
44. Tajfel H, Turner J. C. T: **The social identity theory of intergroup behavior.** In *Psychology of intergroup relations*. Edited by Worchel S, Austin WG. Nelson; 1986:7–24.
45. Edelson J, Alduncin A, Krewson C, Sieja JA, Uscinski JE: **The effect of conspiratorial thinking and motivated reasoning on belief in election fraud.** *Polit Res Q* 2017, **70**:933–946.
46. \*\*Van Bavel JJ, Pereira A: **The Partisan Brain: An Identity-Based Model of Political Belief.** *Trends Cogn Sci* 2018, **22**:213–224.

*Presents the identity-based model of belief to better understand why and how partisanship can bias information processing. It argues that partisan identities serve multiple goals (e.g., belonging, status) and lays out how these goals affect different neurocognitive processes. It proposes that false beliefs are formed when accuracy goals are outweighed by conflicting identity goals (e.g., belonging).*

47. Pereira A, Van Bavel J: **Identity concerns drive belief in fake news.** [unpublished data 2018], <https://psyarxiv.com/7vc5d/>
48. Enders AM, Smallpage SM: **Informational Cues, Partisan-Motivated Reasoning, and the Manipulation of Conspiracy Beliefs.** *Polit Commun* 2019, **36**:83–102.

49. Enders AM, Smallpage SM: **Informational Cues, Partisan-Motivated Reasoning, and the Manipulation of Conspiracy Beliefs.** *Polit Commun* 2018, **00**:1–20.
50. Hollander BA: **Partisanship, Individual Differences, and News Media Exposure as Predictors of Conspiracy Beliefs.** *Journal Mass Commun Q* 2018, **95**:691–713.
51. Smallpage SM, Enders AM, Uscinski JE: **The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs.** *Res Polit* 2017, **4**:1-7
52. Lyons B, Merola V, Reifler J: **Not Just Asking Questions: Effects of Implicit and Explicit Conspiracy Information About Vaccines and Genetic Modification.** *Health Commun* 2019, **34**:1741–1750.
53. Uscinski JE, Klofstad CA: **New poll: the QAnon conspiracy movement is very unpopular.** 2018,
54. Farleigh Dickinson University Poll. 2016,
55. He L, Cong F, Liu Y, Zhou X: **The pursuit of optimal distinctiveness and consumer preferences.** *Scand J Psychol* 2010, **51**:411–417.
56. Jolley D, Douglas KM, Sutton RM: **Blaming a Few Bad Apples to Save a Threatened Barrel: The System-Justifying Function of Conspiracy Theories.** *Polit Psychol* 2018, **39**:465–478.
57. Abalakina-Paap M, Stephan WG, Craig T, Gregory WL: **Beliefs in Conspiracies Beliefs.** 2013, **20**:637–647.
58. Imhoff R, Bruder M: **Speaking (Un-)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude.** *Eur J Pers* 2014, **28**:25–43.

59. Stern C, West T V, Schmitt PG: **The Liberal Illusion of Uniqueness.** *Psychol Sci* 2014, **25**:137–144.
60. Brandt MJ, Reyna C, Chambers JR, Crawford JT, Wetherell G: **The Ideological-Conflict Hypothesis: Intolerance Among Both Liberals and Conservatives.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 2014, **23**:27–34.
61. Vosoughi S, Roy D, Aral S: **The spread of true and false news online.** *Science (80- )* 2018, **359**:1146–1151.
62. Dodson, M. **FBI Labels Fringe Conspiracy Theories as Domestic Terrorism Threat.** *TheDailyBeast*. 2019.



**Figure 1. Conspiracy theories comprise at least two allures: Content and Qualities.** Conspiracy theories lure people with at least two different components – content and qualities. People who are enticed by the content of the conspiracy theory are driven by motives different to those who are enticed by the qualities of the conspiracy theory. The figure illustrates this process using social identity motives and uniqueness motives as two examples. Social identity motives draw people primarily to the content of a conspiracy theory. Uniqueness motives draw people primarily to certain qualities of a conspiracy theory. Both motives interact with each other and can foster each other.