Belief in conspiracy theories and intentions to engage in everyday crime

Daniel Jolley[1], Karen M. Douglas[2], Ana C. Leite[2] and Tanya Schrader[1]

[1] Staffordshire University, United Kingdom

[2] University of Kent, United Kingdom

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dr Daniel Jolley

Department of Psychology, School of Life Sciences and Education,

Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom, ST4 2DF

Ph: +44 (0)1782 294896, E-mail: daniel.jolley@staffs.ac.uk.

Abstract

Belief in conspiracy theories is associated with negative outcomes such as political disengagement, prejudice, and environmental inaction. The current studies—one cross-sectional ($N = 252$) and one experimental ($N = 120$)—tested the hypothesis that belief in conspiracy theories would increase intentions to engage in everyday crime. Study 1 demonstrated that belief in conspiracy theories predicted everyday crime behaviours when controlling for other known predictors of everyday crime (e.g., Honesty-Humility). Study 2 demonstrated that exposure to conspiracy theories (vs. control) increased intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future, through an increased feeling of anomie. The perception that others have conspired may therefore in some contexts lead to negative action rather than inaction.

Belief in conspiracy theories and intentions to engage in everyday crime

Conspiracy theories explain the ultimate causes of significant events and circumstances as the secret actions of powerful groups who cover up information to suit their own interests (e.g., Brotherton, 2015; Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). For example, well-known conspiracy theories allege that climate change is a hoax fabricated by climate scientists to secure research funding (Douglas & Sutton, 2015), that Jewish people control world affairs (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012), and that the harms of vaccines are being covered up so that pharmaceutical companies can continue to make huge profits (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a). Conspiracy theories are popular (Oliver & Wood, 2014), and in recent years, psychologists have uncovered a range of consequences of conspiracy beliefs, including political disengagement, prejudice, and environmental inaction (see Douglas et al., 2017 for a review). The current research aims to build upon this research by examining if conspiracy beliefs are associated with unlawful behaviours and behavioural intentions. Specifically, we investigated if conspiracy beliefs predict people's intentions to engage in everyday crime.

Belief in conspiracy theories

Research on conspiracy beliefs has flourished in recent years, and much is now known about the psychological factors that attract people toward conspiracy theories. Specifically, conspiracy theories seem to resonate with people for epistemic reasons (to be knowledgeable and accurate), existential reasons (to be secure and in control), and social reasons (to maintain a positive sense of the self and the social groups one belongs to; Douglas et al., 2017). Research supports this framework, demonstrating that a range of personality, demographic and social factors are associated with belief in conspiracy theories. However, less is known about the consequences of conspiracy beliefs for the self, groups, and society. Belief in conspiracy theories may have positive consequences for the self since they appear (at least temporarily) to satisfy important social needs such as to have control and to reduce

uncertainty (e.g., van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). For example, believing in conspiracy theories might lead to a sense of shared community with others who endorse the same theories (Franks, Bangerter, Bauer, Hall, & Noort, 2017). However, the majority of the literature to date has revealed that conspiracy theories have rather more negative consequences.

For example, conspiracy theories appear to discourage people from voting, from reducing their carbon footprint, and from vaccinating their children (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b). Conspiracy theories appear to increase feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b) rather than making people feel better. Furthermore, they appear to increase prejudice toward powerful groups who are perceived to conspire (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). They can fuel intergroup conflict and prejudice (e.g., Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013; Kofta & Sedek, 2005; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012), which in turn can even generalize to other out-groups who are not involved in the alleged conspiracies (Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, under review). Moreover, belief in organisational conspiracy theories—that is, believing that powerful groups act secretly to achieve objectives at the cost of employees—is associated with decreased commitment to the organisation, and with increased job dissatisfaction and willingness to leave the organisation (Douglas & Leite, 2017). Therefore, the potential negative consequences of endorsing conspiracy theories are significant. However, researchers have paid less attention to whether conspiracy beliefs lead individuals to engage in unethical behaviours themselves.

Unethical behaviours and everyday crime

Everyday crimes are common offences that most people are likely to commit at some point in their lives (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006). Such crimes can include running red lights, paying cash for items to avoid paying taxes, or failing to disclose faults in second-hand items for sale. Even though they may seem small, everyday crimes can have serious costs. For

example, fraud alone costs the UK economy £193 billion a year (UKFCMC, 2016).

Although unethical decision-making is complex and has multiple underlying sets of

predictors (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010), personality factors seem to play an

important role in predicting everyday crime. Specifically, in the HEXACO model of

personality (Lee & Ashton, 2004), Honesty-Humility (which embodies people's moral

conscience) is an important predictor of unethical business decisions (Lee & Ashton, 2008).

It is also a robust individual-level correlate of criminal behaviour (Gottfredson & Hirschi,

1990; Pratt & Cullen, 2000), alongside Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, which

consistently predict criminal and anti-social behaviour (Miller & Lynam, 2001).

In a similar vein, van Gelder and de Vries (2016) found that Honesty-Humility and

Conscientiousness predicted White Collar Crime (WCC) behaviours, which are crimes

committed by employees against their employing organisation. Moral identity—which can

be described as a mental representation of one's moral character expressed to others through

public and private actions (Aquinio & Reed, 2002)—has been shown to predict moral

behaviours in a variety of settings. For example, moral identity predicts a lower likelihood of

lying in a salary negotiation and a greater likelihood of acting in a prosocial way (Aquino,

Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Winterich, Aquino, Mittal, & Swartz, 2013). Therefore,

it is likely that people who score higher in moral identity would be less likely to engage in

everyday crime behaviour. Together, this research suggests that a variety of psychological

factors predict everyday crime. It also suggests that personality and individual differences

are important predictors of everyday crime.

However, the role of conspiracy theories in predicting everyday crime remains

unexplored. For several reasons, it is plausible that these two factors are related.

Specifically, conspiracy theories are associated with increased levels of mistrust (Einstein &

Glick, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), cynicism (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham,

2010) and anomie—or a general feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999). People who endorse conspiracy theories point fingers at those in authority, accusing them of illegal or immoral acts (Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton, 2018).

Furthermore, given that conspiracy theories are associated with increased disengagement from important social issues (e.g., Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b), it is possible that they might also lead people to disengage from social norms, making them more likely to engage in counter-normative behaviour. The perception that others are conspiring may alter people's perceptions of social norms surrounding immoral behaviour. For example, prescriptive norms refer to moral values and societal standards (see Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993) by signalling what sort of behaviours are expected and accepted in a particular society. Given that social reality is often uncertain, people will often look to others to infer what the expected attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are that will help them navigate the social world (Festinger, 1950; Reynolds, Subašić, & Tindall, 2014). Often, individuals' behaviours will align to those of others in their social groups (Reynolds et al., 2014), which can help them avoid social exclusion (e.g., Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001). It is plausible, therefore, that endorsing the idea that *others* are involved in conspiracies may alter one's perceptions of social norms by signalling that unethical activities are permissible.

In a similar vein, Merton (1938, 1957) argued that the origins of anomie and crime lie within social structures. Specifically, the imbalance between cultural goals (i.e., what is expected at the individual level) and the means available to individuals to achieve what is expected, are is likely to result in anomie, which in turn increases deviant behaviour and crime. Similarly, the perception that society's social fabric is breaking down can involve lower levels of trust in authorities and others generally (e.g., Dirks, 1999; Rothstein & Eeek, 2009). In a recent review, Douglas et al. (2017) suggested that social factors, such as anomie

and feelings of alienation, are likely to be exacerbated by conspiracy theories. Thus, perceptions about the particular ways in which social systems operate might therefore also promote unethical behaviour. In other words, if others are perceived to be conspiring, then perhaps it is permissible to commit negative acts oneself. In support of this view, findings suggest that people believe in conspiracy theories to the extent that they would also be willing—in the same situations—to conspire themselves (Douglas & Sutton, 2011). Conspiracy believers are also more likely to endorse violence as a means to get things done (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Theoretically therefore, conspiracy theories might appeal to people who are already predisposed to dishonest and immoral behaviour. These ideas will be explored in the current research.

The current research

In two studies, we investigated the relationship between conspiracy theories and everyday crime. In Study 1 we examined this relationship in a cross-sectional study, taking into account other predictors of everyday crime (i.e., demographics, Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Moral Identity). In Study 2 we experimentally manipulated exposure to conspiracy theories and tested the effect on future intentions to engage in everyday crime. We also investigated the potential mediating roles of anomie and disillusionment. All materials and data can be viewed at: [insert link].

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Study 1

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In Study 1, we investigated the extent to which conspiracy beliefs predict everyday crime. Participants were asked to indicate their belief in conspiracy theories, and two measures were used for this purpose. The first measure examined belief in general notions of conspiracy (e.g., that governments hide information from the public; Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013). The second measured belief in specific well-known conspiracy theories (e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered by elements within the British establishment;

Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry, & Harvey, 2016). Whilst both measures are typically highly correlated (see Brotherton, et al., 2013), including both measures allowed us to determine whether it is general or specific types of conspiracy beliefs (or both) that predict everyday crime (see Jolley et al. (2018) and Green & Douglas (2018) for a similar procedure). It also allowed us to examine the factor structure of all conspiracy belief items.

Alongside belief in conspiracy theories, existing predictors of everyday crime were also measured, including the personality traits of Honesty-Humility and Contentiousness, and demographic variables such as age and gender (e.g., van Gelder & de Vries, 2016). We also included a measure of moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002) which includes two facets—symbolization (public) and internalization (private). These also predict moral behaviours (e.g., Aquino et al., 2009) and should therefore predict everyday crime. Participants then indicated their engagement in everyday crime. We predicted that alongside the existing predictors of everyday crime, and moral identity, belief in conspiracy theories (general and specific) would also be significant positive predictors of everyday crime.

Method

Participation and design

Following recommendations regarding sample size calculations to receive stable correlations ($n = 250$; Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013), 253 participants (93 male, 157 female and three transgender; $M_{age} = 36.97$, $SD = 11.71$) were recruited via the online recruitment platform, *Prolific Academic*. All participants were resident in the UK. The predictor variables were comprised of personality traits (Honesty-Humility; Agreeableness-Anger; Conscientiousness; Emotionality; Extraversion; Openness to Experience), morality identity, and belief in conspiracy theories (general and specific), and the criterion variable was a measure of participants' everyday criminal behaviour.

Materials and procedure

Participants provided their informed consent before the commencement of the survey. First, participants were asked to complete a series of personality measures taken from the HEXACO–60 (H60, Lee & Ashton, 2004) which included six 10-item subscales. These were Honesty-Humility (e.g. *"I wouldn't use flattery to get a raise or promotion at work, even if I thought it would succeed"* α =.78), Extraversion (e.g. "*I feel reasonably satisfied with myself overall."* α = .95), Openness to Experience (e.g. *"I would be quite bored by a visit to an art gallery"* α = .80), Conscientiousness (e.g. *"I plan ahead and organize things, to avoid scrambling at the last minute."* α = .79), Agreeableness [versus Anger] (e.g. *"I rarely hold a grudge, even against people who have badly wronged me."* α =.81) and Emotionality (e.g. "I would feel afraid if I had to travel in bad weather conditions." α =.80). Participants indicated their agreement on a seven-point scale in all cases (*1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). Participants then completed the Moral Identity Scale (MIS, Aquino & Rees, 2002) which included two five-item subscales; Symbolisation (e.g. *"It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics.*" α =.78) and Internalisation (e.g. "I strongly desire to have these characteristics." α =.83). Participants indicated their agreement on a seven-point scale (*1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). These scales were presented in random order.

Next, participants were asked to complete two measures of belief in conspiracy theories. Belief in general notions of conspiracy was measured using 15 items (e.g. *"A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war"* α = .95; Brotherton, et al., 2013), each on a seven-point scale (*1 = definitely not true, 7 = definitely true*). Belief in specific conspiracy theories was measured with seven items (e.g. "*There was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Princess Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment"* α =.86*;* Douglas, et al., 2016), each on a seven-point scale (*1*

= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Presentation of the two scales was counterbalanced. Using oblique rotation (promax), we conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the individual items of both scales. Statistical assumptions were met, and the analysis revealed one factor (eigenvalue 11.86) that explained 53.93% of the variance. Two much smaller factors emerged (eigenvalues 1.74 and 1.17), explaining 7.91 per cent, and 5.33 per cent of the variance respectively. All items strongly loaded onto the first factor suggesting that conspiracy beliefs (both general and specific) comprise a single factor. We therefore report all analyses combining the general and specific conspiracy scales into a single scale (α = .96).

Two scales were then used to measure both intentions to commit everyday crimes and past everyday crime behaviour. Intentions were measured using an adaptation of the Everyday Crime Scale (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006) made up of four items (e.g., *"When selling second hand items, hide or not disclose faults in what you were selling", "Try to claim for replacement items, refunds or compensation from a shop, small business or travel agent's which you were not entitled to")* where participants signified their intention on a seven-point scale in all cases *(1 =would never consider, 7 = would consider)*. Actual behaviour utilised the same scale but with a change in tense (e.g., *"When selling second hand items, hidden or not disclosed faults in what you were selling", "Tried to claim for replacement items, refunds or compensation from a shop, small business or travel agent's which you were not entitled to")* with participants signifying behaviour on a seven-point scale *(1 = never, 7 = always)*. Presentation of the scales was counterbalanced. Using oblique rotation (promax), we conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the individual items of both scales. Statistical assumptions were met, and the analysis revealed one factor (eigenvalue 4.23), explaining 52.81 per cent of the variance. We therefore combined the items into one measure of

everyday crime (α = .84). At the conclusion of the study, participants were debriefed, paid

and thanked for their time.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations between all variables are presented in Table 1.

As expected, belief in conspiracy theories was significantly positively correlated with

everyday crime behaviours. Criminal behaviours were also negatively associated with

Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness-Anger, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience and

Moral Identity (symbolisation), and positively associated with Extraversion. In addition, men

were also more likely to engage in everyday crime. Honesty-Humility was negatively

correlated conspiracy beliefs, and Moral Identity (internalisation) was positively correlated

with conspiracy beliefs.

Table 1

Means and Pearson product-moment correlations for all variables in Study 1

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
(1) Gender	-	-	.07	.13*	-.09	.14*	.34***	-.11¥	-.03	.20***	.10	-.02	-.15**
(2) Age	36.97 (11.71)		-	.23***	.00	.15*	-.01	-.00	.02	.12¥	-.07	-.06	-.11¥
(3) Honest-Humility	4.82 (1.00)			-	.39***	.23***	.02	-.07	.10	.34***	-.08	-.22**	-.52***
(4) Agreeableness-Anger	4.37 (0.95)				-	.11¥	-.19**	.15*	.11¥	.26***	.07	-.09	-.28***
(5) Conscientious	5.03 (0.86)					-	.02	.12*	.11¥	.35***	.09	-.05	-.19**
(6) Emotionality	4.43 (0.98)						-	-.20**	.03	.28***	.20***	.05	-.04
(7) Extraversion	3.94 (1.05)							-	.09	.04	.26***	.07	.16*
(8) Open to Experience	4.72 (1.08)								-	.23***	.12*	-.03	-.15*
(9) Moral Identity (symbolisation)	6.14 (0.84)									-	.22***	-.06	-.21***
(10) Moral Identity (internalisation)	3.60 (1.24)										-	.15*	.12
(11) Conspiracy beliefs	2.87 (1.26)											-	.26***
(12) Everyday crime behaviours	2.26 (1.04)												-

Notes. ¥ *p < .10. * p< .05. ** p <. 01. *** p <. 001.*

To test the prediction that conspiracy beliefs predict everyday crime alongside other known predictors, we ran a hierarchical multiple linear regression with criminal behaviour as the criterion variable and overall conspiracy beliefs as the predictor.[1] In Step 1, background variables of age and gender were included as control variables following the procedure in previous research (van Gelder & de Vries, 2016). In Step 2 HEXACO model and moral identity variables were included. In Step 3, we then entered conspiracy beliefs.

At Step 1, gender predicted everyday crime, but age did not; specifically, men (vs. women) indicated that they would be more likely to engage in everyday crime in the future. In Step 2, Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience were significant predictors of everyday crime; age and gender were non-significant, alongside Conscientiousness, Emotionality and Moral Identity (symbolisation and internalisation). Adding conspiracy beliefs at Step 3 significantly improved the model fit, whilst being a positive significant predictor alongside the significant measures in Step 2 (see Table 2, Step 3). That is, believing in conspiracy theories predicted everyday crime alongside other known demographic and personality predictors.

These results provide empirical evidence that belief in conspiracy theories plays a unique role in predicting a person's everyday crime behaviour when controlling for the effects of other known predictors. Specifically, belief in conspiracy theories predicted everyday crime behaviours, alongside Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience. It is possible, therefore, that individuals who are predisposed to immoral behaviour find conspiracy theories more appealing. On the other hand, conspiracy theories may inspire people to commit unethical acts as a route to cope with a world where

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[1] The same hierarchical linear regression analyses using both conspiracy scales (general and specific) and both measures of everyday crime (past and intended) revealed the same pattern of results as those reported here. In each case, conspiracy beliefs uniquely predicted everyday crime when other predictors of everyday crime were taken into account.

conspiracies happen. In Study 2, we sought to make a first attempt to tease apart these two

possibilities. Specifically, we tested whether exposure to conspiracy theories would increase

intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression analysis predicting everyday crime using gender, age, Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness-Anger, Conscientiousness, Emotionality, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Moral Identity (symbolisation) and Moral Identity (internalisation) and conspiracy beliefs (Study 1).

		Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
1	Gender	-.14*	-.09	-.09
1	Age	-.10	-.01	-.01
2	Honesty-Humility		-.42***	-.39***
2	Agreeableness-Anger		-.14*	-.14*
2	Conscientiousness		-.09	-.09
2	Emotionality		-.02	-.02
2	Extraversion		.13*	.13*
2	Openness to Experience		-.11*	-.11*
2	Moral Identity (symbolisation)		.02	.03
2	Moral Identity (internalisation)		.09	.07
3	Conspiracy beliefs			.15*
R^2		.03*	.33***	.35**
R^2 change			.30***	.02*

Notes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Study 2

To isolate the causal pathway between conspiracy theories and everyday crime, we next employed an experimental design. We also sought to examine the mechanism underlying the effect. Whilst Study 1 demonstrated that personality traits such as Honesty-Humility predict everyday crime, the data were cross-sectional and therefore we cannot make a claim for a causal direction. However, it is possible to empirically examine whether belief in conspiracy theories influences other factors such as anomie and disillusionment that may act as potential mediators. Specifically, we know that conspiracy theories are associated with anomie (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999) and that anomie, in turn, is associated with unethical behaviours (Ramaseshan & Ewing, 2001). We therefore propose that feelings of anomie may constitute a psychological mechanism through which exposure to conspiracy theories leads to increased intentions to engage in everyday crime. In addition, it is also plausible that feelings of disillusionment are a mediating factor. Disillusionment has been found to increase after exposure to conspiracy theories (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b) and might also lead to increased intention to engage in everyday crime. In sum, participants in Study 2 were exposed to conspiracy theories (vs. control), before indicating their feelings of anomie, disillusionment and intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future. We predicted that being exposed to conspiracy theories would increase feelings of anomie and disillusionment, leading to higher intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future.

Methods

Participation and design

One hundred and twenty participants (32 male and 88 female; $M_{age} = 33.88$, $SD = 10.35$) were recruited via the online platform *Prolific Academic*. As in Study 1, all participants were living in the UK. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (conspiracy theory article [$n = 60$] vs. control [$n = 60$]). Participants then

completed a measure of belief in conspiracy theories, anomie, disillusionment and intentions

to commit an everyday crime in the future. A small-medium effect size determined from

previous research (e.g., Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b) required a sample size of

approximately 120 for 80% power of detecting the effect.

Materials and procedure

Participants provided their informed consent and were then asked to read either a

conspiracy theory article or nothing (control). The conspiracy article, adapted from Jolley

and Douglas (2014b), began by raising questions pertaining to significant international events

and the role that governments play in plots and schemes. The article went on to specifically

discuss the conspiracy surrounding the death of Princess Diana. An extract is as follows:

> *"... To take the example of Princess Diana's death, it is no secret that the British*
>
> *government were discontented with Princess Diana's involvement with Dodi Fayed*
>
> *and also with her increasing involvement in politics.... One must, therefore, question*
>
> *the claim that her death was simply a tragic accident..."*

The term "conspiracy theory" was not used in the excerpt. Participants were then asked to

read twelve statements about conspiracy theories, which were used as a manipulation check

(Jolley & Douglas, 2014b, $\alpha = .91$). The conspiracy scale comprised of five items that related

to the government being involved in conspiracies (e.g., "UK Government is often involved in

the causes of significant international events.") and seven items related to real-world specific

events (e.g., "The British government was involved in the death of Princess Diana.").

Participants indicated their agreement on a seven-point scale in both measures (*1 = strongly*

disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Next, participants completed a measure of anomie as a possible mediator (Srole,

1956), which consisted of nine items (e.g., "Next to health, money is the most important thing

in life", $\alpha = .80$), which were completed on a seven-point scale (*1 = Strongly disagree, 7 =*

Strongly agree). Disillusionment (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b) was then measured as a second mediator using four items (e.g., "I am very disappointed with the government", $\alpha = .85$). Participants again signified their agreement on a seven-point scale (*1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree*). Participants were then asked to indicate their intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future, as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .76$). At the end of the study, participants were debriefed, paid and thanked for their time.

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Results and discussion

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There were no significant effects involving participant age or gender on the dependent measure ($p > .05$), so these factors are not discussed further.

Manipulation check

There was a significant difference between the conspiracy condition and control condition for endorsement of conspiracy theories, $t(118) = -2.03$, $p = .044$, $d = 0.37$. Specifically, belief in conspiracy theories was higher in the conspiracy condition ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.15$) than the control condition ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.20$). The manipulation was therefore successful.
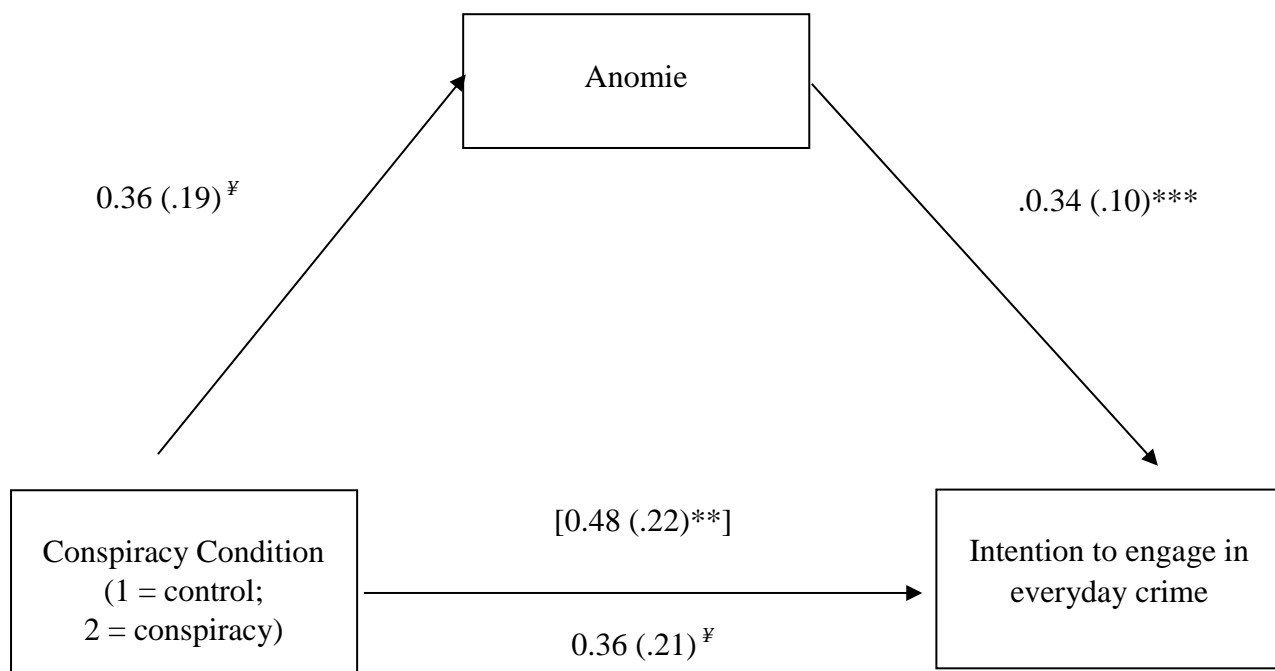
Conspiracy theories and everyday crime

Next, a *t*-test revealed that being exposed to a conspiracy article (vs. control) influenced participants' levels of intention to engage in everyday crime in the future, $t(118) = -2.2464$, $p = .027$, $d = 0.41$. Specifically, intentions to engage in everyday crime were significantly higher in the conspiracy condition ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.39$) than the control condition ($M = 2.02$, $SD = .93$).

Testing mediation

Reading a conspiracy article (vs. control) influenced participants' levels of anomie, $t(118) = -1.916$, $p = .058$, $d = 0.34$. Specifically, anomie was marginally significantly higher in the conspiracy condition ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.97$) than the control condition ($M = 3.96$, $SD =

1.07). There was, however, no difference in the measure of disillusionment, $t(118) = .118$, p = .906. Disillusionment was therefore not a potential mediator and was not analysed further.

Anomie was then examined as a potential mediator between exposure to conspiracy theories (vs. control) and intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future. Based on bootstrapping with 5000 resamples using PROCESS Model 4, the mean estimates effect is .12 (SE .07) with 95% confidence interval of .0060 to .3012. Full pattern estimates are displayed in Figure 1. The results demonstrated that being exposed to a pro-conspiracy account (vs. control) directly increase feelings of anomie, leading to an increased intention to engage in everyday crime in the future.

Figure 1. Mediation model of the relationship between exposure to conspiracy theories (conspiracy vs. control) and intention to engage in everyday crime behaviour through anomie (Study 2).

Note. Path estimates represent unstandardized coefficients. Standard errors presented in parentheses. *Notes.* $^{¥}p < .10.$ $* p < .05.$ $**p <. 01.$ $***p <. 001.$

This study extends the findings from Study 1 by demonstrating that conspiracy-related material can increase people's intentions to engage in everyday crime. Study 2 has therefore provided experimental evidence of the role that conspiracy theories play in predicting intentions to engage in everyday crime. Furthermore, Study 2 also extends Study 1 by providing support for the idea that conspiracy theories increase intentions to engage in everyday crime through increased levels of anomie.

General discussion

The current research establishes that belief in, and exposure to, conspiracy theories predicts an increased tendency toward everyday crime. In Study 1, belief in conspiracy theories predicted everyday crime behaviours when controlling for other known psychological predictors of everyday crime (e.g., Honesty-Humility). Study 2 extended these findings by demonstrating that exposure to conspiracy-related material increased feelings of anomie, which in turn increased intentions to engage in everyday crime in the future. Together, these findings extend existing research that has examined the consequences of conspiracy theories. It demonstrates that conspiracy theories do not always lead to apathy and inaction. Instead, conspiracy theories might lead people to actively engage in antisocial behaviour.

Researchers acknowledge that there are complex and multiple underlying predictors of unethical decision-making (e.g., Kish-Gephart, et al., 2010). This research has extended this literature by demonstrating the role that belief in conspiracy theories may also play in predicting everyday crime. Specifically, this research highlights that everyday crime might be a flexible and dynamic response to the social context, and in particular to how social norms are perceived to be followed (or not) by powerful groups in society. Alongside predictors such as Honesty-Humility, which is a consistent predictor of everyday crime (van Gelder & de Vries, 2016), belief in conspiracy theories was also a significant positive predictor of such behaviour. It is worth noting, however, that Honesty-Humility was shown to explain the largest variance in predicting everyday crime, and in Study 2, the effect sizes, whilst robust, were of moderate size. Nonetheless, our research demonstrates the unique role that conspiracy theories play alongside these known predictors. To our knowledge, this is the first time that conspiracy theories have been found to predict this type of behaviour. This

research further supports the literature highlighting the potentially negative consequences of conspiracy theories (e.g., Douglas & Leite, 2017; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b).

The current research also provides insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between conspiracy theories and everyday crime. Specifically, exposure to conspiracy theories was associated with increased feelings of anomie, which in turn were associated with stronger intentions to engage in everyday crime. This is consistent with recent theorising suggesting that social factors, such as alienation and anomie, may not only be psychological antecedents of belief in conspiracy theories, but they might also be exacerbated by exposure to conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017). Importantly, this finding also supports the idea that beliefs in conspiracy theories are dynamic and vary according to the social context, including being influenced by people's epistemic, existential, and social motives (Douglas et al., 2017).

However, whilst we found that anomie was a significant mediator of the relationship between conspiracy theories and criminal behaviour (Study 2), feelings of disillusionment did not mediate. This was surprising since previous research has found that disillusionment was influenced by conspiracy theories, and that disillusionment mediated the relationship between exposure to conspiracy theories and both political and environmental intentions (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). It is difficult to theorise why the current findings are different, but one possibility is that the effects of conspiracy theories on disillusionment are sensitive to context. For example, whilst previous research has examined factors such as voting intentions and intentions to reduce one's carbon footprint, the current research examines intentions to actively engage in crime. Disillusionment may promote more passive responses to conspiracy theories (e.g., political inaction) rather than active responses (e.g., engaging in crime). Further research could further test how responses to conspiracy theories are influenced by context.

Our novel findings have also extended our understanding of the social consequences of conspiracy theories. Previous research has demonstrated that conspiracy theories can lead to disengagement from politics, climate science, vaccination and the workplace (Douglas & Leite, 2017; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b). The current research highlights the potential role that conspiracy theories may play in a new unexplored domain—everyday crime. This finding resonates with the work of Imhoff and Bruder (2014) who found that people who believed in conspiracy theories were more likely to take political action such as organizing a protest. Depending on the context, therefore, conspiracy theories may lead to action rather than inaction. A key contextual factor may be feeling empowered by the action or inaction. For example, disengaging from efforts to reduce one's carbon footprint may be empowering for people who believe that climate change is a hoax. On the other hand, engaging in everyday crime may be empowering for people who perceive that the world is full of conspiring powerful elites who ought to be challenged. Future research could examine the contexts in which conspiracy theories lead to action or inaction and the role of empowerment in predicting these effects.

Future research could also address some limitations of the current research. For example, social desirability may have played a role in the participants' answers in our studies. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their past and future intentions to engage in everyday crime. Such behaviours are often against the law and even though responses were anonymous, participants may not have been completely honest. Another factor to note is that the outcome measure was based on intentions which do not always lead to real behaviours (e.g., LaPiere, 1934; Sheeran, 2002). However, the current investigation did allow us to study the sensitive topic of everyday crime whilst ensuring anonymity to participants who took part. It also allowed us to measure a range of everyday crime behavioural intentions instead of focusing on a single behavioural indicator. Moreover,

measuring unethical behaviours is challenging, so the current investigation provides a strong first step that future research could explore.

Another limitation of the current research is that we cannot rule out the possibility that participants' criminal behaviours were the result of their financial situation rather than their conspiracy beliefs. Although participants on Prolific Academic are predominantly in full-time employment (see Prolific Academic, 2018), differences in financial security could plausibly determine attitudes and behaviours associated with crime. Future research could explore this possibility, alongside controlling for other factors such as participants' mood. Furthermore, whilst in the current research we were able to provide casual evidence that conspiracy theories predict everyday crime via feelings of anomie, we were unable to examine the possibility that conspiracy theories appeal to those who are already predisposed to immoral behaviour. Furthermore, the perception that "others" are conspiring may alter perceived norms around immoral behaviour that the current research was unable to test. Future research could, therefore, use a longitudinal design to provide a robust test of these possibilities, whilst also exploring actual cheating behaviour. Including past everyday crime behaviours as a moderator in Study 2 would also have been ideal to examine the extent to which people who are relatively pre-disposed to unethical behaviour might be especially susceptible to conspiracy theories.

In the current research, we found that anomie was a significant mediator of the relationship between conspiracy theories and everyday crime behaviour. However, it is plausible that a different causal path may also exist. That is, greater anomie might lead to higher conspiracy belief, which could predict intentions to engage in everyday crimes. We have been unable to examine this possibility in the current research, but future research could employ a longitudinal design where alternative mediation paths could be contrasted, alongside measuring different dimensions of anomie such as the perception of a breakdown

in social fabric and the perception of a breakdown in leadership (see Teymoori, et al., 2016). Other mediators could also be explored. For example, research has shown that moral disengagement may account for decisions to engage in WCC behaviours (Egan, Hughes, & Palmer, 2015). It is plausible that conspiracy theories may influence one's morality and change what an individual perceives to be right and wrong in a specific context. This change could subsequently lead to the endorsement of everyday criminal behaviours. Such a mediator could be tested in future research.

Finally, it is plausible that the effects of conspiracy theories on everyday crime is moderated by specific factors. For example, social identity—the part of our self that derives from our group memberships (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979)—might be an important moderator to consider. Specifically, it could be expected that those who perceive "malevolent groups" as outgroup members, that is, as belonging to a different social category than the self, might seek to distance themselves more from their behaviours and therefore, engage less in everyday crime. However, it is well-established that individuals react more negatively to deviant behaviour when the perpetrator is an ingroup member (i.e., a member of our relevant social category) than an outgroup member (e.g., Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Leite, Pinto, & Abrams, 2016), as the former place the validity of our ingroup in jeopardy (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001). This suggests that the way individuals categorise members of "malevolent groups", actors of conspiracies, and individuals' social identity motives in general, might be implicated in predicting differential reactions to conspiracy theories. This warrants further research.

In summary, we have found that conspiracy theories may play a unique role in predicting everyday crime (Study1) and that exposure to conspiracy theories increases anomie, which predicts increased future everyday crime intentions (Study 2). This research extends previous work and uncovers the consequences of conspiracy theories in a new

domain. It demonstrates that people subscribing to the view that others have conspired might

be more inclined toward unethical actions. We call for more research on the effects of

conspiracy theories on behaviour, and research that may intervene on these effects.

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