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**Conspiracy beliefs and the individual, relational, and collective selves**

Mikey Biddlestone<sup>1</sup>, Ricky Green<sup>1</sup>, Aleksandra Cichocka<sup>1</sup>, Robbie Sutton<sup>1</sup>, and Karen

Douglas<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology, University of Kent

**Author note**

Mikey Biddlestone <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1438-7392>

Ricky Green <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7634-3024>

Aleksandra Cichocka <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1703-1586>

Robbie Sutton <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1542-1716>

Karen Douglas <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0381-6924>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mikey Biddlestone ([mb978@kent.ac.uk](mailto:mb978@kent.ac.uk)), Olive Cottages Room OC2.04, School of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NP, UK, Tel: +44 (0)1227 824048.

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**Conspiracy beliefs and the individual, relational, and collective selves****Abstract**

Recent empirical and theoretical developments suggest that endorsement of conspiracy theories can arise from the frustration of *social* motives. Taking this further, the current review integrates theorising on processes relating to three selves—the *individual*, *relational*, and *collective* self and outlines their associations with conspiracy beliefs. In doing so, we argue that motives pertaining to the individual self (e.g., narcissism, need for uniqueness) are linked to belief in conspiracy theories to deflect blame from personal shortcomings and protect the self-image. Motives responding to threats to the relational self (e.g., social exclusion) increase endorsement of conspiracy theories to regain a sense of social support through exchanging shared concerns. Finally, collective self motives (e.g., collective narcissism, perceived ingroup victimhood) foster conspiracy beliefs to defend the group image by blaming outgroups for ingroup misfortunes and placing one's group in a morally superior victim role. Taken together, endorsement of conspiracy theories appears to be borne out of attempts to manage these three selves. Potential consequences for each of the selves, future directions, and theoretical implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* social motives, the self, conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy theories

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought conspiracy theories to the front of mainstream public discourse. Almost immediately after the outbreak, we observed the use of conspiracy theories to blame outgroups for the spread of the virus (Douglas, 2021a; Lee, 2020). For example, China was accused of deliberately manufacturing COVID-19 in a laboratory to be used as a bioweapon. Further down the line, the impact of conspiracy theories and misinformation on reducing intentions to follow virus-mitigating behaviours (e.g., Biddlestone, Green et al., 2020) or take the vaccine (e.g., Bertin et al., 2020) became more apparent (see also Roozenbeek et al., 2020). These findings illustrate the grave consequences that conspiracy beliefs can have in the face of global threats, reminding us we urgently need to understand why they appeal to so many people (see Douglas, 2021b; Van Bavel et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theories can be defined as attempts to explain the causes of significant social or political events by accusing malevolent outgroups of secretly plotting to achieve nefarious goals (Douglas et al., 2019; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). The psychological factors that attract people to conspiracy theories have received significant attention in recent years. This has led to a refined theoretical understanding of the appeal of conspiracy theories. Many scholars now agree that belief in conspiracy theories arises from efforts to satisfy important but thwarted psychological motives (e.g., Douglas et al., 2017, 2019; Jutzi, 2020; van Prooijen, 2020).

Douglas and colleagues (2017) drew on theorising about ideological belief systems (Jost et al., 2008; see also Hennes et al., 2012) to categorise the motives associated with conspiracy beliefs as existential, epistemic, and social.<sup>1</sup> *Epistemic* motives encompass the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that Jost and colleagues (2008) focus specifically on relational needs which, as we outline in this review, are just one example of social motives.

need to feel in possession of a stable and reliable understanding of the environment (Kruglanski, 1989). For example, a sense of uncertainty is associated with belief in conspiracy theories (Lamberty et al., 2018). *Existential* motives encompass the need for a sense of security and safety (Greenberg et al., 1990; Onraet et al., 2013). For example, people are likely to turn to conspiracy theories when they feel anxious (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) or powerless (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). *Social* motives refer to the need to bolster and protect a favourable image of the self and the group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For example, conspiracy beliefs have been linked to narcissistic needs for recognition of oneself and one's social groups (e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016), as well as the need to feel unique (Lantian et al., 2017; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). All three motives appear to play an important role in predicting conspiracy beliefs, but it is the *social motives* in particular that we turn our focus to in the current review.

### **The three selves**

Brewer and Gardner (1996) differentiate three fundamental representations of the self-concept: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. Each of these self-representations is driven by different social motivations. *The individual self* is associated with the motivation to maintain and establish personal uniqueness from others. The central features of the individual self are constructed with close reference to the people around us (e.g., Yeung & Martin, 2003; see also Sedikides et al., 2013). *The relational self* is associated with the motivation to establish and maintain interpersonal bonds with close others. Finally, *the collective self* is associated with a motivation to maintain and establish ties to groups deemed as important, seeking group-enhancement via intergroup comparisons (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

People tend to experience tensions between feeling unique and independent from others versus wanting to fit in, belong, and form relationships with others. These tensions

might explain why levels of self-categorisation can change dynamically (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For example, when intimacy needs at the relational level are frustrated (e.g., via rejection in a romantic relationship), reliance on one's collective identities (e.g., ethnic group) might increase. Although there are debates about which of the self motives are more important (see Sedikides & Gaertner, 2001), researchers agree that satisfaction of motives associated with all three selves are at least to some extent needed for meaningful psychological functioning and well-being (Sedikides et al., 2013). Thus, people seek to manage frustrations associated with these three fundamental motives in different ways. As we will argue here, one of these ways is to endorse conspiracy theories.

The current article aims to embed extant research on conspiracy beliefs from a variety of perspectives and theorising about the three levels of self-representation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) into Douglas and colleagues' (2017) framework of motivated conspiracy beliefs. While there are certainly other notable models of self that warrant further investigation with regards to conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Blatt & Blass, 1996; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Stryker & Statham, 1985; Deaux & Perkins, 2001; Turner et al., 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the current review does not intend to use the extant evidence to debate the veracity of the tripartite self, but to employ this model as a useful framework that can further elucidate the social processes that result in conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, we will examine whether and why individual, relational, and collective motives may attract people toward conspiracy theories. By doing this, we aim to 1) provide a more detailed taxonomy of the social processes that might motivate conspiracy beliefs, 2) discuss the distinctive consequences that conspiracy beliefs may have on each of the selves, and 3) use this to make more detailed predictions about the interplay between the social motives that drive conspiracy beliefs.

### **Individual self motives and conspiracy beliefs**

Most people are motivated to maintain or enhance views of themselves (Sedikides et al., 2013). To achieve this, they tend to compare themselves to relevant others (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1989). At the same time, perceived threats to the individual self trigger a motivation to protect and maintain a sense of self-worth (e.g., Sedikides & Gregg, 2008; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). It has been proposed that conspiracy theories appeal to people for this reason (Robins & Post, 1997). For example, Abalakina-Paap and colleagues (1999) suggested that conspiracy theories might appeal to people with low self-esteem because this allows them to blame others for their problems. Conspiracy beliefs promise the ability to control the narrative, ascribing responsibility for one's circumstances onto others, and positioning the self as morally superior (see Douglas et al., 2017). At the same time, conspiracy theories may make people feel like they have unique access to special knowledge, providing a particular allure for people hoping to bolster their self-image. Accordingly, conspiracy beliefs have been linked to various self-related motives, such as the need for positive self-worth and the need for uniqueness. We discuss each of these motives in turn.

***The need to defend the self-image: Self-esteem and narcissism***

Although early theorising has linked conspiracy beliefs to low self-esteem, empirical evidence for this association has been mixed (Crocker et al., 1999; Stieger et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2011; Swami 2012). One reason could be that low self-esteem might not always motivate the need to restore or enhance the self (vanDellen et al., 2011). Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) suggested that conspiracy beliefs may in fact be more strongly associated with narcissism—a sense of self-importance, superiority and entitlement to special treatment (Brummelman et al., 2016; Krizan & Herlache, 2017; see also Rosenthal et al., 2020). In particular, grandiose narcissism (as opposed to vulnerable narcissism, linked to negative self-views and paranoia; Cain et al., 2008; Kay, 2021) is characterised by a strong motivation to maintain a grandiose self (Horvath & Morf, 2009;

Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001)—what Baumeister and Vohs (2001) referred to as “addiction to self-esteem”. Those scoring high in narcissism use two social strategies to regulate the self. On the one hand, assertive self-enhancement leads individuals to—often unsuccessfully—attempt to gain ego boosts by garnering admiration from others. On the other, antagonistic self-protection leads them to defend against (real or imagined) ego threats by engaging in social rivalry and competition (Back et al., 2013). Another way those scoring high in narcissism may protect the self is by attributing any of their shortcomings or undesirable personal attributes to malevolent plots and conspiracies. The need for external validation also means that narcissists tend to have paranoid preoccupations with the idea that others are purposefully trying to undermine them (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992).

Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) used validated questionnaires to measure self-esteem and narcissism, testing them as joint predictors of belief in various conspiracy theories (e.g., about the moon landing, or foreign governments’ activities). They discovered that individual narcissism was indeed a more robust positive predictor of conspiracy beliefs. Once the overlap with individual narcissism was accounted for, low self-esteem was a relatively weak predictor of conspiracy beliefs. In fact, its effect became non-significant when controlling for generalised views of humanity, suggesting that any effects of low self-esteem on conspiracy beliefs may be due to the fact that low self-esteem is linked to generally negative views of humanity.

### ***The need for uniqueness and autonomy***

Motives relating to the individual self reflect not only a need for positive self-evaluation, but also the need to demonstrate a person’s unique contribution to the world, proving they are not expendable (see Leary, 2005). It has been argued that nearly all conspiracy theories offer the sense that one possesses supposed coveted knowledge (see Lantian et al., 2017). This ability to provide the believer with a sense of enlightened



understanding is perhaps why several lines of research have documented that both a chronic and temporarily heightened need for uniqueness (e.g., through a writing task that increases the salience of one's unique qualities) increases belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Lantian et al., 2017; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017, 2018). Interestingly, while vulnerable narcissism in particular is associated with paranoia, the link between grandiose narcissism and conspiracy beliefs can be explained by convictions about one's unique and special qualities (Kay, 2021; see also Reynolds & Lejuez, 2011), indicating that the need for uniqueness might additionally explain why those high in narcissism find conspiracy theories especially appealing.

While the need for uniqueness reflects an individual's motivation to maintain a positive self-image through expressions of difference from others, reactance represents a defensive rejection of the ideas perceived as threatening to one's sense of autonomy. For example, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, groups have engaged in collective action against legal requirements to wear face masks, citing "a violation of [their] freedom" (Stewart, 2020). When individuals experience threats to their sense of freedom, they express an active rejection of the values or beliefs that represent the source of this threat to maintain or restore their sense of autonomy (see Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Across 24 nations, Hornsey and colleagues (2018) found that individual reactance scores (measured with items such as "I consider advice from others an intrusion"; Hong & Page, 1989) were associated with stronger belief in various conspiracy theories. The authors suggested that people might reject scientific consensus to the extent that they view it as threatening to their individual autonomy, due to a perception that it imposes prescriptive ideals on how one should live their life (cf. van der Linden et al., 2019).

In sum, motives relating to the individual self seem to underlie two routes to conspiracy beliefs. On the one hand, suspicion of others and the need to deflect blame for personal shortcomings means that narcissists are more prone to believing in conspiracy

theories. On the other hand, conspiracy theories might be used as an attempt to maintain a positive self-image by providing people with the prospect of feeling unique and non-conformist. These processes reflect the primary goals to protect the individual self through deflection of psychological vulnerabilities (Leary et al., 2009) and achieve a sense of positive distinctiveness (Leary, 2005).

### ***Implications for the individual self***

Despite their apparent usefulness to protect the self, conspiracy beliefs might in fact have undesirable consequences for the individual. For example, defending self-worth by perceiving the world in conspiracist terms can leave one feeling dissatisfied and disillusioned with life's circumstances (see Jolley et al., 2019; see also Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b). Furthermore, despite the positive function of the need for uniqueness to demonstrate personal value, motivated aspirations of uniqueness can cloud people's judgment. Imhoff and Lamberty (2017) argue that presenting conflicting evidence to a conspiracy believer may ironically encourage them to 'double-down' on their beliefs, because doing so reaffirms the uniqueness they initially sought in the conspiracy theories. This suggests that although conspiracy theories may carry the promise of a route to bolster the self-image, the additional need to defend this image may override any realistic benefits that could have otherwise been gained from presenting unique ideas with intellectual humility. When coupled with the defensive rejection of consensus views in reactance, these attempts to protect the individual self can have negative consequences not only for the self (e.g., Biddlestone et al., 2021; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b), but also for society more broadly (e.g., hesitance to vaccinate or follow pandemic guidelines; see Bertin et al. 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

### **Relational self motives of conspiracy beliefs**

Even though conspiracy beliefs are motivated by the need to demonstrate and maintain individual uniqueness, there is also some evidence that they might be linked to

relational motives to establish interpersonal bonds with close others. If the relational self is under threat, people seek to regain a sense of social support (see Thoits, 1984). In this regard, research has begun to explore whether conspiracy theory communities can sometimes offer a promise of such help (Poon et al., 2020; Moulding et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2016; Graeupner & Coman, 2017).

***The need for relationships: Social exclusion***

The rise of real-world events organised through social media (e.g., the “stop the steal” protests against Joe Biden’s victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 US election; Spring, 2020a) have provided a mechanism for conspiracy believers to meet both online and face-to-face. While conspiracy believers are unlikely to be the only community that individuals seeking close bonds will turn to, when coupled with other motives implicated in the formation of conspiracy beliefs, expanding online conspiracist communities (e.g., Klein et al., 2018, 2019) might be particularly attractive for those seeking social connection. In fact, conspiracy theories may even provide a basis for individuals to create close bonds with others through their shared interests (Klein et al., 2019), epistemic concerns (Klein et al., 2018), and ideologies (Holt et al., 2020).

Accordingly, Poon and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs can increase when people feel excluded from others: across three studies, experimental manipulations of ostracism (e.g., receiving fewer social media likes compared to a control group) increased conspiracy beliefs. Cross-sectional research has indicated similar effects, revealing associations between conspiracy beliefs and feelings of social exclusion (Graeupner & Coman, 2017), as well as a sense of isolation (Moulding et al., 2016). Interestingly, van Prooijen (2016) found that conspiracy beliefs were actually higher when participants were experimentally induced to feel included (vs. excluded) by others. However, these effects were only observed for participants with unstable self-esteem or those who were made to feel

uncertain. It is then at least plausible that in this case, feelings of inclusion triggered individual self motives, such as the need to feel unique, which might have further translated into higher conspiracy beliefs. Although more research is needed to understand the effects of relational motives on conspiracy beliefs, one possibility is that these effects depend on whether the endorsement of a specific conspiracy theory provides individuals with a sense of community (e.g., belonging to a movement such as QAnon).

### ***Implications for the relational self***

Although conspiracy theories might promise a way of building relationships with others, public endorsement of conspiracy theories ironically heightens concerns for social exclusion. For example, Lantian and colleagues (2018) found that participants who were instructed to write online texts supporting conspiracy theories about the Charlie Hebdo shooting were more likely to anticipate fear of social exclusion than those instructed to write pieces criticising the theories. Moreover, despite a lack of direct research on the interpersonal consequences of conspiracy beliefs, simply searching “relationship advice conspiracy” on Google provides a swathe of pages detailing the relationship difficulties people are having with their friends, families, and partners who believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Spring, 2020b; Reddit, 2015). Therefore, future research would benefit from elucidating the circumstances under which associating with other like-minded conspiracy believers may help to create new dyadic bonds, and whether this may come at the cost of pushing away existing bonds with “non-believers”.

### **Collective self motives of conspiracy beliefs**

Just as people seek to protect their selves and their relationships, they seek to protect and enhance their social groups. Therefore, conspiracy beliefs can not only be a defensive strategy to manage threats to one’s self-worth, but they can also be used in a similar way to attempt to manage threats to the social groups people belong to. van Proojien and van Vugt

(2018) argue that conspiracy beliefs can be seen as an evolved psychological mechanism aimed at detecting malevolent outgroups colluding against the ingroup. Thus, members of groups that feel chronically threatened might show higher levels of conspiracy beliefs. Indeed, there is evidence showing higher levels of belief in conspiracy theories among ethnic and religious minorities, compared to majorities (e.g., Crocker et al., 1999; van Prooijen et al., 2018). Comparable to individual self motives, evidence shows that conspiracy beliefs are also strongest among people who feel victimised or are generally defensive about their group identities. They are likely to use conspiracy theories as a way of maintaining their group image by providing an explanation for their ingroup's (real or exaggerated) disadvantage and defending the group from (real or imaginary) enemies (e.g., see also Biddlestone, Cichocka et al., 2020; Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016; Kofta & Sedek, 2005).

***The need to defend a positive ingroup image: Collective narcissism***

Just as individual narcissism encompasses a defensive self-evaluation, a defensive ingroup identity can be captured by the concept of collective narcissism. Collective narcissism is a belief in the greatness of one's social group (be it nation, ethnicity, or sports team) that is not sufficiently appreciated by others (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). For those scoring high in collective narcissism, conspiracy theories might be a way of explaining why the ingroup is not getting the recognition it is allegedly entitled to, enabling people to blame outgroups for their ingroup's misfortunes. For example, collective narcissism measured among Poles predicted a belief that other nations are conspiring to undermine Poland's successes in the fight against communism (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016). Similarly, collective narcissism in the US predicted a belief that other governments are conspiring against the ingroup (e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016; for examples from other intergroup contexts see Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; van Prooijen & Song, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019). This association between collective

narcissism and conspiracy beliefs seems to be driven by increased sensitivity to intergroup threats (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016). In fact, research suggests that collective narcissism might also predict a more general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. For example, it has been linked to a tendency to view political events in terms of group-based conspiracies (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018), as well as belief in other conspiracy theories, such as ones about vaccines (Cislak et al., in press), climate change (Bertin, Nera et al., 2021), or the COVID-19 pandemic (Sternisko, Cichocka, Cislak et al., 2020), which might not necessarily implicate a specific enemy outgroup.

Importantly, a strong commitment to one's group does not necessarily foster a propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Research suggests that ingroup identification, understood as a positive group evaluation or ties to ingroup members, shows mixed associations with conspiracy beliefs (for negative associations, see Prot, 2015; Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014; Swami et al., 2017; Uenal et al., 2020; Sternisko, Cichocka, Cislak et al., 2020; for a positive association, see Douglas & Leite, 2017; and for non-significant associations, see Douglas & Leite, 2017). However, when the overlap between ingroup identification and collective narcissism is accounted for, collective narcissism is revealed as a unique predictor of the belief in conspiracy theories. In fact, ingroup identification without the narcissistic component, which can be interpreted as a secure form of ingroup identity, seems to be associated with a *lower* tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala et al., 2016). Therefore, it seems that the collective self motivation to defend against threats to the group image through conspiracy beliefs is driven by the narcissistic need for ingroup recognition, rather than genuine commitment to the group.

***The need to blame others: Perceived ingroup victimhood***

Conspiracy theories usually point to specific outgroups that constitute a threat to the ingroup (Kofta & Sedek, 2005; van Prooijen, 2020; Sternisko, Cichocka, & Van Bavel, 2020). Outgroups that are perceived as agentic, yet cold and unfriendly (Winiewski et al., 2015; Fousiani & van Prooijen, 2019; Cuddy et al., 2009) might be especially likely to be stereotyped as a “dangerous, potent, and deceptive enemy” (Kofta & Sedek, 2005; p. 42). Conspiracy stereotypes paint specific groups as being highly coordinated in their secret efforts to exert dominance over other groups (Kofta & Sedek, 2005). When these stereotypes are ascribed to groups that are perceived as more powerful than one’s own, this can lead to scapegoating, wherein individuals hold the outgroup as responsible for negative ingroup circumstances (Glick, 2002). A typical example that illustrates this dynamic is the conspiracy stereotyping of Jews.

People might be especially motivated to look for outgroups to blame when they see the ingroup as a victim (Suciu, 2008; Reid, 2010; Shnabel & Noor, 2012). To maintain a positive group image and compensate for this perceived negative social standing, victimhood motivates the use of conspiracy stereotypes in an attempt to unite the ingroup against the scapegoated outgroup (Reid, 2010; see also Bilewicz et al., 2019; Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014; Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kofta & Sedek, 2005), which seems particularly important when ingroup identification is strong (Pantazi et al., 2020). Similarly, conspiracy stereotyping seems stronger among those who are chronically defensive about the ingroup, particularly those scoring higher in collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012).

In sum, chronic or situationally induced threats to one’s social identity can motivate conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy theories can serve as a sort of threat detection mechanism that identifies allegedly dangerous groups seeking to harm or undermine the ingroup (see Kofta & Sedek, 2005; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Furthermore, this hypersensitivity to outgroup threat fosters attempts to maintain the positive group image through intergroup comparisons

that place the ingroup in a morally superior victim role (Bar-Tal et al., 2009), justifying conspiracy stereotypes even further. Therefore, collective self motives that seek to protect and enhance one's social group increase the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. This can have potentially problematic social consequences.

### *Implications for the collective self*

Conspiracy beliefs about outgroups can threaten social cohesion. They lead to prejudice and intergroup hostility (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Jolley et al., 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2020), as well as disruptive forms of political engagement (Imhoff et al., 2021). However, conspiracy beliefs might also turn out to be dangerous for the ingroup itself. For example, collective narcissism is linked to suspicion of outgroups, even if these outgroups are offering aid to the ingroup (Mashuri et al., 2020). The increased threat sensitivity of those high in collective narcissism may also foster uncertainty around whether fellow ingroup members can even be trusted (see also Cichocka & Cislak, 2020; Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2020). This might be one reason why people scoring high in collective narcissism are willing to engage in conspiratorial plots against their ingroup, such as covering up sensitive information from the public and carrying out terrorist acts on their own soil for the government (see Biddlestone et al., 2021). In fact, the association between collective narcissism and a readiness to conspire against the ingroup is partially explained by the fact that collective narcissists believe other ingroup members are conspiring too (see also Douglas & Sutton, 2011). Therefore, it appears that the use of conspiracy theories to defend against threats to the collective self may also backfire and hurt the ingroup and its members.

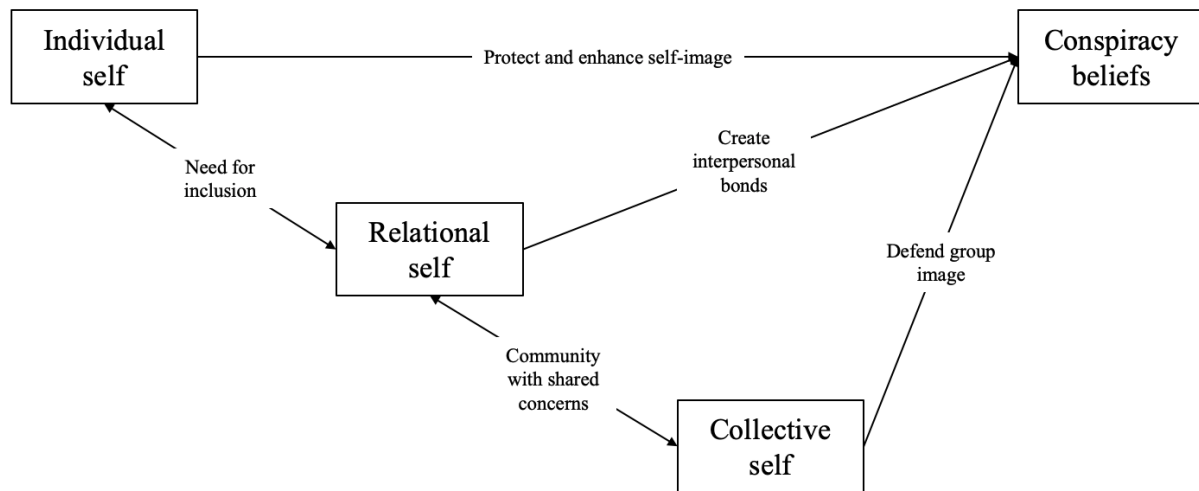
Engaging with conspiracy theories also has implications for one's identification with the "conspiracy theorist" ingroup. Evidence suggests that labelling an idea a "conspiracy theory" does not affect its believability (Wood, 2016), and individuals share these ideas with others, often in online communities (see Klein et al., 2019). Within these communities, the



label of “conspiracy theorist” itself can represent a distinct social group identity (see Nera et al., 2021), encompassing, for example, the dismissal of non-“conspiracy theorist” outgroup members as “sheeple” (Nattrass, 2012). Furthermore, results show that perceived discrimination of the conspiracist identity can be associated with stronger identification with the “conspiracy theorist” ingroup (Nera et al., 2021). Thus, while conspiracy beliefs themselves may act as a defensive response against threats to the group image, stronger identification with the “conspiracy theorist” ingroup, which carries unique implications for intergroup tensions, can be a simultaneous response to a threatened collective self.

### **The interplay of social motives that predict conspiracy beliefs**

Thus far, we have outlined why the motives associated with the three selves (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sedikides et al., 2013) can lead to stronger conspiracy beliefs, weighing the potential consequences for each. Firstly, we argue that threats to the self-image activate defensive motivations to deflect personal misgivings by accusing others of conspiratorial intentions. At the same time, conspiracy beliefs can be driven by the need to feel special and independent. However, there is less evidence that these attempts might be successful—those who believe in conspiracy theories report lower well-being and life satisfaction (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Freeman & Bentall, 2017). Secondly, we argue that threats to the relational self may motivate conspiracy beliefs in an attempt to regain social support through the exchange of shared interests. However, this behaviour could further threaten the relational self by simultaneously pushing away previously existing interpersonal bonds with “non-believers”. Finally, we argue that threats to the collective self motivate conspiracy beliefs in attempts to defend and maintain a positive group image (see Figure 1). These processes have distinctive consequences through the exacerbation of intergroup conflicts and a breaking down of trust within the ingroup.



**Figure 1.** Interplay between the processes linking each of the three selves with conspiracy beliefs.

Conspiracy beliefs then seem to be an attempt (even if sometimes misguided) to defend against perceived threats to all three selves, but are any of these motives especially important in predicting conspiracy beliefs? Sedikides and colleagues (2013) provided evidence suggesting that the processes associated with the individual self take psychological priority over the other two selves. For example, threats towards the individual self trigger stronger reactions, result in more psychological avoidance, and affect participants' mood more strongly than those aimed at the other two selves (Gaertner et al., 1999, 2002, 2012). This individual self-primacy means that even relational and collective self processes are often used to defend against threats to the individual self (e.g., Eidelman & Biernat, 2003; Sherman & Kim, 2005; Seta & Seta, 1996; Skitka, 2003; Pinter & Wildschut, 2012; Gebauer et al., 2012; Rusbult et al., 1988). Accordingly, research shows that interpersonal bonds (Aron et al., 1992) and groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1988) gain psychological value the more they are incorporated into the individual self. Therefore, it is important to discuss the implications that this goal alignment might have for socially motivated conspiracy beliefs.

Contrary to the notion that a threatened relational self can motivate conspiracy beliefs, van Prooijen (2016) found instead that a manipulation of social *inclusion* increased belief in conspiracy theories. However, this was only among participants experiencing unstable self-esteem. Considering the majority of research showing that social *exclusion* motivates conspiracy beliefs (Poon et al., 2020; Moulding et al., 2016; Graeupner & Coman, 2017), it appears that when people experience relational concerns, threats to the individual self in the form of unstable self-esteem may override these concerns. In this case, the unstable sense of self-esteem may have interacted with the experimental manipulation of belonging to motivate conspiracy beliefs in an attempt to re-establish personal uniqueness. Similarly, while collective narcissism motivates conspiracy beliefs as an attempt to defend the ingroup image, it is said to represent more of a concern with how this image reflects on the individual than the group (see Cichocka, 2016; Cichocka & Cislak, 2020; see also Biddlestone et al., 2021). This goal alignment between the selves illustrates how the underlying role of the individual self may alter or strengthen the role that the other selves play in motivating conspiracy beliefs.

For example, Poon and colleagues (2020) found that an additional manipulation of self-affirmation—strengthening the individual self through heightened feelings of competence and morality (e.g., Sherman & Cohen, 2006)—mitigated the experience of a frustrated relational self that would have otherwise been evoked by ostracism, ultimately attenuating its effect on conspiracy beliefs. These findings illustrate how satisfying individual needs might mitigate the effects of relational and collective needs on conspiracy beliefs. However, it is unclear if satisfaction of relational or collective self motives would be similarly effective in buffering needs associated with the individual self. If this were the case, this could challenge the arguments about the primacy of the self in motivating conspiracy beliefs.

Additional insights might come from research considering other types of needs. Studies focusing on control motivation (typically conceptualised as an existential, rather than a social motive; Douglas et al., 2017, 2019) might be especially informative. For example, Bertin, Marinthe and colleagues (2021) showed that a satisfied need for personal control weakened the link between collective narcissism and anti-immigrant conspiracy beliefs (see also Cichocka et al., 2018). However, relying on the distinction between the spheres of personal, interpersonal, and socio-political control (see Paulhus & Van Selst, 1990), Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that conspiracy mentality was only associated with low socio-political control, but less so with personal or interpersonal lack of control (see also Bruder et al., 2013; Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020), which could challenge the ideas about the primacy of the self-related motives. Overall, more work is needed to fully understand the interplay of individual, relational and collective motives in predicting conspiracy beliefs, and the boundary conditions for their effects.

Scholars have also suggested that specific features or types of conspiracy theories may be alluring depending on which motives are frustrated. Researchers have argued that all conspiracy theories carry a common underlying quality of coveted knowledge (Lantian et al., 2017; Sternisko, Cichocka, & Van Bavel, 2020). This quality may be attractive to someone with a high need for uniqueness, offering the ability to express oneself through the endorsement of these niche beliefs. However, conspiracy theories also often imply negative views of specific groups (e.g., via conspiracy stereotypes). Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel (2020) argue that when social identity motives are frustrated, the ability to identify a relevant antagonistic outgroup might be more important than the ability to uncover secret knowledge. With regards to conspiracy theories surrounding the origin and responses to COVID-19, motives relating to the individual self may be responsible for belief in most COVID-19 conspiracy theories due to their stance challenging the official narrative with

supposed coveted knowledge. On the other hand, motives relating to the collective self may only drive belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories that unfairly hold outgroups responsible (e.g., “Coronavirus was created by the Chinese to take control of the world economy”, see Kowalski et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the global vaccine rollouts have provided a new battleground on which bonds with close others can be broken (see Bhardwaj, 2021), threatening the relational self through social exclusion and pushing individuals further towards self-affirming conspiracist communities (see also Nera et al., 2021).

Of course, goals associated with different selves often align, meaning that these different allures might often operate at the same time. For example, conspiracy theories may appeal to both the individual and relational selves because they offer niche ideas of interest, providing a basis on which to form interpersonal bonds. At the same time, however, certain conspiracy theories may offer a unique content that other theories may not provide, which allows individuals to explain their particular negative interpersonal circumstances (see Graeupner & Coman, 2017). For example, a conspiracy theory explaining away a formal interpersonal conflict in the workplace would not necessarily be appropriate in explaining interpersonal conflicts in more casual social settings. In a similar vein, collective narcissism and perceived ingroup victimhood may primarily predict belief in conspiracy theories that implicate enemy outgroups. However, because collective narcissism is thought to compensate for frustrated personal needs (Cichocka, 2016), it might trigger a more general distrust of others, even within one’s group, increasing the appeal of many conspiracy theories.

van Prooijen (2020) developed a framework attempting to propose the sequential order between the conspiracy belief motives identified by Douglas and colleagues (2017). This framework proposes that experiences of existential threat trigger epistemic sense-making processes, which result in conspiracy beliefs when social motives identify a relevant antagonistic outgroup (see also Marchlewska et al., 2018). Building on this theorising, we

argue that certain existential threats might trigger social motives at all three levels of self and, thus, affect the adoption of conspiracy beliefs. Preliminary findings suggest that the link between attachment anxiety and conspiracy beliefs (Green & Douglas, 2018) may be driven by a tendency to catastrophise, implying an attempt to gain social support and satisfy the relational self through garnering attention (Green & Douglas, 2021). Moreover, experimental inductions of existential threats to personal control can lead to conspiracy beliefs by activating the collective self motives associated with collective narcissism (e.g., Bertin, Marinthe et al., 2021; Cichocka et al., 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2020). Therefore, it appears that particular existential threats may threaten different selves. Future research would benefit from investigating these processes further.

While existential threats might underlie processes of motivated conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen, 2020), this does not mean that social motives do not, in turn, predict existential threats. For example, the effect of anxiety on low self-esteem is reciprocal (Sowislo & Orth, 2012), and existential vulnerability is experienced as a result of social exclusion (Poon et al., 2020). Similarly, we argue that social exclusion may be both a predictor and consequence of conspiracy beliefs, thus illustrating a similar effect within the selves.

### **Summary, caveats, and future research**

While recent findings have applied experimental designs to determine the effects of threats to the selves on conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Lantian et al., 2017; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Poon et al., 2020; Pantazi et al., 2020), less is known about how exposure to conspiracy theories affects the three selves. Past work has shown that exposure to conspiracy theories can make people feel powerless and uncertain about politics (Jolley et al., 2014a, 2014b). This suggests that while conspiracy beliefs can be adopted to in an attempt to satisfy needs and cope with stress (Marchlewska et al., 2021), they may also further thwart the frustrated motives that drive them in the first place (Douglas et al., 2017, 2019; van Prooijen, 2020).

Future studies would do well to examine the way conspiracy theories affect one's views of the self, one's group, or social relationships.

Importantly, the vast majority of research on conspiracy beliefs to-date has been conducted on White, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) samples. However, research including non-WEIRD samples seems to be on the rise (e.g., Swami, 2012; van Prooijen & Song, 2020). For example, Hornsey and colleagues (2018) confirmed the link between reactance and conspiracy beliefs across 24 separate nations. Similarly, Sternisko, Cichocka, Cislak and colleagues (2020) replicated the association between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs in 55 countries. However, other research has begun to uncover the differential role cultural orientations may play in the formation of conspiracy beliefs (Biddlestone et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Song, 2020; Adam-Troian et al., 2020). One implication may be that different cultural orientations could alter the way in which different self motives operate. Although Sedikides and colleagues (2013) argued for the primacy of the self being pancultural, other research highlights the different mechanisms associated with self-affirmation (Heine & Lehman, 1997) and reactance (Jonas et al., 2009) between cultures with independent versus interdependent views of the self. Therefore, future research should follow these efforts to further refine our understanding of the contextual parameters to previously established processes.

Another line of investigation that may further clarify the unique connections between these motives and conspiracist notions is the distinction between beliefs and intentions. For example, while collective narcissism is robustly linked to conspiracy beliefs, it has recently been shown to predict intentions to both disseminate (Sternisko et al., 2020) and engage in conspiracies against fellow ingroup members (Biddlestone et al., 2021). Furthermore, preliminary findings suggest that individual narcissism may also be associated with intentions to disseminate conspiracy theories, even more so than endorsing the beliefs themselves

(Wood, 2021). Thus, while other motives may embolden genuine belief in conspiracy theories, using and spreading conspiracy theories may simply be another activity that demonstrates narcissists' Machiavellian side (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; see also Douglas & Sutton, 2011). In other words, this strategic use of conspiracy theories to gain a competitive advantage over others further exposes the antagonistic self-protection displayed by narcissists (Back et al., 2013), suggesting a promising avenue for future research.

Future studies could also investigate whether it is possible to attenuate belief in, as well as dissemination of, conspiracy theories by managing frustrated social motives (Douglas et al., 2015; see also Cichocka, 2020). Possible approaches include self-affirmation (see Poon et al., 2020), or the distancing of the individual self-definition from that of conspiracy believers' through ridicule of the logical inconsistencies inferred by these beliefs (Orosz et al., 2016). We hope that our approach provides a basis for future research that will not only help us understand, but also manage, the motivational appeal of conspiracy theories. To conclude, while conspiracy theories can be an appealing avenue for individuals to protect and maintain their various levels of self, these efforts are likely to create a downward spiral of self-reinforcing processes that ultimately result in a dangerous mixture of perceived threats toward the self-image, social exclusion, and group conflicts.



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