Does belief in conspiracy theories affect interpersonal relationships?

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers have begun to study the social consequences of conspiracy beliefs. However, little research has investigated the impact of conspiracy beliefs on interpersonal relationships. In this review, we draw attention to this issue by summarizing available empirical evidence and proposing potential social-psychological mechanisms to explain whether and why conspiracy theories affect interpersonal relationships. We firstly discuss that the attitude change that often accompanies the internalization of conspiracy beliefs might distance people's opinions and, consequently, erode their relationships. Furthermore, we argue that the stigmatizing value of conspiracy theories can negatively affect the evaluation of conspiracy believers and discourage others from getting close to them. Finally, we consider that the misperception of social norms associated with the acceptance of certain conspiracy narratives can lead conspiracy believers to engage in non-normative behavior. Others are likely to perceive such behavior negatively, resulting in diminished interpersonal interaction. We highlight the need for further research to address these issues, as well as the potential factors that may prevent relationships being eroded by conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy theories, interpersonal relationships, social norms.

> We need a more nuanced way of regarding conspiracy theorists. That these people behind the conspiracy theories are people that we love and that something has happened to them and that there's a real tragedy here, not just for them, but also for all the people who love them, whose relationships with them have been fundamentally changed because of it (extract from interview to Kasey Edwards in ABC news; Dulaney & Lollback, 2020).

The opening words are those of Kasey Edwards, an Australian author and columnist, whose mother developed strong beliefs in a variety of conspiracy theories—from the Earth being flat to the denial of COVID–19 and the Holocaust. In her interview, Kasey described how the discussions about these conspiracy beliefs and, eventually, the spread of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories within her family, led her to break the relationship with her mother. Kasey's is only one of the many anecdotal cases that can be found on social media, in which people report how conspiracy theories have drastically affected, or have even ruined, their interpersonal relationships with close family members, friends, and acquaintances (e.g., Desmond-Harris, 2022; Maverick, 2020; Meyer et al., 2021; Nordstrom, 2021).

The impact that conspiracy theories have on interpersonal relationships might be, however, far from anecdotal when considering the popularity and reach of many conspiracy theories. While people's beliefs in conspiracy theories might not have necessarily increased in recent decades (Uscinski et al., 2022), the percentage of people who believe in these conspiracy theories is not negligible. For instance, in 2021, 19% of Americans believed that climate change is a hoax, 29% agreed that the dangers of vaccines are hidden by the medical establishment, and 44% believed that a "deep state" is embedded in the U.S. government (Uscinski et al., 2022; for a comparison with European data, see also Walter & Drochon, 2022). In Spain, a representative survey with 1103 respondents from the southern region of Andalucía indicated that around 35–40% strongly believed that the government hid data on suicides caused by the economic crisis, or that Muslim immigrants are plotting to impose Islam in Spain (Rodríguez-Pascual et al., 2021). Furthermore, emerging conspiracy theories in recent years, like those concerning the origin of the COVID–19 pandemic (Douglas, 2021b) or QAnon in the US (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021), have gained a considerable number of adherents in a very short time. One out of six Americans believes some of the QAnon major tenets (e.g., "The government, media, and financial worlds in the US. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping paedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation", Orcés, 2022; see also Uscinski et al., 2022). Importantly, almost 80%

of people in one survey reported having a relative or a friend who follows QAnon (Moskalenko et al., 2022). These numbers are far from representing the entire range of conspiracy theories or of domains and cultural backgrounds in which conspiracy theories emerge. Yet, they provide a symptomatic picture of the spread of some conspiracy theories and their potential penetration within people's social networks. A significant concern, therefore, is whether (and how) conspiracy theories affect interpersonal relationships within people's social networks, as anecdotal evidence seems to suggest.

In the present article, we draw attention to this understudied issue, considering the consequences of conspiracy theories for people's interpersonal relationships. We hope that this article will provide a platform for researchers to examine this issue empirically and establish the extent to which accumulating anecdotal accounts of the harmful outcomes of conspiracy theorizing can be explained by psychological factors.

Consequences of conspiracy theories: From a macro-level to a micro-level

The majority of research on the psychology of conspiracy theories had focused on examining the individual and contextual factors that attract people toward conspiracy theories, and only recently, researchers have broadened their focus to also investigate the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories (for a review, see Douglas & Sutton, 2023). A major focus in this area has been to clarify the implications of conspiracy theories for *macro*-social processes, such as drifts in politics and public opinion, society's response to a climate emergency or a global pandemic, or dynamics of intergroup conflict. Thus, research has largely focused on how conspiracy beliefs influence people's attitudes and behavior in important societal domains.

For instance, researchers have investigated how conspiracy beliefs can influence people's political attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, previous work indicates that conspiracy beliefs reduce people's political engagement through conventional means of political participation (e.g., voting intention; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). However, conspiracy believers are more likely to endorse non-normative, even extreme or violent, forms of political action (e.g., participation in a violent protest; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Imhoff et al., 2021; Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). In the context of the environmental crisis, conspiracy theories have the potential to hamper societal efforts to minimize the consequences of climate change. Specifically, belief in conspiracy theories about climate change is associated with lower pro-environmental attitudes, lower intentions to engage in pro-environmental behavior and less support for pro-environmental policies (Biddlestone et al., 2022). Similarly, anti-science conspiracy beliefs might hinder the

response to a pandemic given their association with more negative attitudes towards vaccines (Yang et al., 2021) and lower intentions to get vaccinated (Bertin et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). This disconnection of conspiracy believers from mainstream politics and social causes is congruent with their greater levels of distrust in institutional systems and epistemic authorities, such as the scientific community (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Rutjens et al., 2018; van Prooijen et al., 2022). Furthermore, some work indicates that specific conspiracy theories can also evoke intergroup prejudice and discrimination against minority groups (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kofta et al., 2020; Obaidi et al., 2022), as arguably occurred with COVID–19 conspiracy theories during the outbreak of the pandemic (e.g., Moonshot, 2020).

While understanding the impact of conspiracy theories through this macro-social lens is crucial, we also consider it important to shed light on the *micro*-social consequences of conspiracy theories. That is, how do conspiracy theories affect individuals and their immediate social contexts? Although there is extensive knowledge to help understand why people fall into "rabbit holes" of conspiracy theories (Sutton & Douglas, 2022), the individual and interpersonal consequences of falling into these rabbit holes are much less well understood. We therefore adopt this micro-level of analysis to discuss whether and how people's interpersonal relationships might be shaped by belief in conspiracy theories.

Do conspiracy theories affect interpersonal relationships?

Empirical evidence addressing this question is scarce. One example is a recent investigation of the interpersonal consequences of QAnon conspiracy beliefs (Mousaw, 2022). In this study, 426 users of the r/QAnonCasualties forum from the online platform Reddit, who self-identified as relatives, partners, or close contacts of a QAnon supporter, answered different questions about the quality of their relationship before and after this person started to support QAnon. The results showed that participants recognized drastic changes in their relationship quality. After the person close to them started supporting QAnon, participants perceived less closeness in their relationship with this person, lower relationship satisfaction, and they reported a lower frequency and quality of their interactions (Mousaw, 2022).

In a set of four studies, the authors of the present article found that conspiracy beliefs were associated with, and led to, lower relationship satisfaction (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2022). In three of these studies, participants listed people from their social network and reported both their perceptions of these people's conspiracy beliefs and of their relationship

satisfaction with them. Additionally, participants reported their own conspiracy beliefs. Across studies, we observed that higher perceived conspiracy beliefs were associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Critically, this association was consistently more pronounced among participants who reported weaker conspiracy beliefs. In a fourth study, we asked participants to imagine that the person they listed endorsed (vs. opposed) a conspiracy theory and, similarly to Mousaw (2022), we measured whether participants would recognize this hypothetical event to potentially change their relationship satisfaction. Indeed, if the person endorsed (vs. opposed) the conspiracy theory, participants anticipated lower relationship satisfaction with them, and this was especially the case for participants with weaker conspiracy beliefs themselves.

These two sets of studies support the idea that conspiracy theories can erode interpersonal relationships, despite some methodological limitations (e.g., reliance on retrospective measures and cross-sectional data). Furthermore, they suggest that this effect should partly rest on interindividual differences within a given relationship regarding the endorsement of such theories. However, they do not provide sufficient information to clarify why this effect would occur. In the following sections, we will elaborate on different plausible explanations.

Attitudinal distancing

One explanation for why conspiracy theories might erode interpersonal relationships can be due to a process of attitudinal distancing between the conspiracy believers and people in their social context. Conspiracy theories do likely trigger attitude change among conspiracy believers about topics, objects or individuals related to the conspiracy theory or the conspiracy theory itself. For instance, it is plausible that QAnon supporters change (or strengthen) their evaluation of former U.S. president Donald Trump after internalizing that the latter is fighting against a paedophilic network of liberal politicians, or that believers of climate change conspiracy theories develop negative attitudes against vegetarianism or pro-environmental policies. Previous research has shown that exposing people to conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana increased people's agreement with such narratives, without them being aware (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). Another investigation found that exposure to conspiracy narratives describing how the results of a democratic election were rigged influenced people's attitudes towards democracy (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). Additionally, conspiracy beliefs are more frequent among the political extremes (Alper & Imhoff, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2015), which highlights their potential contribution to the polarization of political attitudes.

The attitude change that conspiracy believers may experience can distance their attitudes from those shared by their immediate social context. According to a broad body of literature on attitude (dis-)similarity, this attitudinal distancing may have negative effects on interpersonal liking (Byrne, 1961; Singh et al., 2017; Zorn et al., 2022) and on the chances of engaging in affiliative behavior, when the differing attitudes are strong (Philipp-Muller et al., 2020). In part, these effects of attitude dissimilarity can be attributed to a decrease of interpersonal trust (Singh et al., 2015, 2017), a variable that is also negatively related to conspiracy beliefs (Goertzel, 1994; Meuer & Imhoff, 2021). Thus, both conspiracy believers and those associated with them might view their relationships to be negatively affected by increasing attitudinal distancing and reduced levels of interpersonal trust. This may frustrate basic social needs and activate compensatory mechanisms to find social validation in other relationships. In the case of conspiracy believers, they might opt to approach like-minded communities of conspiracy believers, as it seems to occur in online contexts (Brugnoli et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2019). Similarly, people who have relationships with conspiracy believers might prioritize new or pre-existing relationships with like-minded people who, in this case, do not believe in (or even oppose) conspiracy theories.

A special case might be that of close relationships that rest on stronger bonds (e.g., kinship, romantic partnerships, close friendships), as these might not be as easily replaceable. Future research should specifically assess the impact of the attitudinal distancing associated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories in this type of relationships. We propose that recent research on the effect of attitude similarity in close relationships could be a reasonable starting point (e.g., Moore et al., 2017).

Conspiracy beliefs as stigmatizing beliefs

Another reason why conspiracy beliefs might affect interpersonal relationships is people's evaluation of the endorsement of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are commonly regarded as flawed narratives that are believed by marginal social groups (Barkun, 2015). An example of this negative perception is people's frequent association of conspiracy beliefs with mental instability and problems of mental health (Green et al., 2023; Klein et al., 2015; Sparkman, 2012). Although conspiracy beliefs positively correlate with some clinical traits (e.g., paranoia, schizotypy; Darwin et al., 2011), they are clearly distinct phenomena (Alsuhibani et al., 2022; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). Another example is people's tendency to make use of the label "conspiracy theory" to refer to events they disbelieve (Douglas et al., 2021), which reflects the stigmatizing value of such a label. Furthermore, people anticipate that the endorsement of conspiracy theories entails social costs, like being negatively

evaluated and socially excluded (Green et al., 2023; Lantian et al., 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest that belief in conspiracy theories is largely stigmatized.

The social stigma surrounding the endorsement of conspiracy theories might contribute to the erosion of interpersonal relationships in two different ways. As we just mentioned, one way is the negative evaluations and associated reactions from people who disbelieve conspiracy theories. The endorsement of conspiracy theories can impact basic processes of impression formation (Green et al., 2023) and ultimately determine people's willingness to establish social interactions and relationships with those who believe in conspiracy theories. For example, the endorsement of conspiracy theories in online dating profiles can truncate people's chances of finding a partner (Green et al., 2022).

A second way in which the stigma of conspiracy beliefs can negatively impact interpersonal relationships is via *stigma-by-association* (Pryor et al., 2012). People who have a relationship with a conspiracy believer might fear that other people's negative evaluations of the conspiracy believer generalize to those close to them. Therefore, they might opt to socially distance themselves from the conspiracy believer or even actively contribute to mechanisms of social exclusion. However, the social isolation of conspiracy believers may accelerate their fall into the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories (Poon et al., 2020; van Prooijen, 2016), increase their need to create new dyadic bonds with other like-minded conspiracy believers (Biddlestone et al., 2021), and ultimately create even more irreconcilable conditions for their relationship with non-conspiracy believers.

Conspiracy theories and social norms

Researchers have further argued that the effect of conspiracy theories on interpersonal relationships might be related to the misperception of social norms (Pummerer, 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022). According to this rationale, strong belief in conspiracy theories implies an altered sense of the social reality consisting of the misrepresentation of the social norms and values that regulate social relationships (Pummerer, 2022). This biased perception of social norms could rest on the distrust conspiracy believers show in the institutional authorities responsible for the signaling and enforcement of social norms (van Prooijen et al., 2022), and on the frequent interaction with like-minded conspiracy believers, who reinforce the adoption of alternative normative frameworks (Pummerer, 2022).

An example of this normative misrepresentation is that conspiracy believers tend to perceive that others also share their conspiracy beliefs (Cookson et al., 2021a, 2021b). This sense of *false consensus* may also reflect in their expectation of how others will behave. For instance, people who believe in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories have been observed to

underestimate others' vaccination intentions (Cookson et al., 2021b). Moreover, conspiracy believers' own vaccination intentions were positively correlated with the misestimation of other people's intentions (Cookson et al., 2021b). These findings suggest that, indeed, conspiracy believers misperceive their beliefs and behaviors as normative, accepted and shared by their social context. Critically, this misperception might lead conspiracy believers to engage in non-normative behavior and to violate social norms (Imhoff et al., 2021; Pummerer, 2022).

The misrepresentation of social norms, and the potential consequences it arguably has on behavior, might have negative consequences on interpersonal relationships (Pummerer, 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022). Firstly, the misrepresentation (and/or violation) of social norms has the capacity to erode interpersonal trust, any attempts of cooperation, reciprocity and prosociality, and ultimately, the interdependence between individuals (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Interestingly, these negative consequences on interpersonal trust and cooperation have already been observed to be associated with belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., Alper et al., 2021; Meuer & Imhoff, 2021; Moon & Travaglino, 2021; van der Linden, 2015).

Secondly, engaging in non-normative behavior might entail different types of risks, such as social (i.e., punishment), economic (e.g., a fine or getting fired) or even physical (i.e., health-related) risks. For example, the assault on the U.S. Capitol in 2021, perpetrated and justified by political extremists, has partly been attributed to the QAnon conspiracy theory (Tollefson, 2021) and it resulted in serious penal sanctions to the heads of this violent protest (Vargas, 2022). In the case of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, the opposition to the use of vaccines entails severe physical risks for those conspiracy believers who decide not to get vaccinated and to those around them. Similarly, in the context of the COVID–19 pandemic, those who endorsed COVID-related conspiracy theories were more likely to break regulations aimed at minimizing the spread of the virus (van Prooijen et al., 2021), and thus, they increased the risk of infection for themselves and for others. Prior research suggests that conspiracy believers, congruently with their beliefs, likely underestimate these risks, and that this explains why they engage in risk behavior (Chayinska et al., 2022). However, people who do not believe in conspiracy theories —and thus, who presumably have more accurate perceptions of risk—, might decide to distance themselves from conspiracy believers to prevent being exposed to (the consequences of) their risky behavior. Ultimately, this can jeopardize interpersonal relationships, as occurred in the anecdotal case opening the present article.

Finally, it is important to consider that conspiracy believers will share their own beliefs, and perhaps, that this spread of conspiracy (mis)information may be perceived in and of itself as a violation of social or moral norms. In the end, the spread of conspiracy theories can be societally harmful (Douglas, 2021a) and even have fatal consequences (e.g., as mentioned above, the increase of people's mortality by refusing to vaccinate). If it was the case that the spread of conspiracy theories was considered as a norm violation, one would expect people to react punitively against conspiracy believers, and that these punitive reactions contribute to the deterioration of their interpersonal relationships. Although further research is needed to support this rationale, previous research provides indirect evidence. For example, in the context of the US, some studies suggest that Republicans are less critical (or even supportive) of the spread of conspiracy theories in comparison to Democrats (Dow et al., 2023; Green et al., 2023). These findings exemplify that social groups —in this case, defined by specific political attitudes and identity— might differ in the normative evaluation of the spread conspiracy theories, considering that conspiracy narratives can become a means to enhance the group's image and status (Marie & Petersen, 2022; Robertson et al., 2022). In short, the negative impact that we argue conspiracy beliefs might have on interpersonal relationships could further depend on the normative evaluation people have of the spread of these beliefs.

Conclusion

The anecdotal and limited empirical evidence to date suggests that belief in conspiracy theories might have important negative consequences for interpersonal relationships. We proposed different social-psychological mechanisms through which conspiracy belief might deteriorate people's relationships, including a process of attitudinal distancing between conspiracy believers and non-believers, the general stigma associated with conspiracy beliefs, and the misperception of social norms that accompanies the belief in conspiracy theories.

It is important to note that not every relationship should be affected by people's conspiracy beliefs, or at least not in the same fashion. Some of the findings we included in this review point to important potential moderators such as when people have similar conspiracy beliefs or political orientation. Other factors such as the level of interpersonal closeness could also buffer any negative impact of conspiracy beliefs on people's relationships. Future research should consider these possibilities to shed more light on this understudied yet important issue.

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