Conspiracy Beliefs and the Perception of Intergroup Inequalities

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Author Note

None of the authors have any conflict of interest to declare. They moreover confirm that this article is in line with the APA Code of Conduct ethical guidelines, as well as the national ethics guidelines of Belgium. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kenzo Nera, Université Libre de Bruxelles CP 122, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium. E-mail: kenzo.nera@ulb.be. Data, analyses scripts, and materials are available at https://osf.io/bamgc/

Conspiracy beliefs are prevalent among members of disadvantaged groups. Adopting a social identity perspective, we hypothesized that these beliefs would reduce the endorsement of internal attributions for inequalities that could negatively affect the image of disadvantaged ingroups. In Study 1 (n = 1104), conspiracy mentality was negatively associated with meritocracy beliefs, which attribute success and failure to internal factors. In Studies 2-5 (ns = 179, 251, 221, 248), taking the perspective of a person exhibiting a high (vs. low) conspiracy mentality in a fictitious context reduced participants' meritocracy beliefs, internal attributions for a privileged outgroup's situation, and fostered negative attitudes towards the outgroup. However, it did not reduce internal attributions for the situation of a disadvantaged ingroup, nor did it improve attitudes towards the ingroup. Regarding intergroup comparison, conspiracy mentality seems to primarily deteriorate the perception of privileged outgroups rather than improve the perception of disadvantaged ingroups.

Keywords: conspiracy mentality, conspiracy theories, attributions for inequalities, social identity, intergroup comparison

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Conspiracy Beliefs and the Perception of Intergroup Inequalities

Members of disadvantaged groups report higher levels of conspiracy beliefs. Such beliefs are more prevalent among members of ethnic minorities (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen et al., 2018), people with less education and lower income (Adam-Troian et al., 2022). Conspiracy beliefs are often prevalent among groups on the losing side of power asymmetries (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; see however Nera et al., 2021). Scholars have therefore proposed that conspiracy beliefs are a way for members of disadvantaged groups to make sense of their plight (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1999; Douglas et al., 2017). However, to our knowledge, no research has investigated how conspiracy beliefs causally affect the perception of an ingroup's relative disadvantage, or one's understanding of intergroup inequalities. In this research, we examined how endorsing a worldview in which powerful groups routinely conspire and deceive the public (i.e., a *conspiracy mentality*, Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) influences the endorsement of system justifying ideologies (and specifically, meritocracy beliefs), attributions for intergroup inequalities, and attitudes towards low-status (in)groups and high-status (out)groups.

Attributions for Inequalities: Consequences and Ideological Causes

How individuals explain inequalities between groups predicts their perceptions of low- and high-status groups. For instance, internal attributions for poverty (i.e., the belief that the poor are responsible for their situation, Feagin, 1975) are associated with negative stereotypes of poor people (Cozzarelli et al., 2001) and the perception that inequalities are fair (Schneider & Castillo, 2015). In contrast, external attributions for poverty (i.e., the belief that external economic and/or social forces explain poverty) are associated with positive stereotypes of the poor (Cozzarelli et

al., 2001), an increased sense that inequalities are unjust (Schneider & Castillo, 2015), and greater support for policies aimed at helping poor people (Krijnen et al., 2022; Piff et al., 2020).

Ideological beliefs are an important source of attributions for inequalities (Davidai, 2022). Notably, meritocracy – the status legitimising belief that success is the reflection of one's personal merits (e.g., McNamee & Miller, 2009) – relies on internal attributions for individuals' successes and failures (Mijs, 2019). At the intergroup level, meritocracy beliefs are associated with increased internal attributions for the situation of disadvantaged group members (e.g., individuals with low educational achievement, Kuppens et al., 2018; people with mental illness, Rüsch et al., 2010; women, McCoy & Major, 2007). Similarly, the belief that hard work always pays off, which is a common operationalisation of meritocracy (Madeira et al., 2019), is positively associated with prejudice against disadvantaged groups (e.g., Christopher & Mull, 2006; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Quinn & Crocker, 1999). Experimental research suggests that the negative consequences of meritocracy beliefs are also observed among members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, McCoy & Major, 2007; overweight women, Quinn & Crocker, 1999).[1]

Ideologies that internally attribute success and failure by portraying these outcomes as the reflection of personal abilities or efforts may lead to the sense that the situation of a disempowered ingroup is deserved, and that privileged outgroups are superior (Jost et al., 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Given the prevalence of meritocracy beliefs in Western societies (Mijs, 2018), members of disadvantaged groups are frequently exposed to internal attributions for their

[1] Other findings suggest that among members of low-status groups, belief in meritocracy is associated with increased well-being, through an increased perception of control over one's life (McCoy et al., 2013).

situation (e.g., in education, Croizet & Millet, 2012; Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Such internal attributions may result in being the target of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on membership in a social category defined by a devalued attribute (Goffman, 1963). For instance, poor people often experience stigmatization and shame for not living up to society's expectations (Ali et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2013). We therefore propose that meritocracy beliefs, and the resulting internal attributions for intergroup inequalities, prevent members of disadvantaged groups from viewing their ingroup in a positive light in comparison with higher status outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Further, internal attributions for inequalities could foster positive attitudes towards high status (out)groups, and negative attitudes towards low status (in)groups.

Conspiracy Beliefs and Attribution for Inequalities

We also propose that conspiracy beliefs could reduce the endorsement of internal attributions for inequalities among members of disadvantaged groups. This is intuitive for conspiracy beliefs pertaining to a specific ingroup's disadvantage. Blaming one's sufferings (e.g., losing elections, Uscinski & Parent, 2014) on a conspiracy is a form of external attribution. This is consistent with many definitions of conspiracy theories. For example, Keeley (1999) defined a conspiracy theory as a "proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons" (p. 116; see also Douglas et al., 2019).

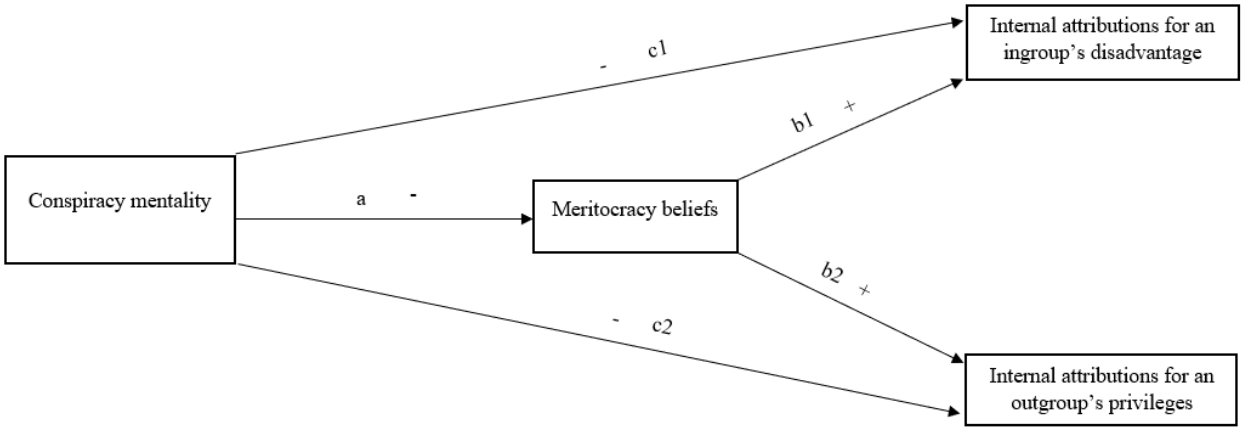
More broadly, a general conspiracist view of society (known as *conspiracy mentality*; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Moscovici, 1987) might reduce individuals' endorsement of internal attributions for intergroup inequalities. While tightly related to specific conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy mentality is a conceptually and empirically distinct construct (Nera, 2024; Imhoff et

al., 2022; see also Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Some authors have proposed that it consists of a generalized political attitude (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) capturing a "general view of the world as determined by malicious plots hatched in secret" (Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 2). We might therefore expect conspiracy mentality to reduce the endorsement of internal attributions for inequalities.

This attributional dimension, however, is not the most salient feature of conspiracy mentality. Current measurements of the construct seldom tap into a tendency to attribute negative events to schemes of powerful groups (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian et al., 2016). Rather, the most salient features of conspiracy mentality are the ideas that so-called "official" information and authorities are not trustworthy (Lantian et al., 2016), and that powerful groups and organizations pursue secret, malevolent agendas (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian et al., 2016). Conspiracy mentality may therefore be closely associated with reduced endorsement of meritocracy beliefs since these beliefs glorify members of powerful groups for their achievements. We therefore propose that the relationship between conspiracy mentality and reduced internal attribution for intergroup inequalities is mediated by reduced meritocracy beliefs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mediation Model Tested in Studies 1-5



Our approach assumes that conspiracy mentality is a system challenging worldview. Mao et al. (2023) have shown that conspiracy theories blaming the national ingroup's authorities reduce system justification, whereas conspiracy theories accusing powerful outgroups (e.g., the US in a Chinese participants sample) foster system justification (see also Jolley et al., 2018). Since measures of conspiracy mentality mostly encompass items pertaining to political authorities, our rationale is consistent with these findings.

Overview of the research

We propose that endorsing a conspiracist view of society (i.e., a conspiracy mentality) will be beneficial for members of disadvantaged groups, allowing them to reject internal attributions for intergroup inequalities that can deteriorate the image of the ingroup. This rationale maps onto the needs-based approach to conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017), according to which the endorsement of conspiracy theories may be fostered by the frustration of three types of psychological needs: existential (i.e., the need to feel safe and in control of one's environment), epistemic (i.e., the need to understand one's environment), and social (i.e., the need to develop and maintain a positive view of valued ingroups).

We hypothesize that conspiracy mentality will be associated with decreased internal attributions for the situation of a disadvantaged ingroup (path c1; see Figure 1), decreased internal attributions for the situation of privileged outgroups (path c2), and that this relationship will be explained by decreased endorsement of meritocracy beliefs (paths a, b1, and b2). Moreover, we hypothesize that conspiracy mentality will be associated with more positive attitudes towards low status (in)groups and more negative attitudes towards high-status (out)groups. Study 1 investigated the relationship between conspiracy mentality, meritocracy beliefs, and attitudes towards low- and high-status groups – irrespective of participants' group memberships. In Studies 2-5, the entirety of the model was experimentally tested in a fictitious intergroup context involving a low-status ingroup and a high-status outgroup.

Across studies, we treated attitudes towards low status (in)groups and high status (out)groups as separate dependent variables. While it is common practice to measure intergroup attitudes by subtracting the evaluation of the outgroup from the evaluation of the ingroup (e.g., Essien et al., 2021), we aimed to examine if the preference for the ingroup is driven by a positive evaluation of the ingroup, or by a negative evaluation of the outgroup.

Transparency and Openness Promotion

All methods, hypotheses, analysis plans, and samples sizes were preregistered on the Open Science Framework. Preregistration forms, data files, analyses scripts, and studies materials are available at https://osf.io/bamgc/?view_only=f04d9d51a2ed4551b27e8d6e5d5b0f3a.[2]

Study 1

[2] We pre-registered more studies than reported in this paper. This is because this paper was initially part of a broader project in which we also examined how internal attributions for inequalities impacted the endorsement of conspiracy attributions. These three studies are part of a separate article. More information about the order in which the studies were carried out, and which studies were removed from the current manuscript, can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

We first examined the associations between conspiracy mentality, meritocracy beliefs, and attitudes towards low-status and high-status groups. Since we expected conspiracy mentality to help members of disadvantaged groups reject internal attributions for inequalities, we predicted that conspiracy mentality would be more prevalent among subjectively poor participants (H1). Second, testing path a of our mediation model (see Figure 1), we expected conspiracy mentality to predict lower meritocracy beliefs (H2). Finally, we hypothesized that conspiracy mentality would predict positive attitudes toward members of low-status groups (H3), as well as negative attitudes toward members of high-status groups (H4). We expected these relationships to be mediated by decreased meritocracy beliefs (H3b, H4b).

Note that while these hypotheses were all preregistered, their numbering was reorganized based on subsequent theoretical reflections. There were also additional hypotheses pertaining to a variable not included in following studies (i.e., conspiracy beliefs about inequalities).

Method

Participants

There were 1104 participants (M_{age} = 47.1, *SD* = 16.4, $M_{Political\ orientation}$ = 5.16,[3] *min* = 1; *max* = 9, *SD* = 1.83) and the sample was representative of the French population in terms of age, gender (52% women), geographical distribution, and professional categories. This sample size allowed to detect a minimum correlation of r = .10, with a power of .90 and two-tailed tests.

Materials and procedure

Participants were recruited by a professional data collection agency. The scales were included in a larger questionnaire including measures for other research projects. The section of the questionnaire dedicated to our research included the following scales, in this order:

[3] With 1 = far left, 5 = centre, and 9 = far right.

Meritocracy beliefs (adapted from Major et al., 2002) was measured with four items (e.g., "We live in an open society where everyone can achieve a higher social status", $\alpha = .75$). Participants answered on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The scale was translated in French by the 1st author (see online supplements for the French version).

Conspiracy mentality was measured using the French version of the five-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013, e.g., "Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.", $\alpha = .88$, translated in French by Lantian et al., 2016). Participants answered on an 11-point scale ranging from 0% (certainly not) to 100% (certain).

Attitudes towards low-status and high-status targets were measured using a 11-point feeling thermometers ranging from 0 (very negative feeling) to 100 (very positive feeling), with 50 corresponding to a neutral feeling. Participants were then asked to report their feeling towards members of two low-status groups (unemployed people, the poorest 10% of the population, $r = .51$, $p < .001$) and two high-status groups (wealthy entrepreneurs, the wealthiest 10% of the population, $r = .71$, $p < .001$).

Subjective socioeconomic status was measured using the item: "Please imagine that this scale represents wealth in our society. Where would you situate yourself on this scale?" (based on Cohen et al., 2008). Participants positioned themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (the poorest 10% people) to 7 (the wealthiest 10%). Finally, participants reported their age and gender.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are in Table 1. As preregistered, we controlled for gender and age in all analyses.

Table 1

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics (Study 1)

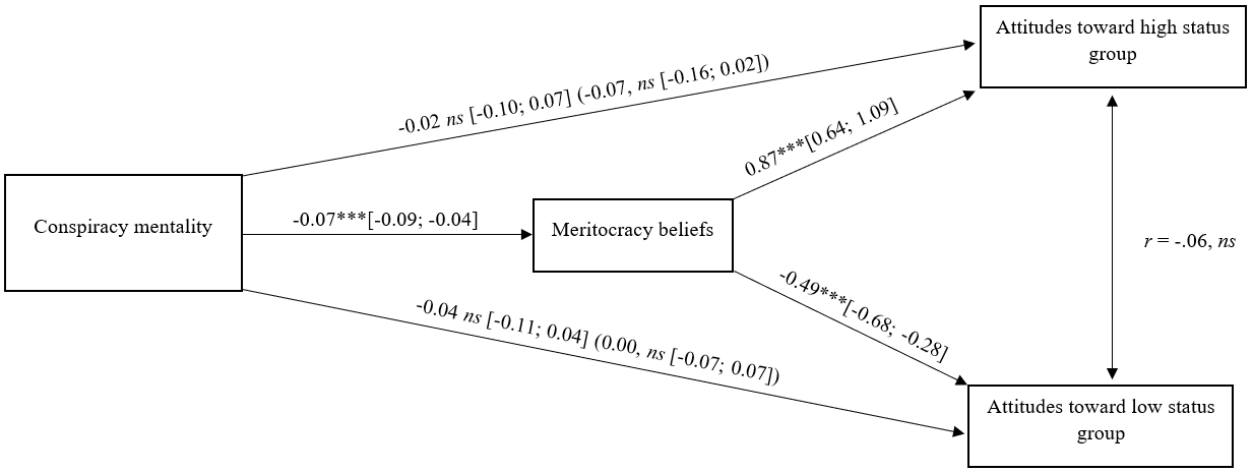
Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Subjective socioeconomic status (1-7)	3.56	1.21					
2. Conspiracy mentality (1-11)	7.19	1.94	-.21** [-.27, -.16]				
3. Meritocracy beliefs (1-5)	2.69	0.73	.18** [.13, .24]	-.17** [-.23, -.12]			
4. Attitude towards high status groups (1-11)	5.51	2.47	.12** [.06, .17]	-.06 [-.12, .00]	.26** [.20, .31]		
5. Attitudes towards low-status groups (1-11)	5.75	2.12	-.04 [-.10, .02]	-.01 [-.07, .05]	-.16** [-.21, -.10]	-.06* [-.12, -.01]	
6. Political orientation (1-9)	5.16	1.83	.04 [-.02, .09]	.17** [.11, .22]	.20** [.14, .26]	.15** [.09, .21]	-.11** [-.17, -.05]

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$. Between brackets of the first column are the number of points for Likert scales.

Supporting H1, subjective socioeconomic status was significantly and negatively associated with conspiracy mentality, $b = -0.33$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.24], $t(1100) = -6.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .042$. Supporting H2, conspiracy mentality negatively predicted meritocracy beliefs, $b = -0.07$, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.04], $t(1100) = -5.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Figure 2

Mediation Analyses for Study 1



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Unstandardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals between square brackets. Total effects are between round brackets.

Contrary to H3, conspiracy mentality was unrelated to attitudes towards low-status targets, b = -0.00, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.07], $t(1100) = -0.11$, $p = .91$, $q\rho R^2 = .00$. However, meritocracy beliefs were associated with negative attitudes towards low-status targets, b = -0.49, 95% CI [-0.67; -0.29], $z = -4.97$, $p < .001$, contributing to an indirect relationship between conspiracy mentality and attitudes towards low-status targets, *indirect effect* = 0.03, 95% CI [0.02; 0.05], $z = 3.46$, $p = .001$ (Figure 2).

H4 was also not supported. Conspiracy mentality was not significantly related to negative attitudes towards high-status targets, b = -0.07, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.00], $t(1100) = -1.88$, $p = .06$, $q\rho R^2 = .00$. However, meritocracy beliefs were associated with positive attitudes towards high-status targets, b = 0.87, 95% CI [0.66; 1.07], $z = 8.11$, $p < .001$. Hence, the data is compatible with an indirect relationship through decreased meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -0.06, 95% CI [-0.09; -0.03], $z = -4.27$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Conspiracy mentality was higher among subjectively poor participants. Congruent with the proposed model, conspiracy mentality was negatively associated with meritocracy beliefs. However, conspiracy mentality was unrelated to attitudes towards low-status and high-status targets. Nevertheless, the relationships between meritocracy beliefs and attitudes towards high and low-status groups showed indirect paths between conspiracy mentality and attitudes. If such a relationship is causal, the absence of a relationship between conspiracy mentality and attitudes towards groups might be due to an unmeasured confound or mediator (Hayes, 2009). Therefore, the relationships between conspiracy mentality and attitudes towards low- and high-status groups would qualify as indirect effects rather than mediations.[4] Overall, these findings are compatible with the hypothesis that conspiracy beliefs reduce individuals' propensity to internally attribute poverty and wealth, which in turn results in more positive attitudes towards low-status groups and negative attitudes towards high-status outgroups.

Study 2

Given its cross-sectional nature, Study 1 cannot establish causality. Also, because an unmeasured confound may suppress the relationship between conspiracy mentality and attitudes towards groups, it is not clear if what we observed was a mediation by meritocracy belief, or an indirect effect. To address these issues, we next manipulated the generic conspiracist perception of a fictitious society. We also introduced an intergroup context characterized by a low-status ingroup facing a high-status outgroup. By doing so, we shifted from the perception of low- and high-status groups, irrespective of participants' group memberships, to the perception of in- and outgroups.

[4] Mediation describes situations in which the main effect of the independent variable on the outcome variable is explained by a third variable (or multiple variables). Indirect effects qualify situations in which the third variable(s) create a causal relationship between the independent variable and the outcome variable, in the absence of a main effect (Mathieu & Taylor, 2006).

We relied on an artificial intergroup setting to reduce the impact of confounding variables (e.g., prior ideological beliefs) and therefore to better isolate the underlying process. Further, the use of an artificial intergroup setting allowed us to circumvent the difficulty of manipulating a generalized attitude such as conspiracy mentality (see Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

We hypothesized that when a society is depicted as secretly controlled by powerful, conspiring groups ("high conspiracy mentality" condition) participants would be less likely to internally attribute poverty of a disadvantaged ingroup (H1) and wealth of a privileged outgroup (H2). We further hypothesized that this relationship would be mediated by decreased meritocracy beliefs (H1b-H2b). Finally, we hypothesized that in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition, participants would report more positive attitudes towards the ingroup (H3), and more negative attitudes towards the outgroup (H4).

Note that in the preregistrations of Studies 2-5, we planned to control for age and gender only when they were significantly correlated with the dependent variables. For the sake of consistency and to facilitate the interpretation of the results, and since gender and age were mostly unrelated to the dependent variables, we removed these covariates from all analyses in Studies 2-5. This did not alter any of the results. Results as preregistered can be found in Supplementary Materials.

Method

Participants

First year psychology students (N = 230) at a Belgian university participated in the experiment for a course credit, out of which 179 (156 women, 3 non-binary, M_{age} = 19.2, SD = 1.38; $M_{Political\ orientation}$ = 4.12, SD = 1.35 min = 1; max = 9) remained after removing participants who failed the attention or seriousness checks, or took more than three median absolute deviation (MAD) above the median study completion time (Leys et al., 2013). This is below the expected

sample size (n = 200). In a between-subject design with two conditions, given a power of .90, the achieved sample size enabled us to detect a minimum effect size of $Cohen's\ d = 0.44$.

Materials and procedure

The study was conducted online and was introduced as a study on perspective taking through written roleplay. Participants were informed that during the experiment, they would become a citizen of a fictitious society called Vlurville (for our inspiration, see Jetten et al., 2015). We gave participants some information about economic inequalities in Vlurville (e.g., the unemployment rate) before introducing them to an intergroup context.

Participants were first introduced to the disadvantaged ingroup: “The Tsocutas live in the poor neighbourhoods of the city. Economic insecurity and unemployment rates are both high. Many Tsocutas struggle to afford food, pay their rent, bills, and health care expenses. Naturally, very few have the opportunity to go on holidays. In this experiment, you will be a member of the Tsocutas”.

Participants then read about a privileged outgroup: “The Thelawys live in the wealthy parts of Vlurville. They are financially secure, and most of them own their homes. They can afford quality food and health care without worry. Their income also allows them to go on vacation every year.”

Participants then completed three attention checks in the form of multiple-choice questions asking the name of the low-status group, the name of the high-status group, and the name of the ingroup.

The experimental manipulation of conspiracy mentality introduced next was based on Imhoff et al. (2021). Participants read a short paragraph entitled “How does Vlurville work?” In the “high conspiracy mentality” condition, participants read a short description inspired by the items of the conspiracy mentality scale (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). The goal was to encourage

participants to take the perspective of an individual exhibiting a high level of conspiracy mentality:

> "In Vlurville, some things happen that are never revealed to the public. A handful of very powerful groups decide the fate of the majority. Those in power do whatever they want. Moreover, there are secret organisations and political circles that greatly influence political decisions. These organisations can psychologically manipulate the population without them realising it […]."

In the "low conspiracy mentality" condition, participants read the description of a society that would be in line with the worldview of an individual low in conspiracy mentality:

> "In Vlurville, the government, secret service and media are reliable, and official sources of information are trustworthy. Citizens are well informed about political decision-making processes, and the implementation of these decisions is transparent. Conspiracy theories circulating in the margins of the media have no credibility. There are no organisations capable of psychologically manipulating people or influencing their lives without their knowledge […]."

Participants were then asked to imagine their life as a member of the disadvantaged group for five minutes and to write about it. Participants were then asked to complete the remainder of the questionnaire "as a Vlurvillian citizen". This included the following:

Meritocracy beliefs. We used the same items as in Study 1, adapted to the context of Vlurville (e.g., "Vlurville is an open society where all individuals can achieve higher status", α = .68). Participants answered on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Attribution for poverty of the ingroup and wealth of the outgroup. Participants were asked to rate the importance of different explanations for their respective situations of the ingroup

and the outgroup: “Please note how important you think the following causes are in explaining the Tsocutas’ disadvantaged situation [Thelawys’ affluence]” (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important). Three items measured internal attribution for poverty (“lack of effort”, “lack of talent”, “laziness”, α = .70) and three items measured internal attribution for wealth (“talent”, “hard work”, “perseverance”, α = .75). The order of assessment of the groups was randomized.

Attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup. Participants reported their attitude attitudes on a 11-point feeling thermometer: “Please indicate your overall feeling about the Tsocutas [Thelawys]. Zero represents a very negative feeling, and 100 represents a very positive feeling. Fifty represents a neutral feeling”.

Single Item Vlurville Conspiracy Beliefs Scale. Participants were asked to answer a version of the Single Item Conspiracy Beliefs Scale (Lantian et al., 2016) adapted to capture conspiracy beliefs in the context of Vlurville. This was used as a manipulation check.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics and correlations are in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study 2

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Meritocracy beliefs (1-5)	1.86	0.72						
2. Internal attribution for poverty (1-5)	1.91	0.84	.46** [.34, .57]					
3. Internal attribution for wealth (1-5)	2.57	0.93	.28** [.13, .41]	.51** [.39, .61]				
4. Feeling thermometer ingroup (1-11)	7.00	2.49	-.07 [-.21, .08]	-.14 [-.28, .01]	-.17* [-.31, -.03]			
5. Feeling thermometer outgroup (1-11)	5.25	2.33	.36** [.22, .48]	.39** [.26, .51]	.40** [.27, .51]	-.29** [-.42, -.15]		
6. Political orientation (1-9)	4.12	1.35	.08 [-.07, .22]	.09 [-.06, .23]	.17* [.02, .31]	-.26** [-.39, -.12]	.13 [-.02, .27]	
7. Age	19.18	1.38	.04 [-.11, .19]	.04 [-.11, .18]	.06 [-.09, .20]	.03 [-.12, .18]	-.06 [-.20, .09]	-.01 [-.16, .14]

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported higher conspiracy beliefs about Vlurville than participants in the "low conspiracy mentality" condition, $t(175)$[5] = -4.32, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 6.97, SE = 0.22, $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 5.56, SE = 0.24, d = 0.65, 95% CI [0.34, 0.95]).

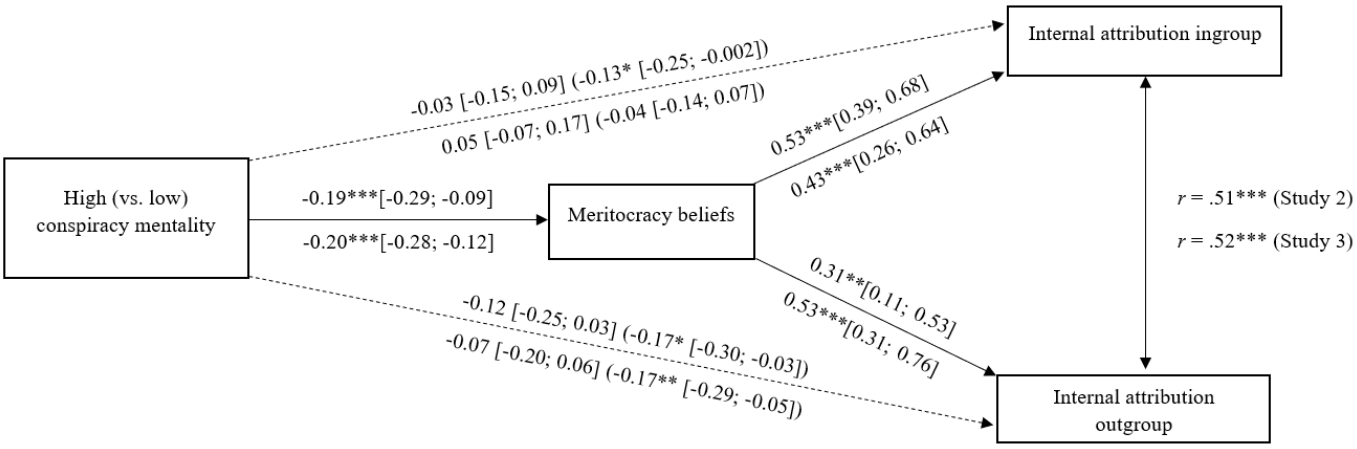
Congruent with H1, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower internal attributions for the ingroup's poverty, $t(175.8) = 2.10$, $p = .037$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 1.78, SE = .09, $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 2.04, SE = .09, d = 0.32, 95% CI [0.02, 0.61]). A pathways mediation analysis with 1,000 bootstraps returned the expected mediation by reduced meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -0.10, *95% CI* [-0.17; -0.04], $z = -3.03$, $p = .002$. Participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower levels of meritocracy beliefs, $t(176.45) = 3.55$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 1.67, SE = .07, $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 2.04, SE = .07, d = 0.53, 95% CI [0.23; 0.83]), and meritocracy beliefs predicted internal attribution for

[5] Following the suggestion of Delacre et al. (2017), throughout this research, we used Welch's *t*-tests instead of Student's. This explains the unusual number of degrees of freedom.

poverty, b = 0.53, 95% CI [0.39; 0.67], z = 7.45, p < .001, leaving no direct effect of the experimental manipulation, b = -0.03, 95% CI [-0.16; 0.08], z = -0.54, p = .59 (see Figure 3). This corroborates H1b.

Figure 3

Mediation Analyses for Studies 2-3 (Internal Attributions as Criteria)



Note. * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001. Above and below the arrows are the coefficients for Studies 2 and 3, respectively.

Congruent with H2, participants reported lower internal attributions for wealth of the outgroup in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition, t(176.57) = 2.53, p = .012 ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 2.39, SE = .10, $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 2.74, SE = .10, d = 0.38, 95% CI [0.08; 0.67]). This effect was also mediated by decreased meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -.06, 95% CI [-0.13; -0.02], z = -2.05, p = .040. Meritocracy beliefs predicted internal attribution for wealth, b = 0.31, 95% CI [0.11; 0.53], z = 2.82, p = .005, leaving no direct effect, b = -0.12, 95% CI [-0.27; 0.03], z = -1.67, p = .10 (see Figure 3). This corroborates H2b.

In line with H3 and H4, in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition, participants reported more positive attitudes towards the ingroup, t(177) = -2.25, p = .026 ($M_{High\ conspiracy}$

$_{mentality}$ = 7.42, *SE* = 0.26; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 6.59, *SE* = 0.26, *d* = 0.34, 95% CI [0.04, 0.63]), and more negative attitudes towards the outgroup, $t(172) = 4.13$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 4.55, *SE* = 0.24; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality}$ = 5.92, *SE* = 0.23, *d* = 0.62, 95% CI [0.31, 0.93]).

Discussion

Participants for whom the fictitious society was described as being controlled by conspiracies of powerful groups (compared to a condition where powerful groups were described as honest and trustworthy) reported lower internal attributions for poverty of the ingroup, and lower internal attributions for wealth of a privileged outgroup. These effects were mediated by reduced meritocracy beliefs. Moreover, taking the perspective of someone with a high conspiracy mentality was associated with more positive attitudes toward the ingroup, and more negative attitudes toward the outgroup.

This study experimentally supports our claim that conspiracy mentality can reduce individuals' propensity to attribute inequalities between a disadvantaged ingroup and a privileged outgroup to internal factors. In Study 3, we directly replicated this study with more power and in a different cultural context – the UK.

Study 3

Method

Participants

Three hundred and one British university students completed the study and were recruited either from a British University (*n* = 62) or Prolific (*n* = 239). Two hundred and fifty-one participants remained after applying the same exclusion criteria as in Study 2 (183 women, 3 non-binary, 65 men, M_{age} = 23.5, *SD* = 7.08; $M_{Political\ orientation}$ = 3.63, *SD* = 1.60 *min* = 1; *max* = 9). The achieved sample size was inferior to the planned sample size after exclusions (*n* = 280).

Given a power of .90, it enabled us to detect a minimum mean difference of $d = 0.37$ with two-tailed tests.

Materials and procedure

The procedure and measures were the same as in Study 2. Internal reliability ranged from $\alpha = .73$ (for meritocracy beliefs) to α .89 (for both internal attribution for poverty and internal attributions for wealth).

Results

Correlations and descriptive statistics are in Table 3.[6]

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study 3

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Meritocracy beliefs (1-5)	1.74	0.66				
2. Internal attribution for poverty (1-5)	1.85	0.92	.29** [.18, .40]			
3. Internal attribution for wealth (1-5)	2.47	1.02	.37** [.26, .48]	.52** [.42, .60]		
4. Feeling thermometer ingroup (1-11)	7.70	2.15	-.32** [-.43, -.21]	-.27** [-.38, -.15]	-.27** [-.38, -.15]	
5. Feeling thermometer outgroup (1-11)	4.64	2.18	.45** [.35, .54]	.30** [.19, .41]	.45** [.34, .54]	-.27** [-.38, -.15]

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

[6] We did not include the manipulation check (i.e., measure of Vlurville conspiracy beliefs) in the study and were not able to check if the manipulation was successful. However, it was successful (with moderate to strong effects) in Studies 2 and 5, which are almost exact replications.

Contrary to H1 and Study 2, participants did not report significantly lower internal attributions for poverty of the ingroup in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition, $t(249) = -0.66$, $p = .51$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.81$, SE = 0.8; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.88$, $SE = .08$, $d = 0.08$, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.33]). However, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower meritocracy beliefs, $t(249) = -5.08$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.53$, SE = 0.05; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.93$, $SE = 0.06$, $d = 0.64$, 95% CI [0.38, 0.90]), which in turn predicted increased internal attributions for poverty, $b = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.57], $t(249) = 4.83$, $p < .001$. A pathway mediation analysis returned support for H1b. We found an indirect effect of the manipulation on internal attribution for poverty, through decreased meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -0.09, 95% CI [-0.14, -0.04], $z = 3.24$, $p = .001$ (see Figure 3).

Supporting H2, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower internal attributions for the wealth of the outgroup, $t(247.71) = 2.80$, $p = .006$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.29$, $SE = .09$; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.64$, $SE = .09$, $d = 0.35$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.60]). Supporting H2b, this effect was mediated by decreased meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.05], $z = -3.23$, $p = .001$, leaving no significant direct effect, $b = 0.07$, 95% CI [-0.20, 0.07], $z = 1.02$, $p = .31$ (see Figure 3).

Contrary to H3 and Study 2, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition did not report more positive attitudes toward the ingroup, $t(219) = -0.77$, $p = .44$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 7.58$, $SE = 0.20$; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 7.80$, $SE = .19$, $d = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.35]). However, supporting H4, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported a more negative view of the high-status outgroup, $t(236) = -3.51$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 4.14$, $SE = 0.20$; $M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 5.09$, $SE = .19$, $d = 0.45$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.70]). In sum, we therefore partially replicated findings from Study 2.

Discussion

In Studies 2-3, experimentally making participants take the perspective of an individual exhibiting a high (vs. low) level of conspiracy mentality reduced internal attributions for the wealth of a privileged outgroup, through decreased meritocracy beliefs. It also fostered negative attitudes towards the outgroup. Internal attributions for the disadvantaged situation of the ingroup were either directly reduced by the experimental manipulation (Study 2), or indirectly, through decreased meritocracy beliefs (Study 3). The same inconsistency was found for attitudes towards the low-status ingroup.

We cannot yet conclude in favour of a causal relationship between meritocracy beliefs and internal attributions for poverty, since we did not manipulate the mediator. To empirically substantiate this causal relationship, we therefore next manipulated meritocracy beliefs (Spencer et al., 2005).

Study 4

We hypothesized that reducing meritocracy beliefs would result in decreased internal attributions for the poverty of the ingroup (H1) and wealth of the outgroup (H2). We also hypothesized that reduced meritocracy beliefs would result in more positive attitudes towards the ingroup (H3) and more negative attitudes towards the outgroup (H4).

Method

Participants

Two hundred and sixty-four French participants were recruited on Foule Factory, out of which 221 remained after removing those who took more than 3 MAD above the median completion time or failed the attention and seriousness check (113 women, no “other”, M_{age} = 44, *SD* = 13.6; $M_{Political\ orientation}$ = 4.89, *SD* = 4.89, *min* = 1; *max* = 9). Given a power of .90, this enabled us to detect a minimum effect of *d* = 0.44 with two-tailed tests.

Materials and procedures

The procedure was identical to that of Studies 2-3, except that we manipulated meritocracy beliefs instead of conspiracy mentality. When informed about "How does Vlurville work?", participants in the "high meritocracy" condition read the following paragraph: "In Vurville, anyone who really wants to can achieve a high social status - regardless of their social background. It is a genuinely open society, where everyone is rewarded according to their efforts, abilities and perseverance. No group faces more difficulties than others in the workplace."

Participants in the "low meritocracy" condition read the following paragraph: "In Vurville, people from disadvantaged social backgrounds have very little chance of achieving high social status, even if they really want to. It is not an open society because people are not rewarded according to their efforts, abilities or perseverance. Members of some groups have more difficulties than others in their careers." The remainder of the questionnaire was identical to Studies 2-3.

Results

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (Study 4)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Meritocracy beliefs (1-5)	2.30	1.08				
2. Internal attribution for poverty (1-5)	2.24	1.08	.55** [.45, .64]			
3. Internal attribution for wealth (1-5)	2.98	1.14	.69** [.61, .75]	.62** [.53, .70]		
4. Attitude ingroup (1-11)	6.39	2.51	-.12 [-.25, .01]	-.35** [-.46, -.23]	-.20** [-.32, -.07]	
5. Attitude outgroup (1-11)	5.95	2.47	.45** [.34, .55]	.40** [.28, .50]	.50** [.39, .59]	-.30** [-.42, -.18]

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Correlations and descriptive statistics are in Table 4. The experimental manipulation was successful. Participants in the "high meritocracy" condition reported more belief in meritocracy than participants in the "low meritocracy" condition, $t(209) = 14.71$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ meritocracy} = 3.00$, $SE = 0.07$, $M_{Low\ meritocracy} = 1.50$, $SE = 0.08$, $d = 1.96$, 95% CI [1.57, 2.32]).

Supporting H1 and H2, participants in the "low meritocracy" condition reported lower internal attributions for the poverty of the ingroup, $t(210) = 6.41$, $p < .001$, ($M_{High\ meritocracy} = 2.63$, $SE = 0.10$, $M_{No\ meritocracy} = 1.79$, $SE = 0.08$, $d = 0.85$, 95% CI [0.55, 1.13]), and lower internal attributions or the wealth of the outgroup, $t(216) = 8.68$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ meritocracy} = 3.52$, $SE = 0.09$, $M_{Low\ meritocracy} = 2.37$, $SE = 0.10$, $d = 1.17$, 95% CI [0.86, 1.45]).

Contrary to H3, participants in the "low meritocracy" condition did not report more positive attitudes towards the ingroup, $t(203.45) = 0.93$, $p = .35$ ($M_{High\ meritocracy} = 6.25$, $SE = 0.23$, $M_{No\ meritocracy} = 6.56$, $SE = 0.25$, $d = 0.13$, 95% CI [-0.39, 0.14]). However, in line with our expectations, participants in the "low meritocracy" condition reported more negative attitudes towards the outgroup, $t(200) = 6.16$, $p < .001$ ($M_{High\ meritocracy} = 6.85$, $SE = 0.21$, $M_{Low\ meritocracy} = 4.93$, $SE = 0.22$, $d = 0.84$, 95% CI [0.55, 1.13]).

Discussion

Study 4 substantiated the causal relationship between the mediator and the dependent variables of our model, except for attitudes towards the ingroup. Altogether, Studies 1-4 supported the hypothesis that endorsing a conspiracy mentality reduces individuals' propensity to internally attribute the situation of a privileged outgroup by consistently reducing their endorsement of meritocracy beliefs. It also fostered negative attitudes towards the outgroup.

Thus far, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perceptions of the disadvantaged ingroup is less clear. Results supported the causal relationships between conspiracy mentality and meritocracy beliefs (Studies 2-3), and between meritocracy beliefs and attributions for the situation of the ingroup (Study 4). However, while the manipulation of a conspiracist perception of the fictitious society reduced internal attributions for the situation of the ingroup in Study 2, it failed to do so in Study 3. Hence, it is possible that conspiracy mentality exerts a main effect on internal attributions for the situation of the ingroup and that this effect is mediated by meritocracy beliefs (in line with Study 2). However, it is also possible that conspiracy mentality does not have a main effect on internal attributions for the situation of the ingroup, but only an indirect effect via meritocracy beliefs (in line with Study 3).

An additional limitation of Studies 2-4 is that they were carried out on participants who did not actually belong to a disadvantaged group. Moreover, participants may have been influenced by the nature of the intergroup context presented in the studies. Indeed, introducing the notion that society is divided between a low-status ingroup and high-status outgroup may have elicited the sense that the latter were the ones conspiring against the rest of society, even though the conspiracist description of the society did not explicitly refer to the high-status group. This may have inflated effect sizes by further strengthening the sense that the intergroup situation was unfair.

We therefore carried out a final study to address these limitations and clarify the nature of the causal relationship between conspiracy mentality and the perception of the disadvantaged ingroup. We tested our model on a sample of participants who belonged to a disadvantaged group, namely, unemployed individuals with low income. While we kept the artificial intergroup setting to allow the manipulation of the conspiracist view of society, we expected participants to identify more with this scenario. Moreover, we adapted the presentation of the intergroup context to make it less likely that we elicited the sense that the high-status outgroup is the group controlling society.

Study 5

We tested the same hypotheses as in Studies 2-3. In addition, we examined if the experimental induction of a conspiracist view of society was associated with a generalized reduction of internal attributions for the situation of various powerful (e.g., bankers, politicians) and powerless groups (e.g., homeless people), and if these relationships were mediated by reduced meritocracy beliefs.

Participants

We recruited 300 participants on Prolific. Three hundred and seven people completed the study, out of which 248 (129 women, 14 "other") remained after removing the second set of responses for participants who participated twice and applying the preregistered exclusion criteria (M_{Age} = 29.7, SD = 10.9; $M_{Political\ orientation}$ = 3.61, SD = 1.94, min = 1; max = 9). Given a power of .90, the sample size enabled us to detect a minimum effect size of $Cohen's\ d$ = 0.41 with two-tailed tests.

We used the pre-screening tool on Prolific to target participants who lived in the UK or the US, were unemployed and job seeking, and earned less than £10,000 a year (or the equivalent in the US), which is the lowest income level that the platform proposes to pre-screen. We

recruited participants from the US and the UK because the pool of participants fitting these pre-screening criteria was limited.

Of the final sample, 244 (98.8%) participants reported being in line with the inclusion criteria (i.e., being currently unemployed and looking for a job, and having an income below £10,000/year), even though they were told that their answer would not affect their payment. Three participants answered "no", reporting that they had recently found a job (n = 1) or that they had an income slightly above £10,000 (e.g., £11,000) while emphasising they still experience economic precarity (n = 2). These participants were kept in the final sample.

Materials and Procedures

The study was similar to Studies 2-3, with a few adjustments to address their limitations. We added some information about climate in Vlurville in the description, to better conceal the goal of the study (Olson & Raz, 2021).

The main difference to Studies 2-3 was that the intergroup context was framed in a way that did not implicitly make a connection between the high-status group and the conspiring groups. Instead of describing Vlurville as inhabited by two groups of unequal status, participants were told that they lived in a small neighbourhood called Tsocuta, which was described as disadvantaged. They were then told that "South of Tsocuta, on a hill, there is another neighbourhood called Thelawy. Compared to the inhabitants of Tsocuta, people who live in Thelawy are financially secure […]". Participants were then asked to imagine their life as an unemployed inhabitant of Tsocuta for four minutes. Measures of meritocracy (α = .77), internal attributions for the situation of the ingroup (α = .89) and the outgroup (α = .90), and attitudes towards the ingroup and the outgroup were the same as in Studies 2-4.

We further added a measurement of internal attributions for the situations of various groups in Vlurville. Participants rated how responsible members of five powerful groups

(bankers, politicians, journalists, CEOs, rich people, α = .83) and three powerless groups (homeless people, poor people, unemployed people, α = .89) were for their (dis)advantaged situation on a scale ranging from 1 (“not at all responsible”) to 7 (“completely responsible”).

The questionnaire ended with sociodemographic questions, as well as a seriousness check. Participants were asked if they thought they had guessed the hypothesis, and if they answered “yes”, they were asked to write down what they thought the hypothesis was. Participants who guessed the hypothesis were removed from the analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics are in Table 5.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (Study 5).

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Meritocracy beliefs	1.80	0.73						
2. IA poverty ingroup	1.98	0.93	.46** [.35, .55]					
3. IA wealth outgroup	2.85	1.01	.48** [.37, .57]	.53** [.43, .61]				
4. Attitude ingroup	7.35	2.05	-.21** [-.33, -.09]	-.28** [-.39, -.16]	-.20** [-.32, -.08]			
5. Attitude outgroup	5.11	2.08	.40** [.29, .50]	.27** [.15, .38]	.48** [.38, .57]	-.10 [-.22, .03]		
6. IA powerful groups	4.36	1.25	.21** [.09, .32]	.34** [.23, .45]	.39** [.28, .50]	-.12 [-.24, .00]	.22** [.10, .34]	
7. IA powerless groups	2.56	1.11	.46** [.36, .55]	.45** [.35, .55]	.31** [.20, .42]	-.20** [-.32, -.08]	.25** [.13, .36]	.22** [.10, .33]

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$**.** IA = internal attributions.

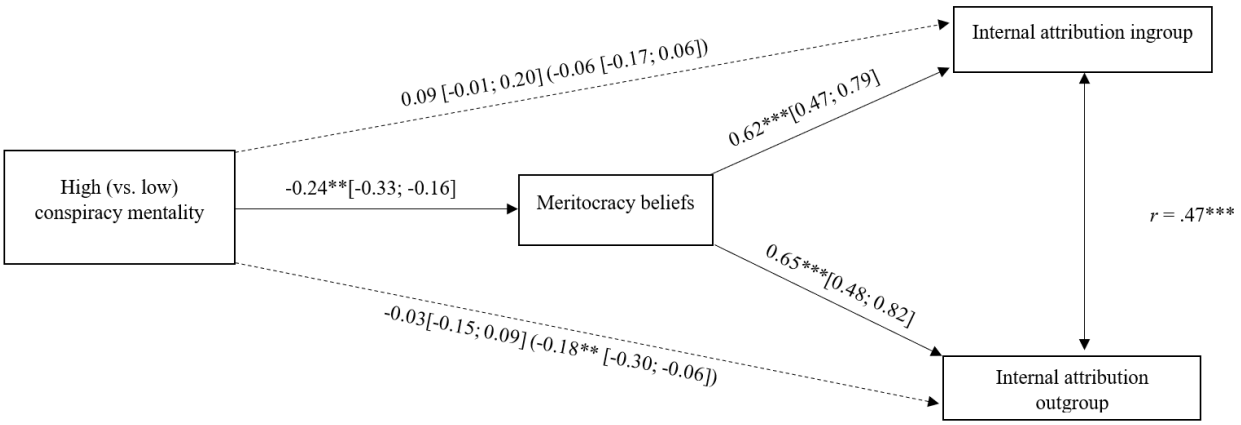
As predicted, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported more conspiracy beliefs about Vlurville, $t(194) = -13.30$, $p < .001$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 4.62$, $SE = 0.17$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 7.80$, $SE = 0.16$, $d = 1.74$, 95% CI [1.40, 2.07]).

Contrary to our first hypotheses – but in line with Study 3 – participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition did not report lower internal attributions for the poverty of the ingroup, $t(241.91) = 0.96$, $p = .34$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.04$, $SE = 0.09$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.93$, $SE = 0.08$, $d = 0.12$, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.37]), nor more positive attitudes towards the ingroup, $t(246) = -0.47$, $p = .64$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 7.28$, $SE = 0.19$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 7.40$, $SE = 0.18$, $d = 0.06$, 95% *CI* [-0.19, 0.31]).

Despite the absence of effect of the experimental manipulation, we tested the hypothesized mediation model to examine indirect effects. In line with the model, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower meritocracy beliefs, $t(218.72) = 5.39$, $p < .001$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.06$, $SE = 0.06$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 1.58$, $SE = 0.06$, $d = 0.70$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.95]). In turn, meritocracy beliefs predicted increased internal attribution for poverty, $b = 0.63$, 95% CI [0.47, 0.79], $z = 7.84$, $p < .001$. Assuming that meritocracy beliefs causally impact the dependent variables (as demonstrated in Study 4), the indirect effect was corroborated, *indirect effect* = -0.15, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.09], $z = -4.77$, $p < .001$. An indirect effect was also found for attitudes towards the ingroup, *indirect effect* = 0.15, 95% CI [0.07, 0.25], $z = 3.19$, $p = .001$, since meritocracy beliefs predicted negative attitudes towards the ingroup, $b = -0.63$, 95% CI [-1.02, -0.29], $t = -3.59$, $p < .001$. However, the causal relationship between the mediator and this dependent variable was not established in Study 4.

Figure 4

Mediation Analyses for Study 5 (Internal Attributions as Criteria)



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

In line with our hypotheses pertaining to the perception of the higher status outgroup, participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition reported lower internal attributions for wealth of the outgroup, $t(245.99) = 2.92$, $p = .004$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 3.04$, $SE = 0.09$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.67$, $SE = 0.09$, $d = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.62]), and more negative attitude towards the outgroup, $t(234.29) = 3.60$, $p < .001$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 5.61$, $SE = 0.19$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 4.67$, $SE = 0.18$, $d = 0.46$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.71]),

Further supporting our hypotheses, the effect of the manipulation on internal attribution for wealth was mediated by reduced meritocracy beliefs in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition, *indirect effect* = -0.16, 95% CI [-0.23; -0.10], $z = -4.64$, $p < .001$. Indeed, our model returned a significant relationship between meritocracy beliefs and internal attributions for wealth, $b = 0.65$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.82], $z = 7.58$, $p < .001$, leaving no direct effect of the experimental manipulation, $b = -0.03$, *95% CI* [-0.15, 0.09], $z = -0.49$, $p = .62$ (see Figure 4). The effect of the manipulation on attitudes towards the outgroup was also mediated by reduced meritocracy beliefs, *indirect effect* = -0.25, 95% CI [-0.37; -0.14], $z = -4.22$, $p < .001$. Indeed, meritocracy beliefs predicted positive attitude towards the outgroup, $b = 1.04$, *95% CI* [0.68,

1.37], $z = 5.65$, $p < .001$, leaving no direct effect of the experimental manipulation, $b = -0.22$, *95% CI* [-0.47, 0.02], $z = -1.72$, $p = .09$.

Finally, our hypotheses regarding internal attributions for the situation of various powerful and powerless groups were not corroborated by the data. Participants in the "high conspiracy mentality" condition did not consider the situation of powerful groups as less deserved, $t(243.51) = 0.26$, $p = .79$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 4.38$, $SE = 0.12$, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 4.34$, $SE = 0.11$, $d = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.22, 0.28]), nor did they do so for the situation of powerless groups, $t(245.01) = 0.17$, $p = .87$ ($M_{Low\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.58$, SE = 0.10, $M_{High\ conspiracy\ mentality} = 2.55$, $SE = 0.10$, $d = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.23, 0.27]). However, meritocracy beliefs did predict an increased internal attribution for the situation of powerful groups, $b = 0.39$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.64], $z = 3.20$, $p = .001$, suggesting an indirect effect, *indirect effect* = -.09, 95% CI [-0.17; -0.04], $z = -2.75$, $p = .006$. An indirect effect was also found for internal attribution for the situation of powerless groups, since meritocracy beliefs also predicted internal attributions for the situation of these groups, $b = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.59, 0.96], $z = 8.27$, $p < .001$, *indirect effect* = -0.19, 95% CI [-0.27, -0.11], $z = -4.75$, $p < .001$.

General discussion

We proposed that the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs among members of low-status groups might be partly explained by the notion that these beliefs enable them to reject internal attributions for an ingroup's disadvantage and an outgroup's privileges. We expected that conspiracy mentality would be associated with decreased internal attributions for poverty (of disadvantaged ingroups) and wealth (of privileged outgroups), and that these effects would be mediated by a decreased tendency to endorse the ideology internally attributing success and failure. We also expected that conspiracy mentality would impact attitudes towards low status (in)groups and high-status (out)groups.

The studies provided some support for our hypotheses. We found cross sectional evidence that conspiracy mentality was associated with decreased meritocracy beliefs, but not with more positive attitudes towards low-status groups, nor with more negative attitudes towards high-status groups. Moreover, in an experimental setting opposing a fictitious disadvantaged ingroup to a privileged outgroup, experimentally having participants take the perspective of an individual exhibiting a high (vs. low) level of conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Imhoff et al., 2021) seemed to primarily deteriorate the image of the outgroup. Indeed, across studies, adopting a conspiracy mentality reduced internal attributions for wealth, and fostered negative attitudes towards the outgroup. In contrast, it did not directly reduce internal attributions for poverty, nor did it improve attitudes towards the ingroup. Social comparison being relative (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), such a view of society may strengthen preference for the disadvantaged ingroup not by eliciting a positive view of the ingroup, but by painting a negative picture of the privileged outgroup.

The relationship between conspiracy mentality and attributions for inequalities does not appear to be as straightforward as suggested by conceptualizations construing it as a tendency to blame negative world events on conspiracies hatched by powerful groups (e.g., Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Popper, 1963). In addition to the aforementioned findings, in Study 5 the induction of conspiracist view of society did not reduce internal attributions for the situation of various high- and low-status groups.

We found consistently that endorsing a conspiracy mentality reduces the endorsement of meritocracy beliefs, which is a prominent system justifying ideology. Research has shown that conspiracy beliefs could act as system justifying beliefs and foster satisfaction with the status quo (Jolley et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2023). Our findings suggest the opposite, and the distinction between conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs provides an explanation for this

discrepancy. Conspiracy theories can be mobilized in a diversity of settings for a variety of ideological reasons (e.g., to bolster or challenge the establishment, Mao et al., 2023; Wood & Gray, 2019; see also Nera et al., 2022). In contrast, conspiracy mentality is robustly associated with discontent with the status quo. Conspiracy mentality fosters willingness to engage in non-normative collective action (Imhoff et al., 2021), and is robustly associated with feelings of anomie (Bowes et al., 2023). Conspiracy mentality encompasses specific perceptions of (corrupt) political authorities (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), and conspiracy beliefs targeting the national ingroup's authorities *reduce* system justification (Mao et al., 2023). Our findings emphasize that conspiracy mentality is primarily a system-challenging ideology, rather than a system reinforcing one (Nera et al., 2021).

Overall, our studies provide little evidence that conspiracy mentality reduces internal attributions for poverty. However, Study 4 showed that a meritocracy manipulation decreased internal attributions for poverty. Thus, there was an indirect effect of conspiracy mentality and internal attributions for poverty, via decreased meritocracy beliefs. The absence of a main effect of conspiracy mentality on internal attribution for the situation of the ingroup, despite the corroboration of the causal chain, suggests that some other unmeasured mechanism suppresses the relationship (Hayes, 2009). A possibility might be that under the worldview of a conspiracy theory believer, there is no ambiguity that members of disadvantaged groups are being deceived by evil elites (Franks et al., 2017). In such a situation, not taking action to challenge the status quo – using violent means if necessary (see Imhoff et al., 2021) – may be perceived as the expression of the disadvantaged ingroup's lack of courage or perceptiveness. Such a perception can be viewed as a form of internal attribution for the situation of the group. In other words, the beneficial effect of the reduced endorsement of meritocracy beliefs may be compensated by an

increased endorsement of the belief that the underdogs who accept the status quo are mindless "sheeple" (Franks et al., 2017).

We primarily examined conspiracy mentality as a means to change the perception of intergroup relationships without altering social structures (i.e., a social creativity strategy, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, conspiracy mentality seems to mostly affect the perception of the social system and privileged outgroups. While this change of perceptions may facilitate positive intergroup comparison, it suggests that conspiracy mentality also acts a social competition catalyst. Conspiracy mentality may help protect the image of disadvantaged ingroups in pre-existing social structures, but it may also foster the willingness to change these structures (see Imhoff et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Directions

First, we used measures of generalized attitudes towards groups (i.e., feeling thermometers). This leaves many unanswered questions regarding the relationship between conspiracy mentality and the perception of disadvantaged (in)groups and privileged (out)groups. Future research may pursue a more fine-grained examination of how conspiracy mentality impacts the intergroup comparison process, by focusing on more specific evaluative dimensions of social judgement (e.g., warmth and/or competence, see for instance Fiske et al., 2016).

Second, we did not consider the fact that ingroup positivity comes in many forms. Notably, insecure attachment to one's ingroup (i.e., collective narcissism, Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) is a robust predictor of conspiracy beliefs (Bowes et al., 2023). It is plausible that conspiracy mentality strengthens the sense that the ingroup's value is not being properly acknowledged (Golec de Zavala, 2020), while reducing secure attachment to the ingroup (Cichocka et al., 2016).

Third, we did not measure ingroup identification across studies. By deteriorating the image of privileged outgroups, conspiracy mentality might – to some extent – favour positive intergroup comparison for members of disadvantaged groups. However, some research suggests that it may also favour disengagement from pre-existing disadvantaged ingroups, and identification with new communities (e.g., "truth seekers", Franks et al., 2017). From a social identity perspective, such a dynamic may be viewed as a social mobility strategy aimed at developing a positive view of one's ingroup. Examining the impact of conspiracy mentality on identification with low-status ingroups is crucial to further this research agenda. Note that when controlling for collective narcissism, ingroup identification seems to predict lower levels of conspiracy beliefs (Cichocka et al., 2016).

Fourth, even though Studies 2-5 involved a fictitious intergroup context, it is still likely that the observed effects could be moderated by a participants' pre-existing ideology (e.g., participants' own meritocracy beliefs, or endorsement of other system justifying ideologies). Examining the moderating role of participants' ideology would be a valuable contribution. In this regard, we observed that across studies, participants reported low average levels of meritocracy beliefs. This is surprising given the importance of meritocratic ideology in Western societies (Mijs, 2018). This may be because, except for Study 1, the average political orientation was consistently below 5 ("center"), indicating left leaning samples (especially in Studies 2, 3 and 5). Moreover, except for Study 1, we relied on convenience (i.e., non-representative) sampling (in contrast to studies highlighting the prevalence of meritocracy beliefs in Western societies, e.g., Mijs, 2018).

Fifth, we examined intergroup inequalities through the lens of economic inequalities. This is justified by the fact that economic resources are a central aspect of group inequalities, and a

source of specific group identifications (Easterbrook et al., 2020). However, economic inequalities suppose that there is – hypothetically – a possibility to achieve social mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and join the high-status group (i.e., by becoming wealthy). Therefore, testing our hypotheses on groups that do not allow such mobility strategies (e.g., race or gender) would be a valuable avenue for future research.

Finally, the impact of conspiracy beliefs on the perception of disadvantaged ingroups needs to be assessed using longitudinal designs. Endorsing a conspiracy mentality may to a limited extent favour positive intergroup comparisons in controlled experimental settings. However, it may have long-term detrimental consequences. In the long run, feelings of powerlessness fostered by conspiracy beliefs (Coelho et al., 2022; Jolley & Douglas, 2014) may negatively impact the perception of the ingroup.

Conclusion

In this research, we empirically examined the relationship between conspiracy mentality and the perception of intergroup inequalities. In line with our rationale, conspiracy mentality reduced meritocracy beliefs, internal attributions for outgroups' success, and fostered negative attitudes towards a comparison outgroup. However, conspiracy mentality did not reduce individuals' internal attribution for the situation of a disadvantaged ingroup, and did not foster positive attitudes towards the ingroup. While it has often been argued that conspiracy beliefs help individuals deal with their ingroups' misfortunes, our results suggest that they primarily help them call into question the fortunes of privileged outgroups.

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