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EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

Are conspiracy beliefs negatively associated with generosity?

Sinan Alper[1], Daniel Toribio-Flórez[2], Karen M. Douglas[2], and Valerio Capraro[3]

[1]Yasar University, Turkey; [2]University of Kent, UK and [3]University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy

Corresponding author: Sinan Alper; Email: sinan.alper@yasar.edu.tr

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Abstract

People with stronger conspiracy beliefs tend to trust others less, show more antisocial tendencies, and behave more self-centeredly. We investigated whether they are also less likely to act generously. In Study 1 (N = 850; UK), conspiracy beliefs were negatively correlated with charitable donations, though effect sizes were small. In Study 2 (N = 323; US), conspiracy beliefs did not predict sharing in a Dictator Game. In Study 3 (N = 830; US), higher conspiracy beliefs were related to more generosity, but only when donations went directly to the recipient without intermediaries. Overall, people with higher conspiracy beliefs are not less generous per se, but their generosity may be constrained by distrust in institutions or intermediaries.

Conspiracy theories explain social and political events of public interest as the secret acts of typically powerful groups (Douglas and Sutton, 2023; Douglas et al., 2019). The correlates of conspiracy beliefs have been investigated extensively in recent years, and one important finding is that people with higher conspiracy beliefs tend to be more self-centered (Hornsey et al., 2021; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; Marinthe et al., 2020). However, there is a dearth of empirical studies investigating whether those with stronger conspiracy beliefs also tend to be less generous toward others in general. We conducted 3 studies to address this gap. Specifically, we examined how intentions to donate to charities on a politically non-controversial issue (childhood cancer) correlate with conspiracy beliefs (Study 1). We also investigated generosity toward random strangers (Study 2). Lastly, we tested whether conspiracy beliefs relate to generosity depends on whether it is direct or mediated through an intermediary (e.g., a charity; Study 3).

1. Conspiracy beliefs are associated with lack of trust

Research on the psychology of conspiracy theories has flourished in recent years, identifying a range of traits, situational factors, and motives that are associated with belief in conspiracy theories (see Hornsey et al., 2023, for a review). One of the most important contributors to conspiracy beliefs appears to be distrust. Specifically, research has shown that higher levels of belief in conspiracy theories are closely related to social distrust (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas and Sutton, 2018; Goertzel, 1994; van Prooijen and Acker, 2015; van Prooijen et al., 2022) and that people with higher conspiracy beliefs overestimate how dishonest other people would behave (Alper et al., 2024). Other studies have shown that those with stronger conspiracy beliefs are more likely to perceive strangers' faces as threatening

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(Frenken and Imhoff, 2023) and are less trusting of their counterparts (Meuer and Imhoff, 2021), even in the absence of cues suggesting threat. It has been theorized that distrust in other individuals, groups, and organizations is crucial in driving people toward conspiracy theories (van Mulukom et al., 2022). It has further been suggested that mistrust triggers biased information processing (e.g., lower analytical thinking and scientific literacy), which eventually results in conspiracy beliefs (Pierre, 2020). Recently, lack of trust in media (Bruder and Kunert, 2021; Lockyer et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021), government and public health institutions (Bruder and Kunert, 2021; De Coninck et al., 2021; Kim and Kim, 2021; Pummerer et al., 2021), and science (Constantinou et al., 2020; Eberl et al., 2021; Erceg et al., 2020) have also been shown to play a key role in fostering conspiracy beliefs about the origins of COVID-19. A large-scale cross-country comparison showed that, in countries where people find fewer reasons to trust institutions (e.g., countries with high levels of corruption), there were significantly higher levels of COVID-19-related and general conspiracy beliefs (Alper, 2023; Alper and Imhoff, 2023) and lower trust in science and scientists (Alper et al., 2024).

2. Conspiracy beliefs are associated with antisocial tendencies

Conspiracy beliefs are associated with antisocial attitudes toward others (Jolley et al., 2022). For example, they appear to be more willing to take part in a sinister conspiracy if given the chance (Douglas and Sutton, 2011) and to commit everyday crime (Jolley et al., 2019). Various studies have also shown that people with stronger conspiracy beliefs score higher on socially undesirable personality characteristics, such as the so-called 'dark' traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Cichocka et al., 2016; Hughes and Machan, 2021; Kay, 2021; March and Springer, 2019). Callousness, which is a common factor among all dark traits (Jones and Figueredo, 2013), is also related to conspiracy beliefs (Swami et al., 2016). The dark core of personality, which is characterized as aversive personality traits and accompanying beliefs regarding how distrustful others are (Moshagen et al., 2018, 2020), is strongly associated with conspiracy beliefs (Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023). Similarly, in a recent study, conspiracy beliefs were found to positively correlate with lying in a monetary incentivized lying task (Alper et al., 2024).

3. Are conspiracy beliefs negatively related to generosity?

Given these links between conspiracy beliefs, distrust, antisocial tendencies, and dark personality characteristics, it is unsurprising that those with stronger conspiracy beliefs tend to be more self-centered. Specifically, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy belief has been consistently linked to a lower likelihood of taking preventive action, such as social distancing and following recommended hygiene practices (e.g., Allington et al., 2021; Erceg et al., 2020; Marinthe et al., 2020; Pavlović et al., 2022; Romer and Jamieson, 2020), lower intentions to take a vaccine for the greater good (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2021; Romer and Jamieson, 2020; Salali and Uysal, 2021), and a greater likelihood of hoarding vital resources for oneself (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). During this time, conspiracy believers have also tended to be more concerned about their own safety than the safety of others (Hornsey et al., 2021; Marinthe et al., 2020).

If conspiracy beliefs positively relate to being more self-centered and antisocial, it is plausible that they may also be less inclined to display generous behavior, understood as incurring a cost to benefit others (Park et al., 2017). Generosity can be broadly defined as the voluntary transfer of resources to benefit others, even at some cost to oneself (Engel, 2011). Unlike cooperation or reciprocity, which involve mutual or conditional exchanges, generosity is fundamentally unilateral—but it is also inherently object-directed: it requires a beneficiary, and people's willingness to give depends on who or what the recipient is, how deserving they are perceived to be, and whether the channel through which generosity is expressed is trusted (Brañas-Garza, 2006). This means that worldviews—including epistemic worldviews such as conspiracy beliefs—can systematically shape these perceptions.

However, empirical research on the association between conspiracy beliefs and generosity remains limited. Thus far, only 2 studies have examined this possibility. A study with participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk found that exposure to conspiracy theories about climate change decreased intentions to donate to, and volunteer for, an unspecified charity (Van der Linden, 2015). This suggests that conspiracy beliefs may indeed be associated with lower levels of generosity specifically toward a charity. However, this was limited to a single study on an American crowdsourced sample. Moreover, it referred to a specific target of generosity: a charity; given that people higher in conspiracy beliefs are more likely to distrust institutions and organizations, it is possible that the aforementioned effect is driven by distrust, rather than generosity per se. In other research from 4 countries, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (i.e., believing that the official account of the COVID-19 hides the actual truth about its nature) were found to be related to lower intentions to help others during the pandemic (self-reported tendencies to donate money, offer support to neighbors, engage with volunteers, and use social media to promote social distancing; Moon and Travaglino, 2021). However, because both the conspiracy-belief measure and the generosity-related outcomes were specific to the COVID-19 context, this association is not especially surprising and may partly reflect domain-specific coherence rather than a broader relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity.

4. Preliminary studies

During the conceptualization of the present research, we conducted 2 preliminary studies. The first was based on secondary analyses of data on hypothetical donations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from an open multinational dataset (Van Bavel et al., 2022). We observed that COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs were negatively related to donations to national charities working on COVID-19, while the association between conspiracy beliefs and donations to international charities was nonsignificant (see the Supplementary Material for details). These preliminary results may not be surprising. After all, why would an anti-vaxxer donate to a pro-vaccine organization? Reluctance to support an organization might not always indicate lower generosity. If one believes that a charity is working against the public interest, refusing to support that organization could actually reflect a prosocial attitude from that person's perspective. In the case of conspiracy believers, refusing to donate to certain charities might similarly be interpreted as a prosocial, rather than antisocial, behavior.

In our second preliminary study, we performed secondary analyses on European Social Survey (ESS Round 10: European Social Survey Round 10 Data, 2020) data (29,904 participants from 20 European countries; see the Supplementary Material for details). We found that perceived importance of being prosocial was not correlated with any of the 3 conspiracy items ('Small secret group of people responsible for making all major decisions in world politics'; 'Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public'; and 'COVID-19 is a result of deliberate and concealed efforts of some government or organization'). However, this was a self-reported measure of being prosocial and did not directly tap into the concept of generosity, since prosociality is a broader concept that includes but is not limited to generosity.

Our first preliminary study, therefore, deviated from an ideal test of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and a general tendency to behave generously, insofar as it introduced confounds (e.g., vaccine attitudes, political identity, and institutional trust) potentially affecting the perceived deservingness of the recipient. Our second preliminary study similarly suffered from limitations since it was a self-report, not behavioral, measure of prosociality, rather than generosity. In the present research, we focused on whether conspiracy beliefs are related to a general propensity for generosity, while methodologically minimizing or testing the influence of potential confounds.

5. Research overview

Building on our preliminary studies (see the Supplementary Material), which indicated a negative correlation between conspiracy beliefs and generosity but were subject to several limitations, we

designed 3 studies to systematically examine how conspiracy beliefs relate to generosity across different contexts. In these 3 studies, we sought to address the limitations of the preliminary work by focusing on contexts in which participants were unlikely to hold strong political attitudes (unlike Preliminary Study 1) and by employing measures that directly assess generosity rather than broader prosociality (unlike Preliminary Study 2). Study 1 focused on generosity in the domain of a politically non-controversial cause (i.e., donations to charities helping children with cancer) to narrow variance in perceived deservingness, while also examining differences between national and international charities. In Study 2, we tested how conspiracy beliefs relate to generosity toward an anonymous stranger in a Dictator Game (Engel, 2011). Finally, Study 3 addressed whether the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity can be explained by institutional distrust by examining whether they differentially relate to direct donations to a person in need versus mediated donations through a charity.

Throughout the research, we employed generosity paradigms that capture people's inclination to benefit others even at a personal cost. In contrast to prior work, we used not only measures of intended generosity (Study 3) but also behavioral measures with real monetary incentives in economic games (Studies 1 and 2). Importantly, because Studies 1 and 2 involved paradigms in which the generous act was carried out through an intermediary, such as a charity or the researchers themselves, we sought to test whether this influenced the results, since conspiracy beliefs often involve a deep distrust of institutions and institutional agents. This rationale guided Study 3, where we compared direct and mediated generosity.

All data, supplementary materials, and the codebook are available at https://osf.io/s762z/. Study 1 was preregistered at https://osf.io/b8dr9. Study 3 was preregistered at https://osf.io/naw9q.

6. Study 1

We preregistered our hypotheses that conspiracy beliefs would be associated with lower donations to national and international charities (https://osf.io/b8dr9/).[1,2]

6.1. Participants

As preregistered, we aimed to recruit a sample size of 853 to be able to detect small correlations (r = 0.11; Funder and Ozer, 2019), with a statistical power of 0.90 and a two-tailed alpha of 0.05. Our sample size was restricted by both thresholds for practically meaningful effect sizes (Funder and Ozer, 2019) and our available resources. We collected a sample of 850 UK participants (419 male, 425 female, 5 non-binary/other, 1 rather not say; M_{age} = 43.38, SD = 13.21) via Prolific (www.prolific.co).[3] They were paid for their participation and told that they could win a bonus payment depending on their choices during the study.

6.2. Measures and procedure

Participants were given the following instructions:

> *As a participant in this study, you are entitled to an additional allocation of £0.50. You will have the opportunity to distribute this sum among the following: (a) yourself; (b) the British*

[1] As exploratory analyses, we also aimed to investigate potential moderating effects of perceived corruption. These analyses are reported in the Supplementary Material.

[2] We also hypothesized that higher conspiracy beliefs would be associated with a greater international–national donation discrepancy. However, based on reviewer feedback on an earlier version of the manuscript, we removed several analyses from the article, which rendered the tests on international–national donations irrelevant to the overall narrative.

[3] We have initially planned to exclude participants who complete the study too fast or too slow, or fail at attention check questions. However, only 10 participants met the criteria and excluding them did not change the results (see the Supplementary Material). Thus, we decided to analyze the entire sample.

non-governmental organization (NGO), Children with Cancer UK, dedicated to aiding children afflicted with cancer; and (c) the international NGO, Childhood Cancer International, which also endeavors to assist children battling cancer.

After reading the instruction, participants were asked to divide £0.50 in any way they liked. Next, participants completed the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton et al., 2013; α = 0.939; measured on a 5-point scale ranging from *definitely not true* to *definitely true*) and 5-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013; α = 0.867; measured on an 11-point scale ranging from *0% certainly not* to *100% Certain*). We used 2 different measures of conspiracy beliefs to capture slightly different aspects of conspiracy beliefs: Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale includes several generic, well-known conspiracy theories (e.g., 'Evidence of alien contact is being concealed from the public'.) while the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire taps into the deep suspicions of the political establishment (e.g., 'I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions'.). Lastly, participants completed a demographic form stating their age, gender, education status, and perceived income status on a 10-step ladder.

After the data collection was complete, we distributed the money from the donation task according to the participants' decisions (i.e., added as bonus payments to the participants' compensation and/or sent as donations to the respective NGOs).

6.3. Analytical procedure

We calculated bivariate correlations between conspiracy beliefs measures, and how much money participants kept to themselves and how much they donated to national and international charities working on childhood cancer. We also estimated multiple linear regressions to check whether the association held when adjusting for differences in demographic factors (age, gender, education, and income). Due to deviations from assumed normality and homoskedasticity, we report robust standard errors (HC1). As a robustness check, we further fit multinomial logistic regression models to capture the discrete and bounded nature of the outcome measure. Specifically, money allocations were categorized into 5 levels (i.e., allocating 0 – zero, 1 – more than zero, 2 – half, 3 – more than half, and 4 – all), allowing us to examine whether the results held across distinct levels of generosity.

6.4. Results

First, we examined how conspiracy beliefs related to how much participants allocated to themselves. The participants were considered as less generous overall if they kept more money to themselves. Generic conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with keeping money to oneself, r = 0.089, p = 0.009, while conspiracy mentality was not associated, r = 0.048, p = 0.162 (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Results were similar in multiple linear regression models, after adjusting for demographics (age, gender, education, and income) and estimating robust standard errors. The multinomial regression model indicated that generic conspiracy beliefs were specifically related to the decision of keeping all (vs. zero) money to oneself (see the Supplementary Material for more detailed statistics).[4]

Generic conspiracy beliefs, r = −0.030, p = 0.384, and conspiracy mentality, r = 0.017, p = 0.615, were not associated with donations to a national charity. However, both generic conspiracy beliefs, r = −0.107, p = 0.002, and conspiracy mentality, r = −0.102, p = 0.003, were negatively associated with donating to an international charity. Adjusting for demographic variables in linear regression (age, gender, education status, and perceived income status) led to the same conclusions. The multinomial logistic regression indicated that the negative associations of generic conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality with international charity donations were specifically significant regarding the decision of

[4]We preregistered the hypothesis that the international–national donation discrepancy would be positively associated with conspiracy beliefs; however, this hypothesis was not supported. Because we opted not to include the discussion of international–national discrepancies in the main manuscript, we have moved the relevant findings to the Supplementary Material.

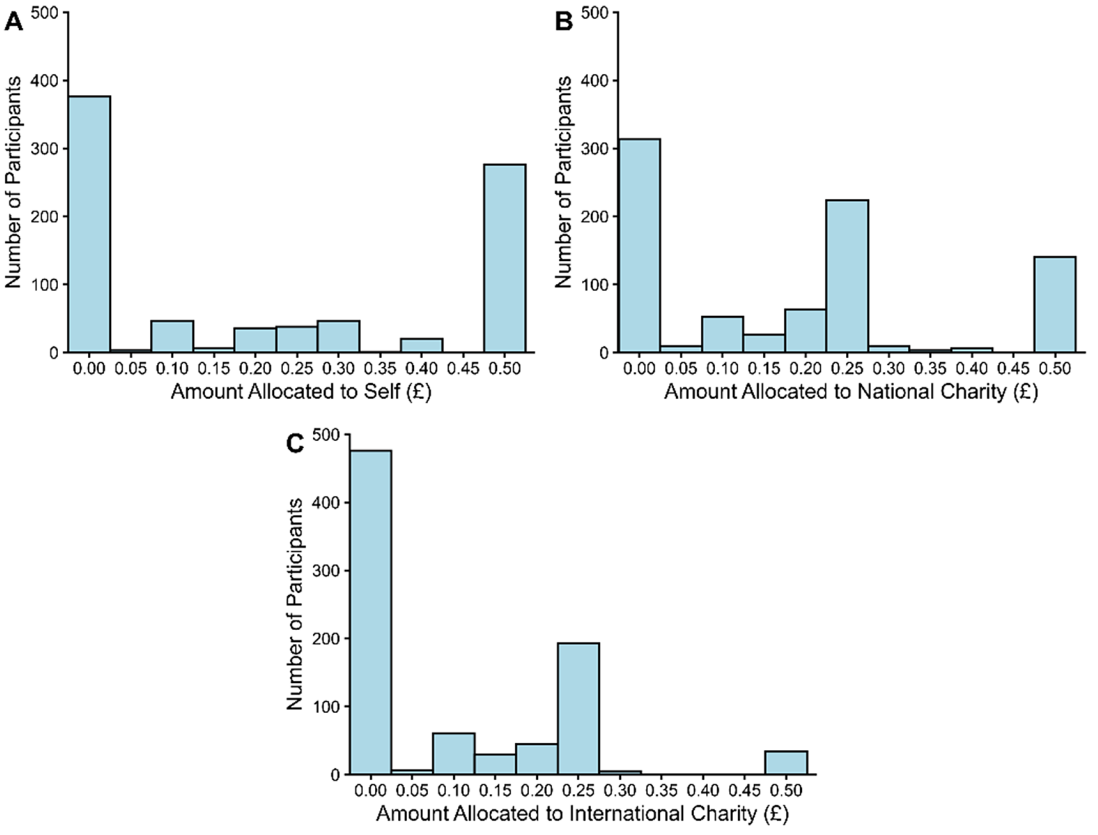


Figure 1. *Histograms depicting the distribution of responses in Study 1 (*N = *850).*

donating half (vs. zero). We also observed a negative association between generic conspiracy beliefs and donating half (vs. zero) to national charities ($p = 0.045$); however, we do not interpret this finding further (see the Supplementary Material).

6.5. Discussion

In terms of overall generosity, Study 1 aligned with our expectations, although the evidence was not as strong as we expected. In line with our hypothesis, generic conspiracy beliefs were positively associated with keeping more money for the self, albeit with a small effect size ($r = 0.089$; Funder and Ozer, 2019). However, conspiracy mentality was not associated with lower generosity. These findings therefore partially supported our hypothesis that those with stronger conspiracy beliefs would act less generously. However, the results revealed inconsistencies between donations to national and international charities: Conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality significantly and negatively predicted donations to international charities only. This finding was the opposite of what we observed in our preliminary study (Preliminary Study 1) on donations to charities working on COVID-19, in which we found that conspiracy beliefs were negatively related to donations to national charities but not to international ones (see the Supplementary Material).

Taken together with our preliminary study, Study 1 provided weak and inconsistent evidence for an association between conspiracy beliefs and generosity. However, Study 1 included measures of donations to charities. Considering that conspiracy beliefs are known to negatively correlate with institutional trust (van Prooijen et al., 2022), overall distrust in charities may be confounding the

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between conspiracy beliefs and the amount of money allocated to self, a national charity, and an international charity on childhood cancer in Study 1.*

	M (*SD*)	Range		1	2	3	4
1. Generic conspiracy beliefs	2.415 (0.877)	1–5		—			
2. Conspiracy mentality	6.748 (2.163)	1–11	r	0.776***	—		
			95% CI	[0.748, 0.802]			
3. Self	0.215 (0.221)	0–0.500	r	0.089**	0.048	—	
			95% CI	[0.022, 0.155]	[−0.019, 0.115]		
4. National charity	0.183 (0.178)	0–0.500	r	−0.030	0.017	−0.796***	—
		0–0.500	95% CI	[−0.097, 0.037]	[−0.050, 0.084]	[−0.819, −0.769]	
5. International charity	0.102 (0.134)	0–0.500	r	−0.107**	−0.102**	−0.597***	−0.011
			95% CI	[−0.173, −0.040]	[−0.168, −0.035]	[−0.639, −0.552]	[−0.078, 0.056]

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$. The intervals in brackets below the correlations are their 95% confidence intervals.

relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity. In Study 2, the recipient of generosity was an anonymous stranger, unlike Study 1.

7. Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to investigate how conspiracy beliefs relate to generosity toward strangers. Due to the mixed results in our preliminary studies (see the Supplementary Material) and in Study 1, we did not preregister Study 2.

7.1. Participants

We collected a sample of 323 US participants (149 male, 156 female, 3 non-binary, 2 preferred not to say; M_{age} = 37.84, SD = 11.97) from Prolific (www.prolific.co). They were paid for their participation and told that they could win a bonus payment depending on their choices during the study, similar to Study 1. The sample size was restricted by the available budget and it was sensitive to detect correlations as small as $r = 0.18$ with a statistical power of 0.90 and a two-tailed alpha of 0.05.

All participants in this study played as dictators and they were paid a bonus according to their choice. Receivers were selected from a list of Prolific IDs associated with participants in prior studies and were paid a bonus according to the dictator's decision.

7.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were provided with $0.10 and informed that they could give any amount of it to a stranger, keeping the rest for themselves. They indicated their decision on an 11-point scale (1 = *give $0.00 to the other participant*, 11 = *give $0.10 to the other participant*). Participants then completed 2 comprehension check questions, in which they were asked which option maximized their own payoff (correct answer: '1 = *give $0.00 to the other participant'*) and which maximized the other person's payoff (correct answer: '11 = *give $0.10 to the other participant'*).

Next, participants completed the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton et al., 2013; $\alpha = 0.942$) and the 5-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013; $\alpha = 0.860$). In the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale, there was an additional attention check item to ensure data quality.[5]

7.3. Analytical procedure

We calculated bivariate correlations between participants' economic allocations to an anonymous person and their conspiracy beliefs (generic conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality).

7.4. Results

The amount given to the other person was not correlated with generic conspiracy beliefs, $r = 0.023$, $p = 0.682$, or conspiracy mentality, $r = -0.009$, $p = 0.878$. When participants who failed the comprehension questions and attention check were excluded[6] ($N_{analysis}$ = 251), correlations between amount given to the other person and generic conspiracy beliefs, $r = 0.026$, $p = 0.681$, and conspiracy mentality, $r = 0.020$, $p = 0.754$, remained nonsignificant (see Figure 2 and Table 2).

[5]The study also included other measures unrelated to the purpose of the present work. Only the reported measures were planned for inclusion in the current research.

[6]A total of 72 participants were excluded, 15 of whom were excluded because they failed an attention check question embedded in a questionnaire instructing them to select a particular option. (see Materials and Procedure of Study 2).

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between conspiracy beliefs and the amount given to a stranger in Study 2 (*N *= 251).*

	M (SD)	Range		1	2
1. Amount given to a stranger	0.037 (0.028)	0–0.100			
2. Generic conspiracy beliefs	2.464 (0.977)	1–5	*r*	0.026	
			95% CI	[−0.098, 0.149]	
3. Conspiracy mentality	6.822 (2.409)	1–11	*r*	0.020	0.793***
			95% CI	[−0.104, 0.144]	[0.742, 0.835]

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. The intervals in brackets below the correlations are their 95% confidence intervals.

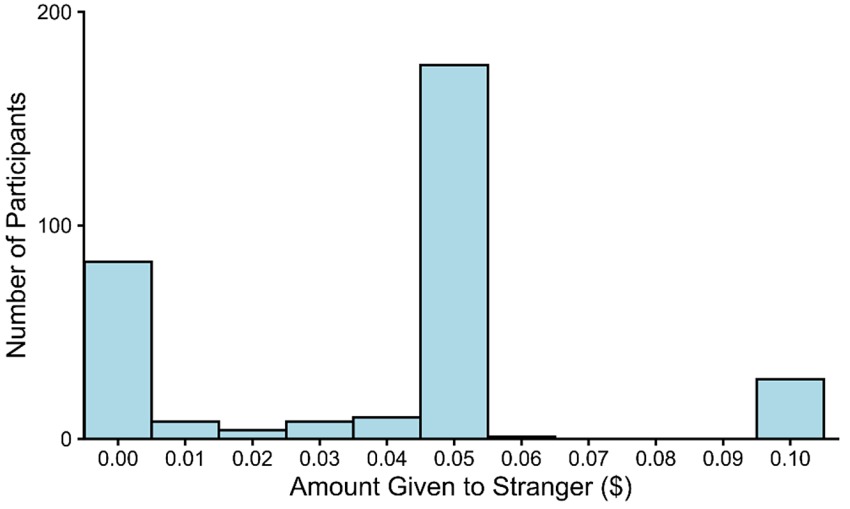


Figure 2. *Histogram depicting the distribution of responses in Study 2 (*N *= 251 after excluding inattentive participants).*

7.5. Discussion

We did not find a correlation between conspiracy beliefs and generosity toward a stranger in a Dictator Game. It appears that conspiracy beliefs are not predictive of generosity in anonymous settings. A potential explanation for the null relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity may lie in participants' attitudes toward the intermediary through which they expressed their generous behavior. As discussed above, individuals with strong conspiracy beliefs are known to distrust institutions (Alper, 2023; Bruder and Kunert, 2021; De Coninck et al., 2021; Kim and Kim, 2021; Pierre, 2020; Pummerer et al., 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2022), and this distrust may extend to the intermediaries of prosocial acts (e.g., charities). In the setup of the present study, the researchers and the data collection platform function as intermediaries between the participants and the anonymous recipient, which may arguably elicit distrust about whether the generous behavior is genuinely carried out. In Study 3, we examine this potential limitation further by comparing participants' willingness to donate directly to a person in need versus through a charity, in hypothetical scenarios. Specifically, Study 3 employs a hypothetical vignette, because (a) it is the only practically feasible way to assess how participants intend to behave toward another person without the mediation of an intermediary, including the researchers or the data collection platform and (b) there is no evidence to suggest that the use of hypothetical versus incentivized paradigms interacts with conspiracy beliefs in a way that would alter the direction of their association with generosity. In other words, although a main effect of incentivization may exist, there

is no indication that it differentially affects individuals as a function of their level of conspiracy beliefs. Nevertheless, we acknowledge this as a potential limitation.

8. Study 3

In Study 3, we test 2 preregistered hypotheses: (H1) there would be a significant interaction between the level of conspiracy beliefs and donation type (direct vs. mediated) in predicting the intention to donate money to a person in need and (H2) the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and intention to donate would be negative when donation is mediated. We preregistered our hypotheses, study design, exclusion criteria, and analytical procedure before data collection (https://osf.io/naw9q).[7]

8.1. Participants

We collected a sample of 830 US participants (251 male, 243 female, 4 non-binary, 332 preferred not to say; M_{age} = 49.02, SD = 15.72) from Prolific (www.prolific.co).[8] They were paid for their participation. The sample size was sensitive to detect correlations as small as r = 0.11 with a statistical power of 0.90 and a two-tailed alpha of 0.05. Our target for the effect size comes from the finding that a typical small effect size in psychological research is 0.10 (Funder and Ozer, 2019) and we reasoned that anything below this threshold would not be consequential. For the analysis of our main model, we ran a sensitivity analysis for a linear multiple regression involving 3 predictors (conspiracy beliefs, the mode of donation [direct vs. mediated], and the interaction between them). The resulting N of 830 participants was sufficient to detect very small effect sizes (f^2 = 0.017) with a statistical power of 0.90, assuming a two-tailed alpha of 0.05 for detecting deviations of R^2 from zero.[9]

8.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read either the direct (n = 414) or the mediated (in parenthesis) (n = 416) versions of a hypothetical vignette:

> *You are walking through a public area and notice* ***a person sitting on the sidewalk holding a sign that says they are homeless and in need. The person appears to be asking passersby for money*** *(* ***a table set up by a registered charity that supports homeless individuals. The charity is collecting small donations from the public.*** *). You have a one-dollar bill in your wallet.*

In both conditions, participants were asked '*How likely would you be to donate one dollar in this situation?'* and responded on a 7-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*).

Next, participants completed the 15-item Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton et al., 2013; α = 0.935) and the 5-item Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013; α = 0.853). There were 2 attention check questions to ensure data quality.

8.3. Analytical procedure

We calculated bivariate correlations between participants' conspiracy beliefs and intention to donate in direct and mediated donation scenarios. We carried out a general linear model to examine the

[7] We also defined several exploratory (rather than confirmatory) analyses to examine whether the expected association is moderated by certain factors. No significant moderation effects were found, and these results are reported in the Supplementary Material.

[8] In our preregistration, we planned to exclude participants who fail at both of two attention check questions. No participant failed at both of them.

[9] Although 830 participants completed the main dependent variables (donation), due to some missing values on conspiracy beliefs measure, exact N for analyses varied. The relatively smallest N was for the general linear model for the interaction between generic conspiracy beliefs and the mode of donation (N = 642), which was sufficient to detect small effect sizes (f^2 = 0.022) with a statistical power of 0.90, assuming a two-tailed alpha of 0.05 for detecting deviations of R^2 from zero.

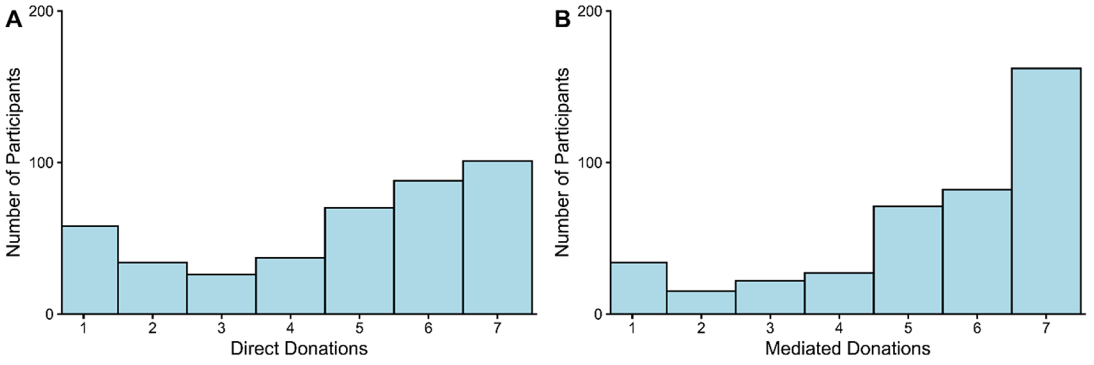


Figure 3. *Bar plots depicting the distribution of responses in Study 3 (*N_{direct} *= 414 and* $N_{mediated}$ *= 413).*

interaction between conspiracy beliefs and binary-coded donation condition (1 = *direct*, 2 = *mediated*). Similar to Study 1, we estimated robust standard errors (HC1) to counter any potential deviation from homoskedasticity.

8.4. Results

In general, mediated donations were significantly higher than direct donations, $t(825) = -4.997$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.348$. However, while conspiracy beliefs were not related to mediated donations, they were positively associated with direct ones (see Figure 3 and Table 3).

In our general linear model, participants with higher generic conspiracy beliefs, $b = 0.591$, $SE = 0.140$, 95% CI [0.343, 0.840], $\beta = 0.120$, $t(638) = 4.239$, $p < 0.001$, and those in the mediated donation condition, $b = 2.535$, $SE = 0.509$, 95% CI [1.595, 3.476], $\beta = 0.402$, $t(638) = 4.979$, $p < 0.001$, were more likely to donate. The interaction between generic conspiracy beliefs and donation condition was also significant, $b = -0.645$, $SE = 0.184$, 95% CI [−0.982, −0.308], $\beta = -0.288$, $t(638) = -3.512$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that while generic conspiracy beliefs predicted direct donations, it did not predict mediated donations, $b = -0.054$, $SE = 0.119$, 95% CI [−0.281, 0.174], $\beta = -0.024$, $t(638) = -0.449$, $p = 0.653$ (see Figure 4).

We subsequently conducted the analysis with conspiracy mentality as a predictor, instead of generic conspiracy beliefs. People with higher conspiracy mentality, $b = 0.229$, $SE = 0.048$, 95% CI [0.140, 0.317], $\beta = 0.144$, $t(807) = 4.742$, $p < 0.001$, and those in the mediated donation condition, $b = 2.116$, $SE = 0.476$, 95% CI [1.211, 3.021], $\beta = 0.355$, $t(807) = 4.448$, $p < 0.001$, were more likely to donate. The interaction between conspiracy mentality and donation condition was also significant, $b = -0.197$, $SE = 0.064$, 95% CI [−0.318, −0.075], $\beta = -0.217$, $t(807) = -3.067$, $p = 0.002$, indicating that while conspiracy mentality did positively predict direct donations, it did not predict mediated donations, $b = 0.032$, $SE = 0.042$, 95% CI [−0.051, 0.116], $\beta = 0.036$, $t(807) = 0.763$, $p = 0.446$ (see Figure 4).

8.5. Discussion

In Study 3, we found that conspiracy beliefs were positively correlated with direct donations, but not with mediated donations. Analyses examining the interaction between conspiracy beliefs and donation type similarly showed that variations in conspiracy beliefs did not predict donations made through charities, but significantly and positively predicted donations made directly to a person in need. These results are consistent with our expectation that the association between conspiracy beliefs and generosity would depend on whether an institutional third party serves as an intermediary to the generosity. Importantly, the findings also suggest that those with stronger conspiracy beliefs are not less

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between conspiracy beliefs and donations to direct and mediated donations in Study 3..*

	M (SD)	Range		1	2	3
1. Direct donations	4.679 (2.102)	1–7				
2. Mediated donations	5.373 (1.887)	1–7				
3. Generic conspiracy beliefs	2.629 (0.933)	1–5	*r*	0.247***	−0.027	
			95% CI	[0.140, 0.348]	[−0.135, 0.082]	
4. Conspiracy mentality	7.085 (2.246)	1–11	*r*	0.236***	0.039	0.781***
			95% CI	[0.142, 0.326]	[−0.058, 0.136]	[0.749, 0.809]

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. Since participants responded to either direct or mediated donation scenarios, the correlation between the two is not calculated. The intervals in brackets below the correlations are their 95% confidence intervals.

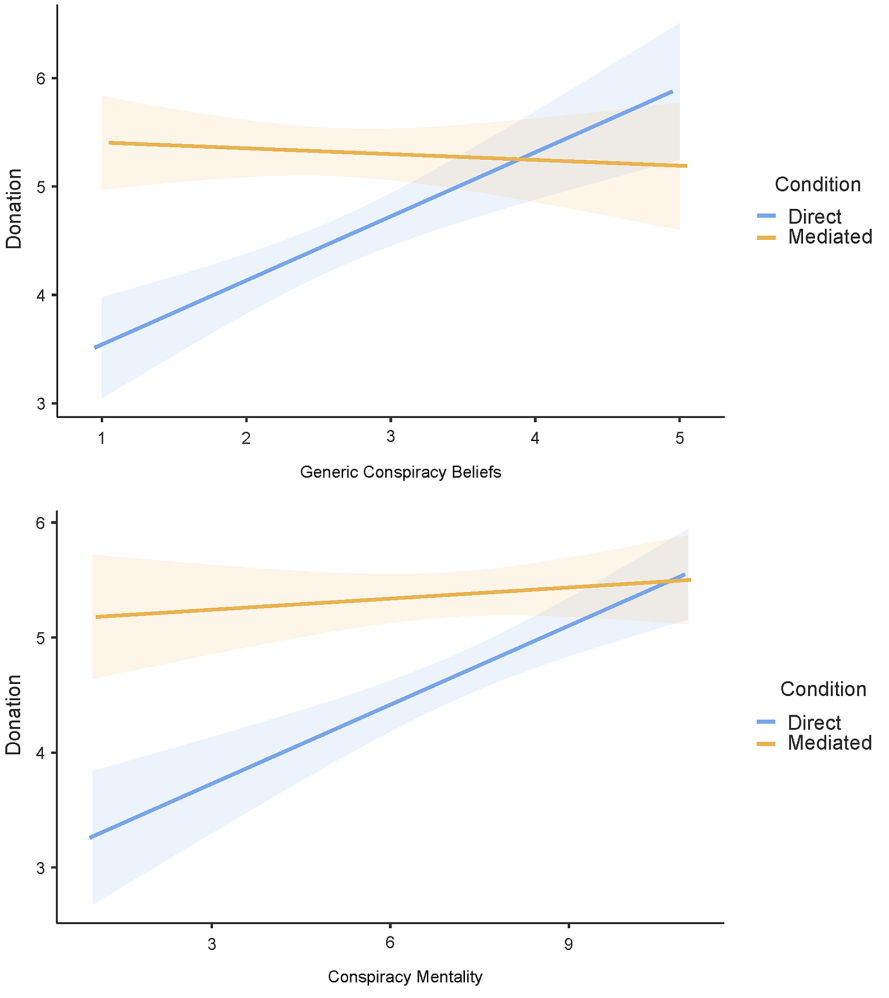


Figure 4. *The associations between conspiracy beliefs and donation for different types of donation (direct vs. mediated) in Study 3. Shades represent 95% confidence interval.*

generous overall; in fact, they may be more generous but only when they are able to donate directly to the recipient.

9. General discussion

In 3 studies, using different methodologies and diverse samples, we have shed light on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity. We had initially hypothesized that those with higher conspiracy beliefs would be less generous, considering their tendency for self-centeredness (Hornsey et al., 2021; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020; Marinthe et al., 2020), dishonesty (Alper et al., 2024), antisocial attitudes (Jolley et al., 2022), lower levels of trust (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas and Sutton, 2018; Goertzel, 1994; Meuer and Imhoff, 2021; van Prooijen and Acker, 2015; van Prooijen et al., 2022), and higher levels of dark personality traits (Cichocka et al., 2016; Hughes and Machan, 2021; Kay, 2021; March and Springer, 2019; Thielmann and Hilbig, 2023). However, our findings suggested that conspiracy beliefs are largely unrelated to generosity. The one exception was that, in Study 3, those with stronger conspiracy beliefs reported being more willing to give when institutional intermediaries were not involved, a finding that awaits replication.

In Study 1, we measured general conspiracy beliefs and examined actual donation behavior in the context of a politically neutral topic, childhood cancer. The results provided partial support for the original hypothesis: Generic conspiracy beliefs negatively correlated with overall generosity, albeit with a small effect size ($r = 0.089$). The association of conspiracy mentality, however, was not significant. Study 1 did not consider, however, that people who have higher conspiracy beliefs might distrust charities in general, regardless of their mission. It is likely that conspiracy beliefs are related to being suspicious of whether the money given to charities is used for the good of the public. We addressed this concern in Study 2 by focusing on alternative operationalizations of generosity. We found that conspiracy beliefs were not associated with generosity toward a stranger in a Dictator Game (Study 2). Together with weak and inconsistent effect sizes observed in Study 1, and the absence of relationships in Study 2, the overall findings suggest that conspiracy beliefs are not a major factor in predicting how generous people are.

Study 3 provided the most compelling evidence that conspiracy beliefs are not necessarily associated with lower generosity. In an experimental paradigm where we manipulated whether the act of donation was made directly to the recipient or mediated through a third party (i.e., a charity), we found that higher levels of conspiracy beliefs predicted a greater self-reported intention to donate when the donation was made directly to a person in need. However, when the donation was mediated, conspiracy beliefs did not predict generosity. Interestingly, although the general tendency across the sample was to donate more through charities, conspiracy beliefs were only (and positively) related to direct donations. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that conspiracy beliefs are related to deep institutional distrust (Alper, 2023; Hornsey et al., 2023; van Prooijen et al., 2022). In our study, people with higher conspiracy beliefs tended to be generous, except when the donation was mediated by an institution.

Our set of studies focused primarily on generosity paradigms. Other dimensions of prosociality, such as cooperation and reciprocity, were not directly examined. Yet different social dilemma paradigms, such as the Trust Game (Berg et al., 1995) and the Public Goods Game (Samuelson, 1954), may evoke different motivations, and individuals may also differ in their motivations within the same dilemma (Bruins et al., 1989; Thielmann et al., 2015). In this context, 2 motivations are especially relevant: greed and fear. Greed refers to the motivation to maximize one's own payoff, whereas fear refers to the expectation that others will do so, leaving oneself as the sole cooperator and exposed to a 'sucker's payoff' (Bruins et al., 1989; Thielmann et al., 2015). Importantly, if conspiracy beliefs are linked to generalized distrust, as our findings and prior work suggest, this distrust may be expressed in social dilemmas primarily as fear, that is, as an expectation that others, especially institutional or anonymous others, may exploit one's cooperation. Our initial hypothesis, grounded in prior work linking conspiracy beliefs to self-centeredness and antisocial tendencies, was that lower generosity would primarily reflect selfish motivations, namely greed. However, our findings, particularly in Study 3, point more strongly toward a fear-based account. This interpretation is also consistent with recent work by Thielmann and Hilbig (2023), who found that conspiracy beliefs are more closely tied to generalized dispositional distrust than to selfish motivations, and that conspiracy mentality was no longer associated with aversive personality traits once distrust-related beliefs were considered.

This distinction between greed and fear becomes crucial for interpreting our results. Individuals with stronger conspiracy beliefs are likely to be highly cynical (Papaioannou et al., 2023) and prone to perceive themselves as victims of others' exploitative intentions (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2025), displaying significant suspicion toward others. This aligns with findings that conspiracy beliefs are negatively correlated with generalized trust and that conspiracy believers overestimate others' dishonesty (Alper et al., 2024). Therefore, conspiracy believers may act out of fear rather than greed, especially fear of exploitation, particularly by intermediary institutions.

These results, overall, suggest that those with stronger conspiracy beliefs are not notably less generous. At the same time, the evidence from Study 3 raises the possibility that the channel through which generosity is expressed may matter, though this finding should be interpreted cautiously given the small effect sizes and the reliance on self-report. Moreover, these findings have potential implications that extend beyond the domain of generosity. Essentializing the socially destructive consequences of

conspiracy theories (Jolley et al., 2022), such as violence (Imhoff et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2022), antisociality (Douglas and Sutton, 2011; Jolley et al., 2019), dishonesty (Alper et al., 2024), and anti-science attitudes (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2022), as expressions of the inner characteristics of conspiracy believers may overlook important contextual factors. The current set of findings points to the possibility that conspiracy beliefs may be unrelated to antisociality or even positively associated with prosociality, provided the context does not involve institutional establishments that conspiracy believers deeply distrust.

Results were inconclusive regarding how conspiracy beliefs affect donations to national versus international charities. In our preliminary study (see the Supplementary Material), we observed that individuals with higher conspiracy beliefs donated less to both national and international charities focused on COVID-19, with a more pronounced negative association for national charities. This suggests that while those with stronger conspiracy beliefs were generally less inclined to donate, they showed a particular reluctance toward national charities compared to international ones. However, we reasoned that this might not be an appropriate test of generosity, since refusing to support COVID-19-related charities could be seen as prosocial if one believes that COVID-19 is a hoax. Study 1, which focused on a non-controversial issue (childhood cancer), revealed the opposite pattern: Higher conspiracy beliefs were significantly linked to reduced donations to an international charity addressing childhood cancer, but not to a national charity pursuing the same objective. This discrepancy might be attributed to the distinct missions of the charities. The contentious and politically charged nature of COVID-19 pandemic response (Kerr et al., 2021), which has spawned numerous conspiracy theories (Douglas, 2021; van Mulukom et al., 2022), likely fueled distrust in national institutions perceived as political adversaries. This political divide may be less pronounced in the context of international organizations, possibly explaining the sharper decline in donations to national charities among those harboring conspiracy beliefs. In Study 1, the focus was on childhood cancer, a cause purposely chosen as a less polarizing cause within a country. Without internal polarization, conspiracy beliefs' impact on attitudes toward outgroups might become more prominent, elucidating the stronger association with reduced donations to international charities. This would be consistent with past research showing that conspiracy beliefs are associated with perceiving one's ingroup as superior to others (Golec de Zavala et al., 2022; Golec de Zavala and Federico, 2018; Sternisko et al., 2023).

9.1. Limitations and directions for future research

While our findings point to distrust as a key factor shaping how conspiracy beliefs relate to generosity, our paradigms do not allow us to directly identify the motivations underlying participants' decisions. Monetary-incentivized tasks, such as the Dictator Game, can reflect a mixture of motives, including fairness concerns, altruism, or reputational considerations (Bruins et al., 1989; Thielmann et al., 2015). As a result, it remains unclear which specific motivations drive the observed associations. Relatedly, our focus on generosity captures only one dimension of prosocial behavior. Other paradigms, such as the Ultimatum Game, involve qualitatively different forms of prosociality, including responses to fairness violations. In the Ultimatum Game, for example, responders may reject unfair offers either to enforce fairness norms (altruistic punishment) or due to spiteful or antisocial tendencies (Brañas-Garza et al., 2014). These distinct motivational pathways are not captured by unilateral allocation tasks. Future research should therefore (a) employ designs that better disentangle the motivations underlying prosocial decisions and (b) extend the scope beyond generosity by incorporating a broader range of incentivized paradigms that capture different forms of prosociality and their underlying motives.

It was evident from our exploratory analyses in Preliminary Study 2 that there was significant heterogeneity across countries in the correlation between conspiracy beliefs and generosity. In exploratory analyses reported in the Supplementary Material, we entertained the possibility that country-level corruption might be an important moderator (Alper, 2023; Alper and Imhoff, 2023) but failed to find consistent results. Future research should investigate the potential moderating effect of other societal and political differences, including, but not limited to, employment status (Freeman and Bentall, 2017),

minority group status (Freeman and Bentall, 2017), and trust in government (Einstein and Glick, 2013). These are linked to conspiracy beliefs and might play an important role in this association. Future research could also control for other variables that are associated with generosity, such as perceived neediness of the recipient (Brañas-Garza, 2006; Engel, 2011).

Another potential limitation is the problem of small incentives. In Study 2, participants were asked to divide $0.10, which could be argued to be too small to be influential on participants' decision-making. However, past research has also found that small incentives might work very similarly to larger ones. The average donation in Dictator Game paradigms with incentives as small as $0.10 was quite similar to a larger meta-analysis of Dictator Game studies (Brañas-Garza et al., 2018; Engel, 2011). In addition, incentives were uniformly small across conditions; therefore, even if they influenced the overall level of generosity, this would not bias our analysis because our focus is on the correlation between generosity and conspiracy beliefs, and there is no reason to expect the potential effect of incentives to vary systematically with conspiracy beliefs.

Finally, although more convenient and arguably more feasible, the use of a self-reported measure as the primary dependent variable in Study 3 constitutes a potential limitation. Participants' reports of how generously they believe they would behave may not correspond to their actual behavior. Future research should therefore incorporate behavioral experiments to examine how both direct and mediated donation behaviors are associated with conspiracy beliefs.

10. Conclusion

Across 3 studies employing diverse methods and samples, we examined the complex and context-sensitive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and generosity. While previous literature often portrayed conspiracy believers as fundamentally antisocial and distrusting, our findings challenge this essentialist view. We observed that conspiracy beliefs are not uniformly associated with reduced prosociality; instead, their influence varies depending on the nature of the recipient, the presence of institutional intermediaries, and the sociopolitical context. Notably, one study found that people with higher conspiracy beliefs reported greater willingness to give directly to individuals rather than through institutional channels, raising the possibility that institutional distrust may shape how, rather than whether, conspiracy believers express generosity.

These findings call for a more nuanced understanding of the social consequences of conspiracy beliefs. Rather than viewing conspiracy believers as inherently antisocial, our research highlights the importance of situational cues and motivational dynamics in shaping their generosity. Future work should further explore these contingencies by integrating a wider variety of behavioral paradigms and examining cross-cultural moderators. A more balanced perspective on conspiracy beliefs, one that takes potential cross-cultural differences into account, may foster more productive discussion around some of the assumed sociopsychological correlates, such as social and institutional distrust, and the erosion of social cohesion and democratic values, more broadly.

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