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Blaming a few bad apples to save a threatened barrel: The system-justifying function of conspiracy theories

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Abstract:

This research demonstrates that conspiracy theories – often represented as subversive alternatives to establishment narratives – may bolster, rather than undermine, support for the social status quo when its legitimacy is under threat. A pilot study ($N = 98$) found a positive relationship between conspiracy belief and satisfaction with the status quo. In Study 1 ($N = 120$), threatening (vs. affirming) the status quo in British society caused participants to endorse conspiracy theories. In Study 2 ($N = 159$), exposure to conspiracy theories increased satisfaction with the British social system after this had been experimentally threatened. In Study 3 ($N = 109$), this effect was mediated by the tendency for participants exposed (vs. not exposed) to conspiracy theories to attribute societal problems relatively more strongly to small groups of people rather than systemic causes. By blaming tragedies, disasters and social problems on the actions of a malign few, conspiracy theories can divert attention from the inherent limitations of social systems.

Keywords:

Conspiracy theories; system justification; system threat; beliefs

Author notes:

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Blaming a few bad apples to save a threatened barrel: The system-justifying function of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories blame significant events on the secret actions of powerful, malevolent and unjust actors (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Goertzel, 1994; Wood, Douglas & Sutton, 2012). They range from wildly implausible (e.g., the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was triggered by U.S. government scientists), through unlikely (e.g., the U.S. government orchestrated, or was complicit in, the 9/11 attacks), to demonstrably true (e.g., conspiracy theories circulating prior to the truth being revealed about the Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Tuskegee syphilis scandals). Although their plausibility varies and their "truth" also varies, one thing that they seem to have in common is that they are predominantly subversive. The majority of conspiracy theories point accusing fingers at authority, and offer alternatives to official explanations (Gray, 2010; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). Their proponents often represent skeptics as gullible conformists, or "sheeple" (Natrass, 2012). Scholars have also written about conspiracy theories' capacity to confront social hierarchies and to offer alternative, empowering understandings of social reality (e.g., Gray, 2010; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013).

Several findings provide support for this view. Endorsement of conspiracy theories is robustly associated with anomie and political distrust (e.g., Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Goertzel, 1994). Exposure to conspiracy theories undermines people's confidence in their work (Douglas & Leite, in press), their confidence in governmental positions on topics such as climate science, and compliance with officially encouraged actions such as voting and vaccinating children (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; 2014b; Lewandowsky, Oberauer & Gignac, 2013). Also, belief in conspiracy theories appears to be especially strong among members of disaffected minority groups (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999); victimized groups (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik,

2013), and those with extreme political leanings (van Prooijen, Krouwel & Pollet, 2015). Entertaining conspiracy beliefs, then, would seem to be at odds with a well-documented motivation – system justification.

System justification theory proposes that people are motivated to hold positive views about existing social, economic and political arrangements (Jost & Andrews, 2011; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004; Kay, Jost & Young, 2005; Kay, Gaucher, Peach, Laurin, Friesen, Zanna, & Spencer, 2009). This motivation arises because system justification symbolically satisfies relational, epistemic, and existential needs. Threats to the fairness, integrity and legitimacy of social systems threaten these needs, causing people to defend, bolster or rationalize the status quo, even at the expense of their own interests (Jost et al., 2004). For example, people use stereotypes to justify status differences between groups (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Jost, 2001; Jost & Hunyady, 2002), and employ other ideological devices such as rationalization and outgroup favouritism to preserve the legitimacy of the social system (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). The meaning of the "status quo" or the "social system" can mean different things to people in different contexts, but system justification theory refers to a general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the systems on which people rely in their everyday lives.

Why do people subscribe to conspiracy beliefs when they appear to be so critical of authorities and institutions? One possible answer is that like system justification, conspiracy beliefs satisfy important psychological needs, allowing people to make sense of events (van Prooijen, 2012), avoid feelings of uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson, Galinsky, & Kay, 2015), avoid existential anxiety (Newheiser, Farias & Tausch, 2011), help make sense of a chaotic world (Quinby, 1999), address feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap, et al., 1999; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015), deal with a lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), protect the image of the ingroup (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de

Zavala & Olechowski, 2016; Cichocka Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala & Olechowski, 2016), and cope with disadvantage (Crocker et al., 1999). Conspiracy theorizing may represent a substitute route to these needs when system justification is untenable.

We propose an alternative possibility, which is that conspiracy theories may paradoxically bolster support for the status quo when its legitimacy is threatened. As noted by Goertzel (2010), "a conspiracy theory gives believers someone tangible to blame for their perceived predicament, instead of blaming it on impersonal or abstract social forces" (p. 494). Specifically, conspiracy theories identify a small group of wrongdoers within the system who are responsible for the ills of society. These wrongdoers are not represented as being characteristic of society more generally, but instead are people working for special interests, such as corporations or corrupt elements within government, and against those of wider society. Conspiracy theories may therefore sometimes deflect blame for society's problems from the inherent features of social systems to the alleged malfeasance of small groups of people. Thus, conspiracy theories postulate that illegitimate and unjust factors influence people's lives, but often nominate factors that are not inherent to social systems.

In this way, the motivated defence of social systems via conspiracy theories is analogous to the preservation of many cherished social beliefs. Subtyping preserves group stereotypes by categorizing people who defy them as members of special subgroups (Kunda & Oleson, 1995). Similarly, in order to defend beliefs that the world is just, people demonize wrongdoers, ascribing to them evil dispositions that make them unrepresentative of normal people (Ellard, Miller, Baumle, & Olson, 2002; Fouts, Callan, Piasnetin, & Lawson, 2006). Likewise, people derogate deviant ingroup members more harshly than deviant outgroup members, in order, ironically, to preserve the belief that typical ingroup members are superior to typical outgroup members (Marques & Paez, 1994). In all these cases, people attribute disconfirmatory phenomena to particular causal factors such as individuals' personality traits.

In so doing, they can avoid revising beliefs about more general entities such as social groups. Also, people often view problems in society as inevitable and therefore need to find ways to adapt to them (Laurin, Gaucher & Kay, 2013). Believing in conspiracy theories may give people the opportunity to do so by attributing problems to the negative actions of outsiders whilst not questioning the system itself.

In sum, there are grounds to predict that conspiracy theories may undermine support for the status quo, and grounds to predict that they may bolster it. However, no research has directly examined these predictions. We report a correlational pilot study and three experiments testing the novel proposal that conspiracy theories may bolster (vs. undermine) support for the status quo. The pilot study examined the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and support for the social status quo. Study 1 examined whether conspiracy theorizing would increase (vs. not increase) in response to "system threat" information. Study 2 tested the hypothesis that exposure to conspiracy theories would buffer (vs. aggravate) the negative effects of system threat on a measure of satisfaction with the status quo. Finally, Study 3 examined the mediating role of the attribution of societal problems to individual perpetrators rather than social systems. In the pilot study and in Study 1, we focused on belief in several well-known conspiracy theories and also the general tendency to think conspiratorially. In subsequent studies, we aimed for greater experimental control by focusing on conspiracy theories in one particular context.

Pilot Study

We first report a pilot study that examined the relationship between conspiracy belief and satisfaction with the status quo. Evidence of such a relationship would provide grounds for experimental studies examining the effects of system threat and conspiracy theories on satisfaction with the status quo. Participants completed scale measures of conspiracy belief and system justification. If conspiracy theories tend to subvert the status quo, we can expect

a negative correlation between these beliefs. If conspiracy theories help to uphold the status quo, this correlation should be positive.

Method

Participants and Design

Ninety-eight undergraduate students at a British University (25 men and 73 women, M_{age} = 20.38, *SD* = 4.38) gave their informed consent to participate in an online questionnaire for course credit. In this and all other studies reported in this paper, the questionnaire management software Qualtrics was used and the university's Psychology Ethics Committee granted ethics approval. Belief in both real-world conspiracy theories and general notions of conspiracy were measured as the predictor variables and satisfaction with the status quo was measured as the criterion variable. A medium-sized correlation between variables required a sample size of approximately 85 participants for 80% power of detecting the effect. We therefore targeted 98-102 participants, anticipating a 15-20% dropout.

Materials and Procedure

Conspiracy beliefs were measured using a scale assessing belief in real-world conspiracy theories (Douglas & Sutton, 2011). There were 17 statements (e.g., "The British government was involved in the death of Princess Diana", 1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*, α = .93). Further, a scale was used to measure belief in general notions of conspiracy (Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013). There were 15 statements (e.g., "The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret", 1 = *definitely not true*, 5 = *definitely true*, α = .94). Satisfaction with the status quo was measured using Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale. Participants responded to eight items (e.g., "In general, I find society to be fair", 1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*, α = .80), with higher scores indicating greater support for the

status quo. The order of the scales was randomized. At the conclusion of the pilot study, the participants were debriefed in writing and were thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Belief in real-world conspiracy theories was positively correlated with belief in general notions of conspiracy, $r(98) = .82$, $p < .001$. Using oblique rotation (promax), we conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the individual items of both scales. The scales were used in this pilot study and Study 1, so the factor analysis was conducted across data from this study and Study 1 in order to increase power. Statistical assumptions were met and the analysis revealed two factors with eigenvalues > 1, explaining 43.38 per cent and 6.83 per cent of the variance respectively. Each component showed strong loadings on the rotated solution, and each item loaded substantially on the predicted scale, with the exception of two items from the real-world conspiracy scale which cross-loaded on the general notions of conspiracy (conspiracies about JFK and aliens). Results were not affected when these two items were omitted from the real-world conspiracy scale.

Belief in real-world conspiracy theories and general notions of conspiracy were positively correlated with satisfaction with the status quo, $r(98) = .23$, $p = .024$, $r(98) = .32$, $p < .001$, respectively. That is, participants who endorsed conspiracy theories perceived society to be fairer, more legitimate and more secure.[1] This study therefore provides some preliminary evidence that conspiracy theories may serve a system-justifying function. We

[1] The pilot study also measured values (Schwartz, 1992), reasoning that security, conformity and tradition (*conservation values*) are relevant to the idea of upholding positive perceptions of social systems. We also measured need for cognitive closure (NFCC; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), reasoning that this could be associated with belief in conspiracy theories that address uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Only system-justification and the NFCC subscale of closed-mindedness were consistent predictors of conspiracy beliefs (see Supplementary Material). In Study 1 participants were presented with the NFCC subscales of preference for predictability and closed-mindedness (both were significantly or marginally predictive of conspiracy belief in the pilot study), and the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz, 2003). There were no effects of NFCC or values (see Supplementary Material). These were therefore not included in Studies 2 and 3.

note however that these correlations arose from a small undergraduate student sample and we should therefore be cautious in drawing any strong conclusions from them. Further, the correlations do not imply that there is a causal link between conspiracy belief and satisfaction with the status quo. Our next step was therefore to experimentally examine whether belief in conspiracy theories responds to system threat.

Study 1

This study employed a system threat manipulation adapted from previous research (Kay et al., 2005; Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi & Mosso, 2005) in which participants read a paragraph describing the social, economic, and political circumstances in the United Kingdom as either problematic (system threat) or not (system affirming). This type of manipulation has previously been shown to decrease general satisfaction with the status quo immediately afterwards (see Jost et al., 2005). This manipulation also motivates social-cognitive efforts to restores the psychological legitimacy of the status quo, including victim derogation and enhancement (Kay et al., 2005), attraction to women who embody sexist ideals (Lau, Kay, & Spencer, 2008), and approval of gender inequality in the attainment of management positions (Kay et al., 2009). Following this manipulation, participants rated their belief in conspiracy theories. We argue that if the motivation to restore the status quo similarly motivates belief in conspiracy theories, then conspiracy belief should increase under system threat. The opposite prediction holds if, instead, conspiracy beliefs undermine support for the status quo, in which case they should be rejected as additional system threats.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred twenty participants (52 men, 68 women, M_{age} = 34.54, SD = 10.08) were recruited via Crowd Flower, a crowdsourcing site similar to Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants were residents of the United Kingdom, and received a small monetary payment

in exchange for their participation. The study was a between-groups design with two levels (system threat: threat vs. affirming). An effect size (*d)* of 0.5 required a sample size of approximately 102 participants for 80% power of detecting the effect. We therefore targeted 117-122 participants, anticipating a 15-20% dropout.

Materials and Procedure

Adapting a procedure developed in previous work (Kay et al., 2005; Jost, et al., 2005), participants were asked to read and memorize details of a journalistic paragraph that described the social, economic, and political circumstances in the United Kingdom as either problematic (system threat) or not (system affirming). Participants assigned to the system threat condition read the following:

> *These days, many people feel disappointed with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the country has reached a low point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People do not feel as safe and secure as they used to, and there is a sense of uncertainty regarding the country's future. It seems that many countries in the world, such as the United States and Western European, nations, are enjoying better social, economic, and political conditions than the UK. More and more British citizens express a willingness to leave the UK and immigrate to other nations.*

Participants in the system affirming condition read the following:

> *These days, despite the difficulties the nation is facing, many people feel satisfied with the nation's condition. Many citizens feel that the UK has reached a stable point in terms of social, economic, and political factors. People feel safer and securer than they used to, and there is a sense of confidence and optimism regarding the country's future. It seems that compared with many countries in the world the social, economic, and political conditions in the UK are relatively good. Fewer and fewer British citizens express a willingness to leave the UK and immigrate to other nations.*

In previous studies across a variety of contexts, this manipulation has been found to decrease the perceived legitimacy of the status quo as expected (see Bobocel, Kay, Zanna & Olson, 2010), and as including a manipulation check may have been leading for the participants, no manipulation check measures were therefore included in the current study. Participants were then asked to complete the same conspiracy theory belief items as used in the pilot study, in which they rated their agreement with real-world conspiracy theories ($\alpha = .91$), and general notions of conspiracy ($\alpha = .95$). At the conclusion of the study, the participants were debriefed in writing and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed that as predicted, exposure to system threat influenced belief in both real-world conspiracy theories and general notions of conspiracy, $F(1,118) = 4.36$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .04$; $F(1,118) = 5.32$, $p = .023$, $\eta^2 = .05$, respectively. Specifically, endorsement of real-world conspiracy theories and general notions of conspiracy were significantly higher in the system threat condition ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.34$; $M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.98$, respectively) than the system affirming condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.16$; $M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.96$, respectively).

This finding further supports the idea that conspiracy theories may perform a system-justifying function. It also echoes the findings of previous research demonstrating that people turn to conspiracy theories when they lack control (Sullivan, Landau & Rothschild, 2010; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), and are uncertain (Newheiser et al., 2011; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). However, it does not show that adopting conspiracy theories helps people defend the system from threat. Instead, system threat may have driven participants toward conspiracy theories as an alternative route to the satisfaction of psychological needs such as control (cf. Whitson et al., 2015). To resolve this ambiguity, we experimentally examined

the effects of both system threat and conspiracy theorizing on satisfaction with the status quo by directly manipulating both variables.

Study 2

In this study we manipulated system threat, and also exposed (vs. did not expose) participants to conspiracy theories. We measured participants' satisfaction with the status quo. If conspiracy theories help people defend the system from threat, the adverse effects of system threat on satisfaction with the status quo should be attenuated when conspiracy theories are also presented. That is, under conditions of system threat, we would expect to see higher satisfaction from participants also exposed (vs. not) to conspiracy theories. Thus, exposure to conspiracy theories *buffers* belief in the legitimacy of the status quo from threats. The opposite prediction holds if conspiracy theories offer an alternative route to psychological needs when system justification is rendered less tenable (Förster, Liberman, & Friedman 2007). In this case, we would expect the adverse effects of system threat on satisfaction with the status quo to be *amplified* by exposure to conspiracy beliefs. That is, under system threat, we would predict lower satisfaction from participants exposed (vs. not) to conspiracy theories.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred ninety undergraduate students from a British University (24 men and 166 women, M_{age} = 19.99, SD = 5.32) received course credit in exchange for their participation. Given the significant length of the conspiracy theory manipulation (which was 580 words long and took M = 182.98 [SD = 167.33] seconds to read), and the system threat or affirming paragraphs (which were each 97 words long and took M = 52.67 [SD = 114.71] and M = 51.80 [SD = 76.51] seconds to read, respectively), a timer was used to identify participants who had not read both the manipulations fully, by spending less than 60 seconds

reading the conspiracy manipulation material and less than 10 seconds reading either the system threat or affirming paragraph and who had thus exceeded reading speed capabilities for upper college students (Speed Reading, 2014). The 29 participants (16% of total sample) who failed the screening were removed from the analyses. The final sample size used for data analysis was 159 (21 men and 139 women, M_{age} = 20.00, SD = 5.30).

The study comprised a 2 (system threat: threat/affirming) x 2 (exposure to conspiracy theories: conspiracy/control) between-subjects design. The dependent measure was participants' satisfaction with the status quo as measured in the pilot study (Kay & Jost, 2003). An effect size (f) of 0.25 required a sample size of approximately 158 participants for 80% power of detecting the effect. We therefore targeted 182-190 participants, anticipating a 15-20% drop out rate.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were first presented with the system threat (vs. affirming) manipulation, as in Study 1. We then manipulated exposure to conspiracy theories by adapting a manipulation used by Douglas and Sutton (2008). Experimental participants were asked to read and memorize a piece of text concerning a conspiracy involving the death of Princess Diana. Control participants proceeded directly to the dependent measures. The conspiracy text included a series of eight bullet points outlining arguments that Princess Diana's death was not an accident. The term conspiracy theory was not mentioned. For example:

> *"Concern has been raised about the rapid disposal of the bodies of Diana and Dodi. Diana had no post mortem prior to burial in Althorp. Victims of sudden death require a post mortem by law in the UK."*
>
> *"Immediately after the crash news was broadcast, witnesses appeared on US TV saying that they heard an explosion or bang before they heard the car crash. Was this a gunshot, or a bomb?"*

In previous work by Douglas and Sutton (2008), this manipulation has been shown to successfully increase belief in conspiracy theories. As in Study 1, in order not to lead the participants and contaminate the result, no manipulation check measures were therefore included in the current study. The full wording is available from the authors. Finally, satisfaction with the status quo was measured using Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale ($\alpha = .63$). At the conclusion of the study, participants were debriefed in writing and were thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

As expected, a two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between system threat and exposure to conspiracy theories, $F(1, 156) = 7.70$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .054$ (see Figure 1). Supporting our hypothesis, there was a significant simple main effect of system threat in the conspiracy condition, $F(1,75) = 4.06$, $p = .047$, partial $\eta^2 = .066$, such that those who were exposed to system threat reported higher satisfaction with the status quo ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.60$, $n = 39$), than those in the system affirming condition ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.56$, $n = 38$). As expected based on previous research (Bobocel et al., 2010), there was also a marginally significant simple main effect of system threat in the no conspiracy condition, $F(1,81) = 3.90$, $p = .052$, partial $\eta^2 = .048$, but in the opposite direction, such that participants exposed to system threat reported lower satisfaction with the status quo ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.80$, $n = 40$), than those in the system affirming condition ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.71$, $n = 43$).

Further analyses revealed a significant simple main effect of exposure to conspiracy theories when participants had been exposed to system threat, $F(1,77) = 8.90$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$, such that those in the system threat condition who were exposed to conspiracy theories reported higher satisfaction with the status quo ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.60$, $n = 39$), than those in the control condition ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.80$, $n = 40$). There was, however,

no simple main effect of exposure to conspiracy theories in the system affirming condition, $F(1, 79) = 0.68$, $p = .410$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$.

[Figure 1 about here]

Participants under conditions of system threat reported the status quo as more legitimate after exposure to conspiracy theories. In the context of threat to the social order, conspiracy theories may therefore allow people to preserve their sense that the social system is legitimate. The final study tested our proposed mechanism for this effect – that conspiracy theories allow people to maintain positive views about social systems because they attribute negative events in society to a small number of conspirators within the social system.

Study 3

We exposed all participants to system threat and then half of the participants were exposed to conspiracy theories and half were not. We asked all participants to rate the extent to which various social problems (e.g., pollution, inequality) are caused by individuals or small groups, as opposed to broader problems within the system. Participants then rated their satisfaction with the status quo. We expected to observe an indirect causal path in which participants exposed to conspiracy theories (vs. not) would be more likely to attribute societal problems to the actions of individuals and small groups than to inherent flaws in society, and in turn, to express increased satisfaction with the status quo.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred sixty six participants (76 men and 88 women, 1 transgender/other, and 1 undisclosed, $M_{age} = 36.07$, $SD = 12.04$) were recruited via Crowd Flower as in the pilot study. Participants were residents of the United Kingdom, and received a small monetary payment in exchange for their participation. As in Study 2, given the significant length of the conspiracy theory manipulation (which was 580 words long and took $M = 132.47$ [$SD =$

553.00] seconds to read), combined with the system threat manipulation (which was 97 words long and took $M = 32.71$ [$SD = 22.90$] seconds to read), a timer was used to identify participants who had not read the manipulations fully, by spending less than 60 seconds reading the conspiracy manipulation material and less than 10 seconds reading the system threat manipulation and who had thus exceeded reading speed capabilities for upper college students (Speed Reading, 2014). The 57 participants (34% of total sample) who failed the screening were removed from analyses. The final sample size entered in data analysis was 109 (51 men, 57 women and 1 transgendered/other, $M_{age} = 37.66$, $SD = 12.32$). There were 51 participants in the pro-conspiracy condition and 58 in the control.

The study consisted of a two-group (exposure to conspiracy theories: conspiracy/control) between-subjects design where all participants were exposed to system threat. The dependent measure was participants' satisfaction with the status quo as measured in Studies 1, 2 and 3 (Kay & Jost, 2003). The proposed mediator variable was the extent to which participants attributed societal problems to individuals and small groups or to problems inherent in society as a whole. An effect size (f) of 0.25 required a sample size of approximately 128 participants for 80% power of detecting the effect. We therefore targeted 147-166 participants, anticipating a slightly higher 15-30% drop out rate due to the combination of two manipulations, as observed in Study 2.

Materials and Procedure

All participants were first presented with the system threat information as in the previous studies. Participants were then exposed to a text highlighting various conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana (vs. control), as in Study 2. Next, to measure the proposed mediator, participants were presented with nine problems that are facing society today (pollution, poverty, unemployment, inequality, crime, discrimination, overpopulation, conflict and war). They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they thought these

problems were caused by individuals or society ("Please indicate the extent to which you think these problems are due to the actions of individuals and small groups in society or due to fundamental flaws inherent in UK society, such as flawed laws, values, norms, institutions, or its political and economic system"; 1 = *individuals and small groups*, 9 = *flaws in UK society*, $\alpha = .78$). Finally, satisfaction with the status quo was again measured using Kay and Jost's (2003) scale ($\alpha = .81$). At the conclusion of the study, the participants were debriefed in writing and were thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

Two separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted with exposure to conspiracy theories (conspiracy vs. control) as the independent variable, and satisfaction with the status quo and attributions for social problems as the two dependent variables. As predicted, exposure to conspiracy theories influenced both satisfaction with the status quo, $F(1, 107) = 13.55$, $p <. 001$, $\eta^2 = .13$, and participants' attributions for social problems, $F(1, 107) = 5.18$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Specifically, participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories reported higher satisfaction with the status quo ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.16$), than those in the control condition ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.27$). Further, participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories attributed societal problems to individuals and small groups rather than flaws in British society ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.87$), than those in the control condition ($M = 6.24$, $SD = 1.21$). Put differently, their attributions shifted toward blaming individual actions for these problems.

To test the predicted pattern of mediation between exposure to conspiracy theories and satisfaction with the status quo via attributions for social problems, we used Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapped procedure designed for SPSS to run a simple mediation model. This method is based on 5000 bootstrapped re-samples used to describe the confidence intervals of indirect effects in a manner that makes no assumptions about the distribution of

the indirect effects. Interpretation of the bootstrap data is accomplished by determining whether zero is contained within the 95% confidence intervals (CIs). An indirect effect is estimated as being significant if the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) do not contain a zero. Results (see Figure 2) demonstrated a significant indirect effect of exposure to conspiracy theories and system justification beliefs through attributions for significant social problems (*LLCI* = -.5667, *ULCI* = -.0621).

[Figure 2 about here]

Under system threat, exposure to conspiracy theories increased satisfaction with the status quo relative to a control condition. This effect was mediated by participants' attributions for social problems. Those who were exposed (vs. not exposed) to conspiracy theories shifted attributions for society's problems from institutional and systemic causes toward individuals and small groups. Conspiracy theories may therefore enable people to justify social systems by suggesting that social problems are the fault of a small number of people rather than inherent flaws in their society.

General Discussion

Intuition, popular belief, proponents, and several scholars suggest that conspiracy theories have the power to subvert social systems (e.g., Gray, 2010; Sapuountzis & Condor, 2013). Although some research shows that conspiracy belief undermines trust in and compliance with authority (e.g., Abalakina-Paap, et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), its effect on overall perceptions of the legitimacy of social systems had not been researched previously. The present results suggest that far from undermining system justification, conspiracy theories may actually bolster the social status quo. Conspiracy belief was found to increase when the legitimacy of social systems was threatened (Study 1). Exposure to conspiracy theories was shown to buffer satisfaction with the status quo from threat (Study 2), and was shown to do so via an indirect causal path in which it caused people

to increasingly attribute society's problems to malevolent individuals, rather than systemic causes (Study 3).

Conspiracy theories therefore appear to function as a means to defend the social system when its legitimacy is under threat. In this respect they join the ranks of other system-justifying processes such as complementary stereotyping of the poor, sexist ideology, and just world belief (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Jost, 2001; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Conspiracy theories, to be sure, cast doubt on the motives and legitimacy of people in authority positions. They draw attention to some of the most tragic and worrisome events of modern life. However they may often do so in a way that appears to divert people from questioning inherent limitations of their society.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of the current research. We note that although the effects reported here are statistically robust, they are relatively small. Further, participants were British, and were presented with a single, uniquely British, example of alleged conspiracy (Studies 2 and 3). It is possible that in some geographical and political settings, and at certain points in time, conspiracy theories may satisfy the need to justify the system, but in other settings they may not. The current findings therefore require replication in different contexts. Also, the participants contained relatively few genuine adherents of conspiracy theories. This leaves open the (plausible) prospect that fervent commitment to conspiracy theories, as opposed to exposure or openness to them, radicalizes political opinion and motivates social change (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Strong commitment to conspiracy theories may lead people to believe that corruption and malice are endemic across different branches of the social system, and so make it incoherent to psychologically quarantine them by blaming individuals for society's problems. We therefore cannot be confident about the extent to which the present results will generalize to other populations and other conspiracy theories.

Although boundary conditions are not yet known, the present results clearly show that sometimes, conspiracy theories strengthen rather than weaken support for extant social systems. This entails that conspiracy theories are not *necessarily* subversive, and poses a new research challenge – to determine when and how conspiracy theories do, and do not, buttress the status quo. For example, while conspiracy theories may bolster support for a threatened social system at a general level, they encourage subversive opinions at a more specific level (e.g., distrust of political leaders and scientific orthodoxy). Such views may have the effect of motivating social change even if people do not express general objections to the status quo. However, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) have shown that exposure to conspiracy theories weakens political engagement. This suggests an additional mechanism by which conspiracy theories may reduce, rather than increase, the likelihood of social and political change.

The present results, and the present analysis of the function of conspiracy theories, resonate with an important distinction made by political scientists, but paid little attention by psychologists. Specifically, trust in governments can be distinguished sharply from support for systems of government (Citrin, 1974; Easton, 1975; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Thus, "individuals can express a sense of pride in their political system while at the same time exhibiting very low trust in government" (Muller, Jukam, & Seligson, 1982, p. 242). Indeed, Muller et al. found that illegitimate forms of political dissent were predicted not by distrust in government but by rejection of the political system. Measures of trust in government have been shown to have a robust, negative relation to conspiracy belief (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). However, instead of assessing fundamental rejection or even distrust of the political system, such scales may only pick up "evaluations of the general performance of various incumbents, who are vaguely called to mind by the collective term 'politicians' or 'the government'" (Easton, 1975, p. 45). The present results suggest that by

pointing fingers at individuals – even groups of individuals charged with operating the system – conspiracy theories may exonerate the system, just as blaming a driver for a car crash shifts blame from the car.

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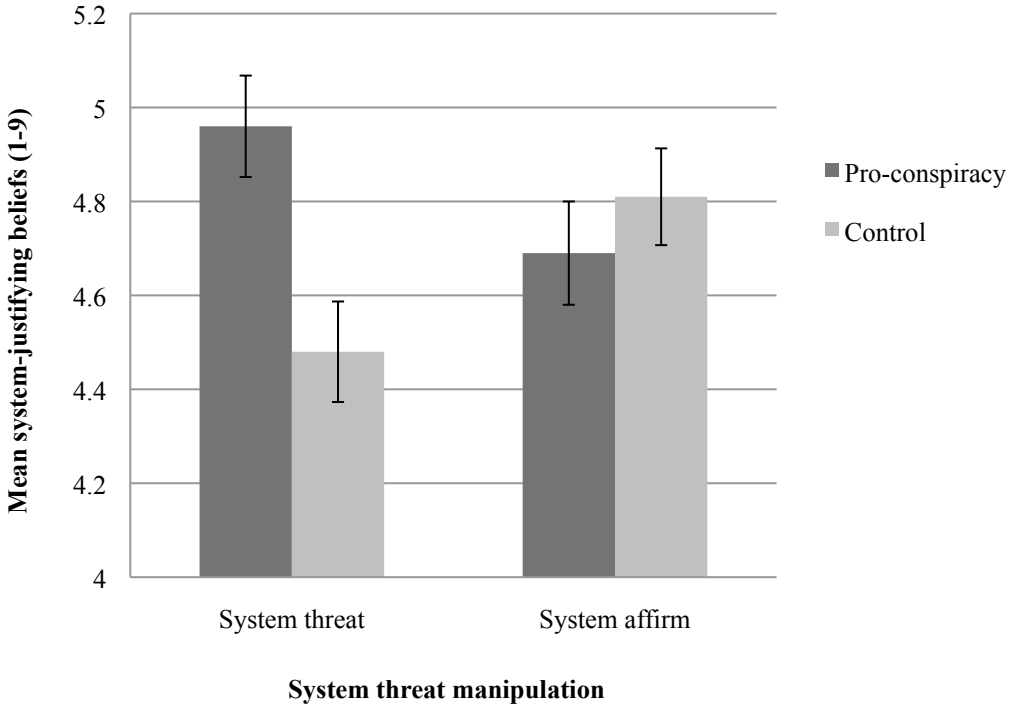
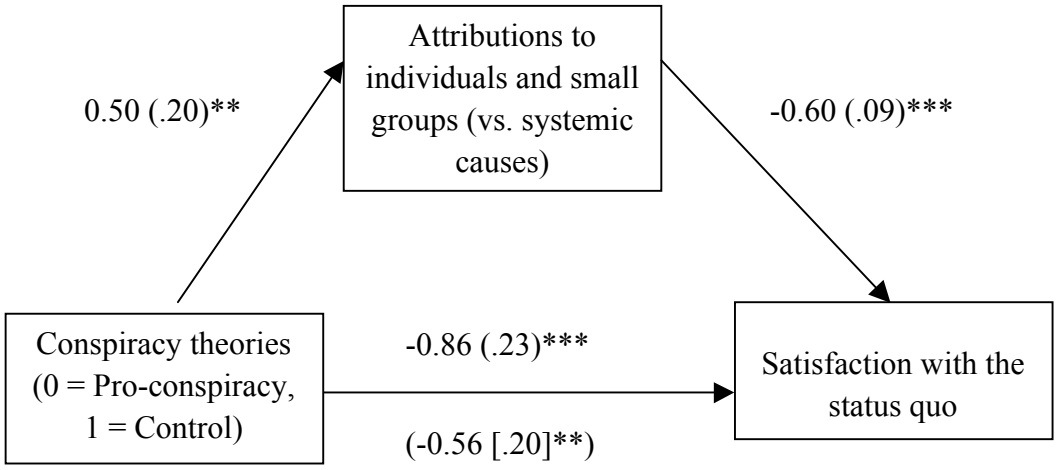


Figure 1. Mean system-justifying beliefs as a function of exposure to conspiracy theories and system threat. Error bars represent standard error of the mean.



Adj R^2 = .10, $F(2,51) = 13.97$, $p < .001$

Figure 2. Mediation model of the relationship between exposure to conspiracy theories and satisfaction with the status quo through attributions for social problems.

Note. **p<.05, ***p<.001.