2.1 PERSONALITY TRAITS, COGNITIVE STYLES AND WORLDVIEWS ASSOCIATED WITH BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Introduction

Why do some people tend to believe conspiracy theories (i.e. describe events as clandestine plots by secret agents), while others do not? Psychologists have been asking this question since at least the 1960s, when Hamsher et al. (1968) examined why some people accepted conspiracy theories about the assassination of President Kennedy. Six years later, in the midst of another American political scandal, Wright and Arbuthnot (1974) investigated the same question, phrased differently: why do some people dismiss allegations of conspiracy – in this case, the idea that President Nixon might have been involved in the Watergate affair?

The central question of both investigations has dominated psychological research in this area since then. Why is it that, when two people are presented with the same information about the same situation, one sees coincidence or contingency, while the other sees evidence of conspiracy? We might see these people as having different levels of what psychologists call conspiratorial thinking, conspiracy mentality or conspiracist ideation – a relatively broad tendency to accept conspiratorial explanations for events. Empirical research supports the existence of such a mentality. Analyses of survey data show robust evidence that a single statistical factor predicts endorsement of different conspiracy theories, and several validated psychometric scales exist to measure it (Brotherton et al. 2013; Bruder et al. 2013; Lantian et al. 2016; Swami et al. 2017). Although the current evidence supports the view of conspiracy mentality as essentially one-dimensional, people differ on how they score on this dimension. This suggests that individual difference variables can play a deciding role in the tendency to explain world events through the lens of conspiracy theory. In addition, these individual factors can provide a more in-depth and fine-grained understanding of variation in conspiratorial thinking and are therefore pivotal for a better understanding of the subject at hand.

In this chapter, we will review some of the work on individual differences linked to conspiracy mentality, or to beliefs in specific conspiracy theories. We will touch on three distinct types of individual differences that may have an effect: personality (can we predict someone’s
The role of personality traits

Research on personality factors associated with conspiracy mentality has naturally targeted characteristics that are known to broadly influence religious, social and political beliefs (Swami, Furnham 2014). Namely, the general tendency to see the world as governed by conspiracies serves to provide alternative, simplistic explanations of events that are otherwise confusing, distressing, incomprehensible or uncontrollable, in the same manner as religious or ideological belief systems. This may seem an uncharitable view of conspiracy theories, but there is evidence to support such line of reasoning. Conspiracy theories, like many other human belief systems, are sometimes based on mutually contradicting propositions (Wood et al. 2012). Theories that are completely fabricated within the context of a psychological survey – like a variety of made-up claims about the Red Bull energy drink – can elicit enthusiastic endorsement from conspiracy-minded respondents (Swami, Coles et al. 2011). In addition, popular conspiracy theories often appear to be incoherent by conventional evidentiary criteria (Lewandowsky et al. 2018). Some authors have argued that people with a strong conspiracy mentality suffer from ‘crippled epistemology’ (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009; Brotherton, French 2014) since they support claims that are unjustified (relative to the available information in the wider society) or implausible (relative to other allegations of conspiracy). The overall inclination to accept or reject conclusions based on general predispositions, seems to suggest that personality indeed plays an important role in the tendency to (dis)believe in conspiracy theories.

According to some past research (Robins, Post 1997; Swami, Weis et al. 2016), conspiracist ideation is partly attributable to traits labelled as maladaptive for the individual since they are viewed as clinically latent anomalies in personality. However, such claims are subject to ethical scrutiny (against stigmatization of people who are not diagnosed with a medical condition) and scientific criticism (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009). Here, we will delineate the inner worlds and elaborate on the worldviews of conspiracy theory believers through the perspective of both the adaptive personality traits and their so-called maladaptive variants.

As regards adaptive traits, we will focus on the Big Five model, which measures personality using five continuously-scaled dimensions: Extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The Big Five model enjoys broad empirical support and wide acceptance in personality psychology (McCrae, John 1992).

Specifically, several studies have reported negative correlations between conspiracist ideation and the agreeableness trait (i.e. willingness to be pleasant and compliant in social situations). In other words, conspiracy mentality may be higher among less agreeable people (Swami et al. 2010; Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami, Furnham 2012; Bruder et al. 2013; Galliford, Furnham 2017). However, other studies have failed to find such a correlation (Swami et al. 2012; Brotherton et al. 2013; Swami et al. 2013; Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Lobato et al. 2014; Orosz et al. 2016; Rose 2017; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis including 13 studies on agreeableness and conspiracy theory beliefs (Goreis, Voracek 2019) failed to show a statistically significant link once the effect sizes were aggregated. If this relationship exists, it can be explained by the fact that people who are prone to trust conspiracy theories simultaneously tend to be distrustful of others, especially when they represent the system (Wagner-Egger, Bangerter 2007; Einstein, Glick 2015; Miller et al. 2016; Leiser et al. 2017; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018; Vitriol, Anthony Lantian et al.
Marsh 2018; Goreis, Voracek 2019). Also, stronger believers in conspiracy theories tend to express higher interpersonal distrust, suspicion and antagonism (Hamsher et al. 1968; Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Wagner-Egger, Bangerter 2007; Swami et al. 2010; Brotheron et al. 2013; Miller et al. 2016; Lantian et al. 2016; Rose 2017; Green, Douglas 2018; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018; Vitriol, Marsh 2018). This may be a bidirectional relationship: a vicious cycle in which distrust makes conspiracy theories seem more likely, and conspiracy theories in turn ‘erode social capital and may frustrate people’s needs to see themselves as valuable members of morally decent collectives’ (Douglas et al. 2017: 540). Consistent with this idea, several studies investigated the broader aspects of social antagonism and found that conspiracy theory beliefs tend to correlate with anomie, disengagement from the system, discontent with or rejection of social norms and feelings of powerlessness, disaffection and hostility (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Brotheron et al. 2013).

Along with negative feelings toward the system and others in general, stronger believers in conspiracy theories tend to cultivate more negative feelings toward the self as well, expressed in the form of lower self-esteem (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami, Furnham 2012; Stieger et al. 2013; van Prooijen 2016; Galliford, Furnham 2017). This might happen because people with low self-esteem would blame themselves or their ingroup for negative events, if it were not for conspiratorial explanations. Instead, conspiracy theories allow for a self-to-other shift in the blame game, thus preserving one’s self-worth. In an analogous fashion, people with heightened anxiety tend to have a higher conspiracist mentality (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; for a more extensive discussion of the role of anxiety and existential motives, see Chapter 2.3 in this volume). Here, too, conspiracy theories help to restore one’s sense of agency by reinstating a sense of order, control and predictability (especially after a distressing external threat), thus regulating anxiety and negative emotions (Swami, Furnham et al. 2016). However, the negative association between conspiracy beliefs and self-esteem has proven to be somewhat inconsistent (i.e. not replicated) and conditional over the course of recent research (Crocker et al. 1999; Swami 2012; Cichocka et al. 2016; Radnitz, Underwood 2017; van Prooijen 2017). Namely, according to Cichocka et al. (2016), the link between conspiracy beliefs and self-esteem can be observed when the partial overlap between self-esteem and narcissism is taken into account. In fact, a string of studies directly confirms that people with higher conspiracist mentality score higher on the narcissistic trait (Cichocka et al. 2016), and a need for uniqueness as well (Imhoff, Lamberty 2017; Lantian et al. 2017; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018). Hence, recent developments suggest that believers in conspiracy theories cultivate a more ambivalent regard of the self, hinting that mechanisms for this relationship are more complex.

The thread from conspiracist mentality to negative affectivity could be extended to include various aspects of emotional instability (i.e. proneness toward psychological stress and susceptibility to unpleasant emotions, like anxiety and depression) and neuroticism (Swami, Furnham 2012; Swami et al. 2013; Lobato et al. 2014). The accentuated experience of negative emotions and attenuated engagement in analytical mental processes can be easily regarded as two sides of the same story. To put it simply, tuning in on our fears and anxieties could tune out our abilities for fact-checking and rational thinking. In fact, past research has demonstrated that stronger conspiracist thinkers tend to exhibit more uncritical receptiveness for unorthodox, unconventional or unusual ideas, main hallmarks of the Big Five personality trait of openness to experience (Swami et al. 2010; Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami et al. 2012, 2013). Some studies of conspiracy mentality, however, substitute the link with general open-mindedness with a more particular type of openness toward peculiarity, eccentricity and oddity (Darwin et al. 2011; Swami, Pietschnig et al. 2011; Swami et al. 2013).
That said, as with agreeableness, some caution is warranted regarding the correlation between conspiracy mentality and openness to experience. Namely, the findings have not been consistently replicated (see Brotherton et al. 2013; Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Lobato et al. 2014; Orosz et al. 2016; Galliford, Furnham 2017; Leiser et al. 2017; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018; Goreis, Voracek 2019).

In line with the findings on eccentricity and conspiracy mentality, it has also been demonstrated that the odd beliefs of some conspiratorial thinkers encompass ideas of reference, magical thinking, paranormal beliefs and schizotypy (Swami, Pietschnig et al. 2011; Bruder et al. 2013; Swami et al. 2013; Barron et al. 2014; Lobato et al. 2014; Brotherton, Eser 2015; van der Tempel, Alcock 2015; Barron et al. 2018).

One possible explanation for such parallel findings is the observed concordance between the Big Five personality model and the matching five-domain model of maladaptive personality traits as referenced in the last version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2013). According to this analogy, the negative version of agreeableness would be social antagonism, neuroticism would align with negative affectivity, while an extremely negative variant of openness would be psychoticism (Gore, Widiger 2013; Krueger et al. 2011; Swami, Weis et al. 2016).

The link between conspiracist worldviews and maladaptive traits, however, is not exclusive in nature, since many people with no manifestation of psychopathology endorse conspiracy beliefs to some extent. This is especially true regarding the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and paranoia, which are related to distinctively different constructs (Wilson, Rose 2014; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018).

In summary, conspiracist ideation cannot be described simply in terms of the Big Five dimensions or the maladaptive variants, thus some caution is warranted when regarding the inner worlds of conspiracy theory believers primarily in the context of their personality traits.

The role of cognitive styles

Sense-making is a fundamentally cognitive process. When we try to make sense of what is happening in a particular situation – for instance, is this situation the result of a conspiracy or not? – we weigh evidence, consider sources of information and make a decision on what seems to be the best explanation. Our conclusions are affected, not just by the situation at hand, but also by our own psychological idiosyncrasies. We are subject to a tremendous number of biases, heuristics, attitudes, motives, other beliefs and overall patterns of thought. These factors change substantially from individual to individual, and can generally be grouped together under the broad label of cognitive style.

Cognitive styles are relatively stable, trait-like tendencies for people to acquire and process information in different ways, such as the tendency to jump to conclusions versus seek out more information before coming to a decision. Kozhevnikov (2007) argued that people develop these characteristic cognitive styles based on a complex interaction between their experiences and their abilities, as a general approach to dealing with the world in a flexible and accurate way. Cognitive styles are classified in a number of ways, but one of the most well-researched classifications of cognitive style, and probably the most relevant for conspiracy belief, is the tendency to think analytically (or rationally) versus intuitively. Analytic/rational thinking is relatively slow, explicit, effortful and detail-oriented, while intuition is relatively fast, implicit, effortless and concerned with broader, more general impressions (Norris, Epstein 2011; Dagnall et al. 2015). Many psychological processes work very differently when we are thinking in an effortful,
analytical way versus an off-the-cuff, intuitive way, a fact that has given rise to many dual-process models across psychological subfields ranging from persuasion to health behaviour. We all use both of these styles of thinking, depending on the situation, but people vary in their tendency to default to one or the other. An individual’s general analytic versus intuitive cognitive style, therefore, has profound consequences for how they are likely to react to a wide variety of different situations (Kahneman 2011; for a more extensive discussion on this topic, see Chapter 2.2 in this volume).

Psychological research has revealed that the tendency to think intuitively (rather than analytically) has a tremendous range of downstream effects on belief and behaviour. Intuitive versus analytic cognitive style predicts belief in a variety of unconventional topics, such as superstition, pseudoscience, the paranormal, pseudo-profound nonsense (Aarnio, Lindeman 2005; Pennycook et al. 2012; Pennycook et al. 2015) and conspiracy theories. Across one survey and three experiments, Swami et al. (2014) found that conspiracy belief is positively correlated with intuitive cognitive style, negatively correlated with analytic cognitive style and directly reduced by experimental manipulations that promote analytic thought. Van Prooijen (2017) likewise found a negative correlation between analytic thinking and conspiracy belief, and determined that this link partially explains why more educated people tend to take conspiracy theories less seriously: people with more years of education tend to think more analytically and therefore believe in conspiracies less (though this might depend on the conspiracy theory; for contrasting evidence regarding conspiracy theories about climate change and vaccination, see Zhou 2014; Hornsey et al. 2018).

So, the available research seems to show that analytic thinking largely suppresses conspiracy belief – as well as other types of unconventional belief – whereas intuitive thinking cultivates it. People who tend to rely on general impressions to make decisions about the world tend to believe more conspiracy theories, while people who tend to think carefully, explicitly and rationally tend to believe fewer. This extends to other anomalous beliefs as well, such as the paranormal. But why? One hypothesis concerns the nature of how we judge probability. Paranormal beliefs are correlated with probabilistic reasoning ability, apparently because people often infer paranormal causes for events that seem intuitively (but not always rationally) very unlikely to happen by natural means (Rogers et al. 2009). In a similar way, arguments in favour of conspiracy theories are often predicated on sinister interpretations of apparent coincidences. For instance, several airlines’ stock prices dropped before the 9/11 attacks and this fact was used by promoters of 9/11 conspiracy theories to argue that someone was using foreknowledge of the attacks to carry out insider trading. Some psychological studies have shown that people with stronger conspiracy mentality are more likely to see patterns in random noise (van der Wal et al. 2018; van Prooijen et al. 2018), although others have not found such a correlation (Dieguez et al. 2015; Wagner-Egger et al. 2018). Moreover, conspiracy theories often require conjunctions of independently unlikely circumstances, such as everyone involved in a very large plot staying silent indefinitely (Grimes 2016). Therefore, many conspiracy theories might seem more plausible if the underlying probabilities are not examined closely, and therefore less plausible for people with the ability and inclination to assess these probabilities in detail.

Empirical research has supported this idea as an explanation for the correlation between conspiracy belief and cognitive style. Conspiracy belief is associated with usage of the representativeness heuristic, a biased shortcut in probabilistic reasoning that leads to various errors and fallacious judgements (Brotherton, French 2014; Moulding et al. 2016). In particular, people with a higher level of conspiracy belief are more likely to commit the conjunction fallacy, a specific case of the representativeness heuristic that involves misjudging the probability of two events occurring
The conjunction fallacy occurs when people judge that the conjunction of two probabilities is more likely than either of those two probabilities on its own. This is a mathematical impossibility, but can seem subjectively true in particular circumstances.

Cognitive shortcuts of this kind are a signature feature of intuitive cognition, valuing quick shortcuts, rough estimates and general impressions at the cost of consistent, detailed accuracy (Tversky, Kahneman 1983; Kozhevnikov 2007). Indeed, the available research shows that analytic versus intuitive thinking is a strong determinant of the tendency to commit the conjunction fallacy.

Other psychological research falls into this general pattern, showing that conspiracy beliefs tend to co-occur with intuitive, heuristic and implicit styles of thought. People who believe more conspiracy theories are more likely to perceive patterns, deliberate action and agency in ambiguous stimuli (Brotherton, French 2015; Douglas et al. 2015; van der Tempel, Alcock 2015), to anthropomorphise inanimate objects (Douglas et al. 2015), to exhibit more general confusions about the ontological nature of objects in the world (for example, separating animate from inanimate; Lobato et al. 2014), to display impaired reality testing (Drinkwater et al. 2012), to jump to conclusions on the basis of limited evidence (Barron et al. 2018), to show a greater need for cognitive closure in the absence of official explanations for major events (Marchlewskas et al. 2018) and to think that complex problems can generally be resolved with fairly simple solutions (van Prooijen et al. 2015; van Prooijen 2017). Some of these correlates also suggest plausible mechanisms for the correlation between conspiracy belief and cognitive style – for instance, the tendency to infer deliberate agency over random chance in interpreting a particular event has very clear relevance for inferences of conspiracy.

Intuitive cognitive style seems to predict conspiracy belief quite reliably, and conspiracy belief and cognitive style share many correlates. The analytic/intuitive cognitive style framework predicts many other psychological outcomes, though, and not all of these outcomes seem to correlate reliably with conspiracy belief. For example, a strong correlate of intuitive thought is a discomfort with uncertain, ambiguous situations, also known as intolerance for ambiguity (Ie et al. 2012). However, research to date has shown little or no evidence for a role of ambiguity tolerance in conspiracy mentality (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Moulding et al. 2016). Similarly, despite the reliable correlation between analytic cognitive style and conspiracy belief, the evidence suggests a weak or non-existent correlation between conspiracy belief and need for cognition, a trait-like variable that describes someone’s drive or motivation to think slowly, explicitly and effortfully in daily life (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Lobato et al. 2014; Swami et al. 2014; Stahl, van Prooijen 2018). However, given that a similar construct, need for closure, predicts conspiracy belief only under certain conditions (Marchlewskas et al. 2018), need for cognition and ambiguity tolerance might indeed affect conspiracy belief in specific circumstances (e.g. high ambiguity or uncertainty).

Finally, it is important to note that most measures of rational/analytic cognitive style describe the inclination to engage in this kind of thought, but not necessarily the ability to do so very well. This naturally leads to the question of what effect cognitive ability (e.g. general intelligence), rather than cognitive style, might have on conspiracy beliefs. We have already reviewed some relevant evidence above: People who tend to reject conspiracy theories also tend to perform better on probabilistic reasoning tasks (e.g. Brotherton, French 2014; Moulding et al. 2016). More broadly, tests of mathematical and verbal reasoning ability show that conspiracy sceptics tend to score higher than conspiracy believers (Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Stahl, van Prooijen 2018). This trend appears to extend to people’s intellectual self-image as well: When asked to rate their own intelligence, people with stronger conspiracy beliefs tend to rate themselves as less intelligent (Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami, Furnham
Not only do cognitive style and cognitive ability have independent effects on conspiracy belief, their effects depend on one another. In a recent investigation, Ståhl and van Prooijen (2018) found that higher cognitive ability is only associated with lower conspiracy belief when the person in question also finds rational thought to be important. Both the motive and the means must be present in order for rational/analytic thought to work against conspiracy belief.

In general, then, the cognitive factors underlying conspiracy belief fall under two broad categories: The tendency to take a careful, analytic and rational approach to thought (or not), and the ability to do it well. However, there are important limitations to these conclusions. Primarily, most of the available research in this tradition has been done on populations in Western, English-speaking nations. There is reason to believe that some of the effects of variations in cognitive style are culturally determined – for instance, Majima (2015) demonstrated that analytic and intuitive cognitive styles were both positive predictors of paranormal belief in a Japanese sample. Conspiracy theories are arguably even more culturally-bound than paranormal beliefs are, and how they are construed across different contexts is likely to profoundly alter how they relate to our underlying psychological dispositions.

The role of worldviews

In the last part of this chapter, we will examine two specific worldviews associated with belief in conspiracy theories: Belief in the world as a dangerous place or as a competitive jungle. As already outlined by several researchers (Wilson, Rose 2014; Rose 2017), we will show to what extent the two worldviews are connected with personality traits and socio-political factors/generalised political attitudes shared by people who believe in conspiracy theories.

Belief in a dangerous world could be defined as the view that the social world is ‘a dangerous and threatening place in which good, decent people’s values and way of life are threatened by bad people’ (Duckitt et al. 2002: 78). According to this worldview, people are by nature dangerous, hence they do not deserve to be trusted. There are many empirical results showing that people who believe more in conspiracy theories feel that they are living in a more dangerous social world (Wagner-Egger, Bangerter 2007; Moulding et al. 2016; Leiser et al. 2017; Leone et al. 2017; Rose 2017). Finally, according to some evidence, conspiracy believers consider not only that they live in a dangerous world, but also endorse a simplistic Manichean view. More explicitly, for them, politics is like a battlefield between the camps of absolute good and absolute evil (Oliver, Wood 2014; Green, Douglas 2018).

This worldview is a framework that nicely integrates several personality traits related to belief in conspiracy theories. For instance, belief in a dangerous world is consistent with the lack of interpersonal trust that conspiracy theorists express toward others (for cited literature please refer to earlier segment). Moreover, lower self-reported levels of agreeableness found occasionally amongst conspiracy theorists (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013) could be a defensive strategy for those who believe the world to be a dangerous and threatening place.

According to the dual-process motivational model developed by Duckitt et al. (2002), belief in a dangerous world is determined to some extent by personality traits, and in turn acts as a precursor to right-wing authoritarianism. Right-wing authoritarianism is a social attitude characterised by three facets: Authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression and conventionalism (Altemeyer 2006; see Chapter 2.6 in this volume for a more extensive discussion about this topic). Given the connection between belief in a dangerous world and right-wing authoritarianism, it could be reasonable to predict a certain amount of shared variance between right-wing authoritarianism and belief in conspiracy theories. As reviewed by Grzesiak-Feldman (2015),
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these two variables indeed tend to be positively correlated (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Grzesiak-Feldman, Irzycka 2009; Swami et al. 2012; Bruder et al. 2013; Wilson, Rose 2014; Rose 2017; Green, Douglas 2018; Federico et al. 2018; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018; Imhoff et al. 2018). Nonetheless, this association seems to be influenced by the type of conspiracy theories (e.g. right-wing authoritarianism being more correlated with pro- rather than anti-establishment conspiracy theories, Wood and Gray 2019) and the cultural background of the respondents, which could explain the conflicting results found occasionally (Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami 2012; Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Oliver, Wood 2014; Leiser et al. 2017; Wood, Gray 2019). In line with an authoritarian mindset, conspiracy belief is positively (though not strongly) correlated with support for governmental violations of human rights and restriction of civil liberties as part of the War on Terror (Swami et al. 2012).

People who endorse conspiracy theories tend to believe not only that the world is dangerous, but also that it is a competitive ‘jungle’ in which the strong dominate the weak (Wilson, Rose 2014; Rose 2017; however, this association is not significant in Leone et al. 2017). Belief in a competitive jungle is a worldview characterised by a brutal and amoral social environment in which people continuously struggle for resources, illustrated by the statement ‘might is right’ (Duckitt et al. 2002).

Several related personality traits can explain why stronger conspiracy believers tend to see the world as more of a competitive jungle. For instance, political cynicism and Machiavellianism both tend to increase with conspiracy mentality (Douglas, Sutton 2011; Swami, Coles et al. 2011; Swami, Furnham 2012; Swami 2012; Swami et al. 2012), forming an adaptive psychological stance tailored for a harsh social environment like the one depicted by the competitive-jungle worldview. However, there does not seem to be any correlation between conspiracy belief and free market ideology (Lewandowsky, Gignac et al. 2013; Lewandowsky, Oberauer et al. 2013), or a more broad support for the neoliberal economic view (Leiser et al. 2017; i.e. ideologies that emphasise the role of competition as a driving force behind the functioning of the economy). These findings suggest that the competitive jungle worldview, at least in terms of its association with conspiracy mentality, might be relatively domain-specific.

Beyond correlating with these personality traits and ideological views, the competitive-jungle worldview is also theorised as being a precursor to social dominance orientation (Duckitt et al. 2002). Social dominance orientation is a general social attitude characterised by a preference to hierarchical (rather than equal) relations between groups, as well as a willingness to see one’s ingroup being dominant and superior to outgroups (Pratto et al. 1994). Consistent with the idea that the competitive jungle worldview is relevant to conspiracy mentality, social dominance orientation tends to show robust correlations with beliefs in conspiracy theories (Bruder et al. 2013; Wilson, Rose 2014; Rose 2017; Green, Douglas 2018; Imhoff et al. 2018; Wood, Gray 2019; see also Imhoff, Bruder 2014 for less stable correlations between conspiracy beliefs and social dominance orientation, and Swami 2012 for an unexpected negative correlation between these two variables). In short, in this section, we have seen that conspiracy beliefs are connected to the belief that the world is both dangerous and a competitive jungle, and that this connection brings together a wide variety of congruent personality traits and socio-political factors.

A dynamic system of individual differences

In summary, research to date indicates that people with a stronger conspiracy mentality tend to have a relatively dark and pessimistic view of humanity. This includes higher general distrust and an increased willingness to exploit others for personal gain. Regarding Big Five personality factors, at the time of writing, we cannot conclude that they are reliably related to belief in
conspiracy theories (Goreis, Voracek 2019). However, those with a weaker conspiracy mentality rely more on slow, explicit thought than fast, intuitive understanding. It should be acknowledged that there is not yet a comprehensive theoretical model that encompasses all individual differences known to be related to conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, most of the empirical work in this area is cross-sectional, meaning that we do not know how opinions of conspiracy theories change and develop over time. In addition, we cannot yet say which of these variables cause people to accept or reject conspiracy theories, and which ones are in turn affected by perceptions of the world as a place run by conspiracies. Some variables, such as interpersonal trust, likely have a reciprocal relationship with conspiracy theory belief; others, however, are relatively basic and stable characteristics of personality, and are therefore more likely to be purely antecedent to opinions of conspiracy theories. Future work may attempt to include the temporal dimension to help us to build a more detailed understanding of how worldviews, cognitive styles and personality traits dynamically interact with one another.

References


