Some preliminary notes on questions of definitions

When discussing the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and power, it is a useful start to put out largely consensual definitions of both and analyse connections already at a basic semantic level. To do so, we will adopt a definition of conspiracy beliefs as a conviction that there is or was a ‘secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly secret means’ (Pigden 2015: 5). Missing from this approach is a certain magnitude or relevance of the above mentioned events. It seems reasonable that the suspicion of a secretly organised birthday party does not constitute a conspiracy theory. Past research has shown that conspiracy theories are more likely to relate to events that are perceived as collectively threatening (Kofta, Sedek 2005), and large and impactful (LeBoeuf, Norton 2011). This said, there needs to be a socially or politically relevant action harming others that few people have conjointly decided to make happen without making this fact of prior planning transparent (thus often implying additional steps to cover this fact, although this is not necessarily implied). By this definition, the notion that the Elders of Zion have met and decided how to secretly take over the world is a conspiracy theory, whereas the European Commission deciding to implement stricter limits of C.O₂ emissions for new cars is not (as it is clearly transparent). The idea again that the European Commission met with Chinese bike manufacturers to make this decision would be a conspiracy theory (when the role of Chinese bike manufacturers in the decision process is not made public). The (factually wrong) claim that vaccines cause autism is, in and of itself, not a conspiracy theory. Insinuating, however, that vaccine producers and/or health commissions know this fact is implying a conspiracy by omission, deciding not to remove something that is knowingly harmful.

Prototypical conspiracy theories go beyond the omission aspect by being enriched with explanations of why certain actors have an interest in having these specifically harmful substances on the market (e.g. for mind control, population control, to reach world domination). This leads to the very basic concept that a conspiracy belief is the belief that some people have conspired with the intent to harm other people (either as an ultimate goal or as an instrumental goal to gain profit on the costs of others). Importantly, we propose that actual veracity should not be a criterion here. Whether an allegation of a conspiracy turns out to be truthful should in our view not change its epistemic status of being a conspiracy theory, nor should its empirical refutation (Pigden 2015). Although the term conspiracy theory often bears the connotation of
being a false belief, there are plenty of historical examples of a theory about a conspiracy being true. As maybe an extreme example, the conviction that the Nazi elite met in January 1942 at the Wannsee to make a determined decision and detailed plan to eliminate European Jewry was a conspiracy belief, as this was not – at that time – the officially announced purpose. Sadly enough, however, it was true. The fact that it was true does not, according to our definition, change its status of being a conspiracy theory, or a conviction that some people have secretly planned an action to harm others.

We are aware that such a definition of a conspiracy belief may provoke some contradiction. We would argue, however, that the often-included notion that a conspiracy theory must be factually wrong is neither epistemologically nor pragmatically useful. It introduces the danger of circular reasoning if one seeks explanations of conspiracy beliefs, as confounding conspiracy belief with merely wrong beliefs would make some connections in the literature seem trivial or even tautological. As an illustration, replace the term ‘conspiracy belief’ with the term ‘wrong belief’ in an overview of relevant findings: Analytical thinking reduces wrong beliefs (Swami et al. 2014). Wrong beliefs are more prevalent among those with lower education (van Prooijen 2016). People who hold wrong beliefs also believe ‘bullshit’ (Pennycook et al. 2015). People who (wrongfully) believe that objects have feelings also hold other wrong beliefs (Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Douglas et al. 2016). Epistemologically, it would be impossible to even decide whether any kind of utterance is a conspiracy belief unless we have firmly established ground truth. This is already next to impossible in the reductionist sciences, let alone in complex social happenings. If the qualification of the sentence ‘The car lobby tries to suppress technological progress to keep oil prices up, as they benefit from this due to financial interest in this business segment’ as a conspiracy belief is contingent on whether this sentence contains factual truth, it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus. This would reduce the term to a polemical concept that might be used in disputes but there will never be an agreement of whether an allegation is a conspiracy theory. We would thus exclude any implication of veracity from the definition.

Another aspect that is missing in the above definition, but frequently present in others, is the notion of conspiracy theories as ‘alternative explanations’ for social events. While, for example, the U.S. government clearly names terrorism as the cause of the attack on the towers at the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the ‘alternative explanation’ is that the U.S. government itself blew up the towers and was thus responsible for the deaths of many people. Even if this approach may seem plausible at first glance, it conceals various problems. Conspiracy theories are not always the alternative explanation and conspiracy beliefs are not always a minority opinion. In different epochs and states, conspiracy theories were and are the mainstream opinion (for examples from Turkey, Russia or even U.S. history see Chapters 5.5, 5.7, and 5.10). In a recent survey covering eight European countries (plus the U.S.A.), only between 15 per cent (Hungary) and 48 per cent (Sweden) declared that, out of a number of items tapping into a conspiracy worldview (e.g. ‘Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments and other organisations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together’), none was true (YouGov 2018). One half of U.S.-Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver, Wood 2014). In addition, the question arises to whom or what does conspiracy theory represent an alternative to? To the majority opinion? And what is exactly a majority opinion? When more than 50 per cent agree on one topic? Would that mean that if 46 per cent of the population believe that 9/11 is an inside job, it would be a conspiracy theory and if 55 per cent believe it, then not? Or is it about being an alternative to government narratives? That would also be problematic. Then the belief that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are real would not be a conspiracy in the case of Nazi Germany (or the Palestinian territories under the reign of the Hamas), but it would be in post-war Germany.
Finally, a third aspect that we did not include in our definition is that of power. Many scholars have defined a conspiracy theory as the idea that a few powerful people have hatched plots in secret (Goertzel 1994). While we find this definition not as self-defeating as the previous, for the current purpose of exploring the association between conspiracy beliefs and power, this would introduce undesirable circularities. As we will argue below, even without incorporating the power of the agent into the very definition, it is still implied in the idea that the secret plot can at least potentially have a relevant impact. Thus, although we are convinced that conspiracy theories typically are beliefs about secret plans on the part of some powerful group to influence large-scale events by partly secret means, we propose to leave out this power aspect for the sake of an argument to be made after briefly reviewing what power refers to.

So, what is a psychological definition of power? A basic conceptualisation would be that someone has power to the extent that he or she can exert an influence on others, thus alter another person’s condition or state of mind by either providing or withholding resources. One of the most widely accepted definitions of social power describes it as ‘asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations’ (Magee, Galinsky 2008: 361). These resources do not have to be necessarily material. Bosses have power over their employees not only via determining what income they will receive (although that plays a big role), but also via the power to grant or deny taking a day off, the power to give direct orders, etc. The police have power via the legal right to tell others what to do and what not to do, and the ability to withhold the resource of personal liberty in the case of non-compliance. The people, it might be argued, have power to the extent that they can influence governments and other rulers by providing or withholding support and obedience.

As is apparent from contrasting the latter two examples, power can be either formal or informal. Formal power here refers to the legitimacy to influence others granted by rules and structure (i.e. the police, the boss, the judge), whereas informal power connotes the factual power, not necessarily granted by a formalised code (as in the power of the people or the unions). Particularly such forms of informal power are easily confused with highly related aspects of strength, influence and control. Sometimes, the term power refers to strength or potential rather than asymmetric control over resources (as in Black Power or – for that matter – White Power). Likewise, it is not uncommon to confound it with the capacity to exert influence. A textbook example is that, allegedly, many constitutions give a lot of formal executive power to their president, but most presidents also have a great informal power, for instance because their voice has more weight in public discourse than those of a random other person. Clearly, the latter could be construed as asymmetric control over resources in the sense of airtime, but it also includes another element of stronger capacity to influence others. Such capacity to influence others has been included in older definitions of power (French, Raven 1959; Cartwright 1965), but explicitly refuted in more recent ones (Magee, Galinsky 2008). In our discussion of power – and it is important to note that we always refer to perceived or ascribed power, not ‘objective’ power –, we will incorporate the aspect of capacity to influence. One of the reasons is that some of our findings build on studies in which participants have rated the power of certain groups. In all likelihood, participants use both aspects, the asymmetric control over resources as well as the (resulting) ability to influence as indicators of power. Arguably, Jews are frequently rated as a powerful group (e.g. Imhoff, Bruder 2014) not only because people think they have greater control over resources (money, victimhood status), but also because they supposedly – thereby – have a greater ability to exert influence (on world politics or public opinion). Below, we will try to make it clear when we focus on influence rather than resource control.

Potentially most relevant for a discussion in relation to conspiracy beliefs is the connection between power and control. Lacking control is a frequently mentioned antecedent of endorsing conspiracy theories (Whitson, Galinsky 2008; Sullivan et al. 2010; van Prooijen, Acker 2015).
and, throughout the literature, control deprivation and feelings of powerlessness have not always been clearly separated, both empirically and conceptually. We will thus briefly revisit the connection between the two. Personal control can be described as an individual’s ability to gain predictability and influenceability of a certain kind of outcome (e.g. behaviour, thoughts, feelings; for an overview of the confusingly diverse proposal of definition, see Skinner 1996). Power, on the other hand, is typically conceptualised as a relational construct entailing influence over others and develops from an asymmetric control over valuable resources (Fast et al. 2009; Kay et al. 2009). Thus, although conceptually the two seem to be clearly separable, empirically they are intertwined to a certain extent (correlating between 0.29 and 0.47 in Cislak et al. 2018) and holding a position of power is associated with both greater personal control (i.e. autonomy) and influence over others (Lammers et al. 2016). Speaking to a bi-directional relation, exerting power over others also satisfied the need for personal control (Inesi et al. 2011).

Who can pull off a conspiracy?

Now, finally to our question: what is the connection between power and conspiracy beliefs? The first is a logical aspect: many (us included) have argued that the very idea of a conspiracy necessitates an assumption of power on the side of the conspirators. This is particularly true for the large-scale conspiracies of world domination and population control, but even more modest conspiracies require the potency to not only pull off this conspiracy but to guarantee that it is kept in the dark. Clearly, it is in principle conceivable that a small group of people conspire to do X and hide this from the public eye, but – powerless as they are – fail at both and neither successfully reach X nor succeed in keeping their plans a secret. Formally, this might still be a conspiracy belief, and empirically most circulating conspiracy beliefs do not follow such a structure. Most conspiracy beliefs are not sad tales about failed and incompetent conspirators but are quite the opposite: vivid warnings against almost almighty but well-hidden enemies. Thus, presuming a (noteworthy) conspiracy almost necessarily implies great (informal) power of a group of people to reach their (sinister) goal (thus implying capacity to influence but also controlling the necessary resources to do so). Although many conspiracies involve agents with high formal power (e.g. governments, intelligence agencies, corporations), others do not (e.g. satanic cults). Importantly, however, even conspiracies about groups with low formal power typically imply tremendous informal power of potency (or capacity to influence). A Jewish world conspiracy or an Islamic plan to exchange the whole population of Europe for Muslims envision extremely powerful or potent conspirators. Describing a group as the source of a world-changing event ascribes tremendous informal power to them. Conspiracy beliefs are thus – almost necessarily – beliefs about the secret plans of groups perceived as powerful.

Inferring threat from power

The connection between conspiracy beliefs and negative views of power, however, goes far beyond the more or less intuitive assertion that accusing someone of conducting a conspiracy implies a certain extent of power to realise this conspiracy. As maybe the most striking exemplification, endorsing a worldview that plots hatched in secret (conspiracy mentality) largely determine the fate of the world is systematically related to prejudice against groups perceived to possess a lot of power, even if no conspiracy is mentioned (Imhoff, Bruder 2014).

As an illustration of the principle, unlike other generalised political attitudes like right-wing authoritarianism (R.W.A.) and social dominance orientation (S.D.O.; for the relation of both R.W.A. and S.D.O. with prejudice against low-power groups see Duckitt and Sibley 2007), conspiracy mentality
was systematically related to prejudice against groups perceived as powerful (Americans, bankers, Jews), but not against groups perceived as powerless (Muslims, Roma; Imhoff, Bruder 2014; surprisingly, however, exposure to antisemitic conspiracies increased prejudice against virtually any group; Jolley, Meleady et al. 2019). In a more systematic approach to the relation between perceived power of and prejudice against social groups, participants rated how powerful they saw each of 32 social groups (e.g. managers, gay men, asylum seekers, students and artists), how threatening they perceived each group to be and how likeable they thought each group was. Based on the 96 ratings, we calculated for each participant individually, whether their ratings of power were unrelated to their ratings of threat and likeability or whether they were positively or negatively related. Averaged across participants, impressions of power were completely unrelated to perceptions of likeability, \( r = -0.02 \), but more powerful groups were seen as more threatening, \( r = 0.38 \). Importantly, these intra-individual correlations varied as a function of conspiracy mentality: The more people endorsed a conspiracy mentality, the stronger was their association of power with threat and the more they tended to see powerful groups as particularly less likeable (Imhoff, Bruder 2014).

What these data suggest is that conspiracy mentality is associated with seeing groups perceived as more powerful also as more threatening. What these data do not speak to is whether people high in conspiracy mentality see powerful groups as particularly threatening and dislikeable or whether they attribute greater power to groups that they perceive as threatening and dislikeable. This issue can be somewhat elucidated by means of a yoked design. As part of a larger project on relevant stereotype content dimensions (e.g. Koch et al. 2016; Imhoff, Koch 2017; Imhoff, Koch et al. 2018), 371 participants had rated all of the 41 social groups included in prior research on stereotype content (Fiske et al. 2002; Cuddy et al. 2007). Each participant rated each group only on one out of 17 possible dimensions and completed a measure of conspiracy mentality. This allowed us to re-analyse the correlation between consensual impressions of power (averaged across all raters) and individual ascriptions of warmth, as well as the opposite – the relation between consensual estimates of warmth and individual perceptions of power. These correlations could then again be related to individual differences in conspiracy mentality. What the results show is that the extent to which people attribute warmth to social groups consensually seen as high in power, depends significantly on their conspiracy mentality, \( r = -0.39 \), but the opposite is not true: The relation between consensual ratings of warmth and individual ascriptions of power does not significantly relate to conspiracy mentality, \( r = -0.10 \). Thus, people high in conspiracy mentality infer low warmth from high consensual power, but they do not infer high power from low consensual warmth.

Further evidence in support of the notion people endorsing a conspiracy worldview do not regard high power as a positive attribute comes from additional domains like epistemic trust in sources of knowledge or medical consumer decisions. Specifically, across a series of four studies, conspiracy mentality moderated the effect of source power on source credibility in the field of historical disputes (Imhoff, Lamberty et al. 2018). It is interesting to note, however, that the source bias was more on the side of the people rejecting conspiracy theories than those endorsing them. Whereas people low on conspiracy mentality employed a heuristic of finding the identical position more credible when it came from a high power source, people high on conspiracy mentality showed virtually no bias. Although – compared to people low on conspiracy mentality – they saw powerful sources as less and powerless sources as more credible, they saw both sources as equal in that regard.

A similar pattern could be observed in the domain of medical choices (e.g. Lamberty, Imhoff 2018). The belief in conspiracy theories attenuated preference for conventional over alternative medical approaches. People low in conspiracy mentality inferred medical effectiveness from the producing companies’ high power, but people high in conspiracy mentality saw them as equally effective. These results at least suggest that conspiracy mentality is less characterised by an
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absolute negative perception of those in power, but rather by the absence of a halo effect for those in power. This may seem rational to the extent that such a halo effect of power is objectively irrational. Particularly in the fields of knowledge generation and medical treatments, however, it may seem functional, if not necessary to trust established institutions rather than judging no difference between the New York Times and a blog on medical science and alternative treatments.

Feelings of powerlessness and conspiracy beliefs

So far, we have argued that conspiracy believers see power as a potential threat. Even at the level of objective power, arguably, power itself is thereby a relative construct: Once one person has more power, another person automatically has less power and influence – and vice versa. To be able to carry out conspiracies, people need a certain amount of influence. A homeless person is probably not able to commit electoral fraud, while political leaders are – at least potentially – capable of doing so. Therefore, the question naturally arises of how the connection between the belief in conspiracy theories and the power perceptions of the followers of this ideology is formed.

Perceived powerlessness has been described as the belief that one’s actions do not affect outcomes. As is apparent here, powerlessness seems intimately connected to lack of personal control. Although having power may primarily relate to asymmetric control over valued resources in social relation rather than control over one’s personal outcomes, these two are more tightly connected on the opposite side of the spectrum. Not having power does not only imply not having greater control over resources, but also that someone else has, which again reduces one’s own ability to control one’s outcomes. In the following paragraphs, we will thus not dissect ‘powerlessness’ (not having power) from lack of control, as – to a large extent – one follows from the other. Hofstadter (1964) has already suggested that beliefs in conspiracy theories can be traced to feelings of powerlessness. Past research has empirically confirmed this assumption: Conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among people who feel powerless (e.g. Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018). It has, for example, been shown that one’s own life circumstances, when perceived as powerless, are also related to an increased belief in conspiracy theories. For example, when people are unemployed (thus not having control over valued resources and not having personal control), they tend to believe more strongly in conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Decker 2013; Imhoff 2015).

Although endorsement of conspiracies tends to correlate with perceived personal powerlessness (e.g. Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Imhoff, Bruder 2014), research tapping into different spheres of control deprivation (i.e. powerlessness) suggests that it is particularly the perception of low power to achieve socio-political goals (rather than personal or interpersonal goals) that show such a relation (e.g. Imhoff, Lamberty 2018). This view is also compatible with the frequent finding that people who endorse political beliefs on the fringes of the political spectrum (i.e. with politically ‘extreme’ views) tend to endorse more conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Imhoff, Decker 2013; van Prooijen et al. 2015). This curvilinear relation could just reflect that politically extreme ideologies are more conspiracy-laden (e.g. due to rather Manichaean worldviews), but it may also be that the constant experience of not being represented by the political rulers and the consequential deprivation of reaching one’s political goals evokes conspiracy beliefs. A demonstration of this principle can be observed in two recent U.S. elections: after the election, supporters of the winning party showed less, supporters of the defeated party more, belief in election-related conspiracies (Edelson et al. 2017; Nyhan 2017).

Conspiracy beliefs are not only stronger in certain situations where people feel that they have less power: Research has established that conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among social
groups who have only little power in society – like migrants or social minorities (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999). Muslims in the Netherlands, for example, believed more strongly in conspiracy theories than non-Muslims (van Prooijen, Staman et al. 2018). Despite relatively robust evidence for stronger conspiracy beliefs among marginalised groups, there exists no consensus whether this is due to feelings of anomia (Goertzel 1994), feelings of deprivation (van Prooijen, Douglas et al. 2018) or system blaming (Crocker et al. 1999; see also Chapter 2.6 in this volume).

A power-inspired perspective also helps integrating some findings regarding the role of education, knowledge and power in conspiracy beliefs. A famous quip asserts that ‘knowledge is power’ (often ascribed to Francis Bacon) and, indeed, looking at the association between conspiracy beliefs and knowledge or education is another way to connect it to power. Not only because of the above-mentioned quip, but clearly information can easily be subsumed under the concept of a ‘valued resource’ (often distributed asymmetrically) in our original definition of power. Information and knowledge are typically acquired through education and education in general gives people the feeling that they are more strongly in control of their lives because they gain skills that give them the ability to influence their social environment (Mirowsky, Ross 1998). In line with the current argument that conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among people with low power, it has been shown that education can also be a predictor for believing in conspiracy theories: People with less education are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g. Douglas et al. 2016; van Prooijen 2016), as are people with less knowledge (Miller et al. 2016). In addition to believing in simple solutions, two variables are particularly responsible for this connection, which are directly related to one’s own power: feelings of powerlessness, and subjective social class (see van Prooijen 2016). Thus, less educated people endorse conspiracy theories to a greater extent, not because they are less intelligent, but because they feel powerless.

Powerless and betrayed – what next?

After it has been consistently shown that the belief in conspiracy theories is associated with feelings of powerlessness, two questions naturally arise: first, the question of causality and – in line with this –, the question of the theoretical explanation for this effect. In principle, two theoretical directions are possible: Experiencing powerlessness may strengthen the belief in conspiracy theories or the belief in conspiracy theories leaves people feeling powerless.

The notion that powerlessness increases conspiracy beliefs is in line with the compensatory hypothesis: It has been described that power is an important source of a person’s feeling of being in control and lacking control is one important predictor of why people believe in conspiracy theories (Whitson, Galinsky 2008). Individuals are more likely to endorse conspiracy beliefs in situations in which they feel powerless and the belief that negative events in one’s own life are caused by external forces (e.g. Whitson, Galinsky 2008). They might help people to make sense of a world containing evil forces beyond the control of individuals and explain their difficulties by creating patterns – even if these patterns are just illusory (Hofstadter 1964; van Prooijen, Douglas et al. 2018). Another – and not contradictory – explanation why powerlessness might increase conspiracy beliefs could be that people who feel that they are powerless may find conspiracy theories appealing because they are so consistent with their own perception of themselves (confirmation bias). People might experience powerlessness and these feelings make those in power seem even more distant and different. People who believe in conspiracy theories might perceive managers as more distant or different from their own ingroup and therefore are more distrustful of them (Imhoff, Bruder 2014).
On the other hand, belief in conspiracy theories could also reinforce feelings of powerlessness (reinforcement hypothesis). If people assume that everything is controlled by a small elite, then it is also likely that they feel more powerless than if they assume that they can influence society as a member of a democratic community, for example. Jolley and Douglas (2014) were able to show that, when people are confronted with conspiracy theories about vaccination, they reported increased feelings of powerlessness. Of course, both ways are possible. This might trigger a downward spiral: Powerless people tend to believe in conspiracy theories, which in turn reinforce feelings of powerlessness. At this point, there are still too few experimental or even longitudinal studies devoted to this question. Further research would be necessary to clarify the question of causality.

**Levelling of power differences as a functional aspect of conspiracy beliefs?**

So far, we have seen that conspiracy beliefs are to a certain extent intrinsically connected to the notion of powerful evil-doers and that endorsing conspiracy belief is associated with a negative view of power and a view of the self as powerless. Building on the reinforcement hypothesis, it could be that endorsing conspiracy beliefs exacerbates feelings of powerlessness, undermines perceptions of political efficacy and ultimately leads to political apathy and inaction. Logically, this would strengthen, if not intensify, power asymmetries, as being passive will not change the (objective) status quo. To the extent that powerlessness further increases the likelihood of perceiving and endorsing conspiracy beliefs (e.g. because they provide a desperately sought-after explanation for one’s own lack of power as discussed in terms of confirmation bias above), this would allow the prediction of an escalation principle longitudinally. Powerlessness makes conspiracy theories more likely, which makes the self both objectively and subjectively more powerless, which in turn further biases the interpretation of the world. Such a cycle (see Figure 2.4.1, lower half) would be particularly destructive and the functional nature of adopting a conspiracy belief would be limited (at least in terms of power – it might still be that it fulfils other needs like creating a collective identity or feeling unique; Imhoff, Lamberty 2017).

There is, however, a perspective that may be seen as more functional and more in line with the general principle of homeostasis both for the individual and in its social effects. For the individual, seeing through the muddy waters of a conspiracy might actually increase feelings of agency and power. After all, not falling for the red herring to distract from the real conspiracy lays the very ground to expose and eventually stop it. To the extent that conspiracy beliefs fuel feelings of outrage and a resulting propensity to alter what is perceived as unjust, they might motivate rather than undermine political action. Indeed, conspiracy mentality has been connected to a greater willingness to engage in political action (Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Imhoff, Lamberty 2018), and non-normative forms of protest in particular. In two experimental studies, participants were asked to imagine living in a society that differed between experimental conditions in terms of whether it was aligned with a low, average or high conspiracy mentality (Imhoff, Dieterle et al., 2020). Afterwards, participants completed a 20-item scale of what kind of political engagement they would be willing to show in such a society. Ten items reflected normative, legal actions (e.g. voting, writing a blog, contacting local representatives), whereas ten items reflected non-normative, illegal, partially violent actions (e.g. tax refusal, vandalism, hacking). Across two pre-registered studies in two different cultural contexts (Germany and the U.S.A.), results showed less willingness to engage in normative action (likely as it seems futile if the political system is driven by self-interested and corrupt people in power) and more willingness to engage in non-normative actions (likely as it seems legitimate to break rules) for people who were assigned either an intermediate or strong conspiracy mentality (Figure 2.4.2).
Figure 2.4.1 Escalating (lower half) and homeostatic (upper half) models of conspiracy beliefs and political action. Figure available at https://osf.io/bg2tc/, under a CC-BY4.0 license.
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This greater propensity to engage in non-normative forms of protest for people who perceive their ability to achieve change as low is well-established in the literature on collective action (e.g. Ransford 1968; Wright et al. 1990; Tausch et al. 2011). Feeling a lack of control over events is positively correlated with willingness to engage in violence. Non-normative political action, then, is not only potent to change the self-perception as agentic and powerful, but also the objective reality (see Figure 2.4.1, upper half). Undermining the legitimacy of those in power might ultimately level power differences by pulling them down. This pattern of a homeostatic principle would ascribe a much greater extent of functionality of conspiracy beliefs – both for the individual, but also in the society’s interest to regulate power asymmetries. Importantly, both paths (the homeostatic path via political action and the escalating path via political lethargy) are not mutually exclusive. It may very well be that either dispositional factors (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, dispositional action orientation) or situational circumstances decide which path will be taken. At present, however, these are not well understood.

The power paradox: integrating conspiracy research with power research

As discussed above, conspiracy beliefs are associated with a variety of outcomes that can legitimately be called non-normative: From support of terrorist or extremist groups (Bartlett, Miller 2010), illegal and violent forms of protests, to intentions to engage in everyday crime (Jolley, Douglas et al. 2019). If most aspects of our society are illegitimately influenced by a few powerful people, and the official rules and norms are just a means to uphold this scandalous situation, not complying with laws, rules and norms is not only legitimate but an almost necessary step toward
autonomy and liberation. Conspiracy believers are thus, it seems, powerless, but more likely to be disobedient to social norms and inhibited by what others (the sleeping masses) think of their demeanour. This conception aligns very well with the association of feelings of powerlessness with non-normative protests and political violence, potentially following from the perception of having ‘nothing to lose’ (Saab et al. 2016).

This characterisation, however, creates some tension to a recurring theme in the social psychological literature on social power: here, having power reduces inhibitions and compliance with perceived norms, and liberates people to act on their impulses. Power reduces the impact of situational pressures (Galinsky et al. 2008) and general awareness of constraints (Lammers et al. 2008). This state of disinhibition has both positive (e.g. overcoming inertia to help others; DeCelles et al. 2012) and negative (e.g. unethical behaviour; Trautmann et al. 2013) outcomes (Hirsh et al. 2011). Both powerful men and women are more likely to engage in extramarital sex than their powerless counterparts (Lammers, Maner 2016). Men and women who reported to hold more power in the workplace not only admitted having greater interest in non-normative varieties of sexual behaviour (sexual masochism, sexual sadism), but did so disproportionately for the variant that was less frequent (and thus descriptively non-normative) for their gender role (men for masochism, women for sadism; Lammers, Imhoff 2016). Thus, a plethora of research is in line with the idea that power (not powerlessness) evokes a reduced reliance on social norms (and, by implication, powerlessness increases it).

Taking these two lines of thought together leaves a conundrum. Although a feeling of powerlessness should increase adherence to norms (according to the power literature), endorsing conspiracy theories is neither particularly normative, nor are other associates of conspiracy beliefs (e.g. crime intentions, non-normative protests). To our best knowledge, there is currently no authoritative solution to reconcile the psychological literature on a (comparatively) inhibiting and norm-compliant effect of low power, with the collective action literature making the opposite prediction of greater non-normative action in situations of powerlessness. One way to make sense of these findings might be to think about a curvilinear relation between power and norm compliance. Norm compliance could then be maximal for average levels of power and a deviation in either direction would reduce it. High levels of power would reduce norm compliance due to its general disinhibiting effect and because high power implies that one does not have to take others’ reactions into one’s consideration. Low levels of power would relate to reduced norm compliance because at some point one has ‘nothing-to-lose’ and therefore no reason to care about others’ reactions. Future research is required to elucidate this relation in more detail (but see Cichocka et al. 2018).

Conclusion

The above-mentioned power paradox is not the only avenue for future research, as many questions remain unanswered at this point. One of the most basic issues is the question of causality and empirical support for either the compensatory hypothesis or the reinforcement hypothesis, or both. With the help of prospective longitudinal studies, it would be possible to tease apart whether powerlessness increases the endorsement of conspiracy theories (as a way to deal with one’s deprived sense of control) or whether endorsing such theories about almighty others will reduce one’s sense of power (as these almighty others have all of it). The question might also be addressable with experimental manipulations of power, but only in their (relative) short-term effects of a single study.

A comparative perspective might shed more light into the intrinsic linkage between negative views of power and conspiracy beliefs. Most psychological studies so far have been conducted in context where conspiracy theories are heterodox knowledge, an outsider opinion, and the
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target frequently are the powerful. It is not pre-empirically clear whether we should expect the same in contexts where a conspiracy rhetoric is a strategy of those in power and the targets of the insinuations are marginalised minorities or outside groups. Comparisons between such contexts or even better across a large number of contexts differing in this regard may further elucidate how close this link is.

Seeing the world governed by a secret plan made behind closed curtains intimately evokes questions of power. We have argued that even if one does not include high power of the conspirators into the definition (and thus make the connection tautological), conspiracy beliefs are tightly connected to distrust of people, groups and institutions with power, both conceptually and empirically. Whether such theories in the long run empower individuals to either perceive themselves as more powerful or indeed achieve more agency and control over their surrounding (e.g. via political protests) is an exciting avenue for future research.

References
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