2.6 CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Mikey Biddlestone, Aleksandra Cichocka, Iris Žeželj and Michał Bilewicz

Introduction

Considering the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs, there is substantial consensus in the psychological literature that they are unlikely to be a function of pathology (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009; Oliver, Wood 2014). The implication that these beliefs could be held by almost anyone warrants careful consideration of this topic from a social psychological perspective. As aptly noted by van Prooijen and van Lange (2014: 238–9), ‘most conspiracy beliefs can be framed in terms of beliefs about how a powerful and evil outgroup meets in secret, designing a plot that is harmful to one’s in-group’. Understanding conspiracy beliefs, therefore, requires understanding of intergroup attitudes and behaviours (see Kramer and Messick 1998; Crocker et al. 1999). This chapter aims to illuminate the group processes involved in the development and endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. First, we review research on group perceptions and stereotyping, alongside its implications for conspiracy beliefs. Second, we discuss the motivational paths associated with beliefs in conspiring groups, focusing especially on the influences of fear, control and the need for recognition. Finally, we review the consequences of intergroup conspiracy beliefs.

Conspiracy stereotypes and images of conspiring outgroups

In the first section, we discuss characteristics that might make outgroups especially likely to be accused of conspiring against the ingroup. We first illustrate the dimensions along which social groups are perceived, and then move on to address the unique aspects of conspiracy stereotypes.

People’s perceptions of social groups are based on cognitive schemata, known as stereotypes (e.g. Phalet, Poppe 1997; Fiske et al. 2002). Kofta and Sedek (2005) have argued that conspiracy stereotypes (which usually refer to a whole group) are qualitatively different from other, trait-laden stereotypes (which usually refer to characteristics of individual group members). Although both can promote ingroup favouritism and involve ascribing collective outgroup goals, trait-laden stereotypes determine judgements about individuals belonging to a group, whereas conspiracy stereotypes may determine judgements about social groups as a whole.

One way we can illustrate differences between trait-laden and conspiracy stereotypes is the way they respond to a key mechanism of attitude change, namely intergroup contact. Having positive contact with stereotyped outgroup members (especially of the equal status) is an effective
way to promote more favourable attitudes and decrease stereotyping of outgroup members (Pettigrew, Tropp 2006a, 2006b). However, attempts to use this paradigm in counteracting conspiracy stereotypes have been largely ineffective. A nationwide representative study in Poland found that intergroup contact, as well as intergroup friendships, were significant predictors of attitudes toward Jews, but they were not significantly related to belief in the Jewish conspiracy (Winiewski et al. 2015). To put it more simply, contact with Jewish people did not seem to reduce the ‘Jewish conspiracy’ myth. Similar findings were reported by Bilewicz (2007), who conducted an intervention bringing together Polish youth (with no prior contact with Jews) and Canadian and American Jewish peers. This intervention had many positive effects except for one: those who believed in the Jewish conspiracy did not change their opinion after the meeting.

This difference in effectiveness of intergroup contact illustrates the essential difference between trait-laden and conspiracy stereotypes. Trait-laden stereotypes are schemata and generalisations based on knowledge of specific exemplars of a given category. Contact provides such information that could be later generalised to the whole outgroup, and even to other, unrelated outgroups (Pettigrew 2009). Conspiracy stereotypes are based on essentialist thinking to a much greater extent than trait-laden stereotypes are. If someone believes that there is some biological basis for the intention of the outgroup to conspire, then any form of contact would not be effective, as individual experiences could not affect the general theory about the whole group.

In order to better understand the components of social stereotypes, Fiske et al. (2002) proposed the stereotype content model (S.C.M.), which assumes the attributes that comprise all social stereotypes can be grouped along two dimensions: warmth (i.e. sociability and morality) and competence (i.e. agency; but see Koch et al. 2016). The model aimed to provide an explanation for emotions felt towards outgroups based on their perceived level of warmth and competence. According to the S.C.M., feelings of pity are associated with perceptions of the outgroup as warm but incompetent, conceptualised as a paternalistic stereotype (e.g. of the elderly). Conversely, feelings of envy are associated with perceptions of the outgroup as cold but competent, conceptualised as an envious stereotype (e.g. of Asians). Envious perceptions of high-status competitive outgroups – induced by the perception of incompatible goals (see Fiske et al. 2002) – can justify ingroup resentment. These stereotypes have been linked to conspiracy beliefs: a group that is competent yet cold and unfriendly is most likely to be viewed as being able to plot against the ingroup (e.g. Winiewski et al. 2015; but see Fousiani and van Prooijen 2019 for a more nuanced view on competence).

Envious stereotyping has been implicated in such insidious views as hostile sexism (Glick et al. 1997) and antisemitic notions of economic Jewish conspiracies (Glick 2002). Due to their perceived high-status and competence, enviously stereotyped outgroups are likely to be the target of threat-detection. This threat detection encourages conspiracy beliefs about the enviously stereotyped outgroup. Consequently, Winiewski et al. (2015) argued that envious stereotyping can eventually lead to a belief system that views the outgroup as a scapegoat responsible for the ingroup’s misfortunes. For example, Winiewski et al. (2015) demonstrated this process in Nazi caricatures depicting Jews as conspiring during the Second World War. Based on coding of hundreds of images that appeared in the notorious antisemitic magazine Der Stuermer, they found that the caricatures portraying Jews as conspiring also presented Jewish characters as highly competent, but simultaneously immoral and not sociable. When looking at this phenomenon from a chronological angle, one could see that the caricatures presenting Jews as conspiring were more frequent in the period of the Second World War (1939–1945), as compared the previous period of Nazi regime in Germany (1933–1939). This suggests that envious caricatures portraying certain enemy groups as conspiring can be used in propaganda to mobilise war efforts.
and to engage society in collective goals. Moreover, findings demonstrating that people show preferential attention to general envy-related stimuli (such as a successful protagonist; Zhong et al. 2013) may also reveal why this propaganda was so alarmingly effective.

The process of identifying enemies can also be facilitated by the tendency to personalise groups as collective agents (e.g. Morris 2000) — another important factor shaping conspiracy stereotypes. This tendency is associated with perceiving groups as entitative categories (that is being viewed as highly similar, and with common goals and fate; see Hogg et al. 2007; Lickel et al. 2000), which share a common essence (see Lickel et al. 2000; Rothbart and Taylor 1992). For example, Kofta and Sedek (2005) found that higher perceptions of entitativity of Jews predicted conspiracy stereotyping of this group (see also Wieckowska 2004). The grounding of these stereotypes in natural categories fosters perceptions oriented towards a prototypical symbol of the outgroup rather than a concrete, observable characteristic (see Rosch 1973, 1975). This focus on a prototypical symbol (rather than the more realistic perception of diversity within a group) makes it easier for ingroup members to project their own conspiracy stereotypes onto the outgroup (see Krueger 2000; Ames 2004).

We have thus far considered the group perceptions involved in conspiracy belief. This section aimed to illuminate the stereotype contents of groups, revealing that the stereotyping process is likely an evaluative system used to determine whether a group is threatening. If an outgroup’s goals and intentions do not match the ingroup’s, their perceived warmth and competence will likely determine whether they are a potential threat (however, for a detailed review on the complicated relationship between these dimensions, see Koch et al. 2016). Specifically, groups perceived as competent and agentic, but cold, are most likely to be viewed as threatening and conspiring. Because conspiracy stereotypes are based on essentialising perceptions of outgroups, they seem relatively resistant to change. Therefore, considering the antecedent motivations in conspiracy stereotyping and conspiracy beliefs more broadly may reveal the underlying mechanisms that lead ingroup members to endorse these beliefs.

**What motivates conspiring images of outgroups?**

So far, we have discussed the perceived characteristics of outgroups that can increase their likelihood of being viewed as conspirators. Now, we will discuss the individual and group-level motives that can lead ingroup members to endorse conspiracy theories that target these outgroups. According to Krekő (2015), intergroup conspiracy theories serve to 1) explain significant and unexpected events, by managing the anxiety associated with them, 2) justify power strivings, and 3) help defend the image of the ingroup. Indeed, research indicates that conspiracy beliefs about outgroups can increase when people experience anxiety and fear, loss of power and control, or strive for recognition of their social groups. In the following section, we discuss each of these paths to embracing intergroup conspiracy theories (for a discussion of individual motives associated with conspiracy beliefs more broadly, see Douglas et al. 2017 and Chapter 2.3).

The first is the fear path. People can be motivated to view outgroups as conspiring against them when they experience fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety generally lead to an overreliance on stereotype-consistent information (see Wilder and Simon 2001 for a review), making ingroup members evaluate ambiguous social information based on pre-existing beliefs about the outgroup (Kramer, Schaffer 2014). Further, given the connection between anxiety and threat detection (e.g. Yiend and Mathews 2001; Mathews, MacLeod 2002), it is unsurprising that people with high levels of anxiety tend to interpret ambiguous information as threatening (Mathews, MacLeod 2002). Thus, they might also be more susceptible to interpreting ambiguous intergroup behaviour as intentionally malevolent. This threat perception has been implicated in
the endorsement of conspiracy theories as a way of preparing for collective self-defence from the outgroup (Kofta, Sedek 2005). A body of research has confirmed the link between anxiety and conspiracy beliefs. For example, Grzesiak-Feldman demonstrated that both trait (2007) and situationally induced (2013) anxiety are associated with endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of Jews and also with more general conspiracy thinking. Thus, conspiracy theories may be adopted through a fear path, wherein anxious ingroup members tend to perceive higher levels of intergroup threat, leading them to adopt conspiracy theories to derogate the outgroup and protect the ingroup (see Kofta, Sedek 2005).

Conspiracy beliefs have also been linked to ideological predispositions that foster perceptions of threat. One such predisposition is right-wing authoritarianism (R.W.A.): A dispositional measure of adherence to authority (authoritarian submission), aggression towards outgroups (authoritarian aggression) and adherence to the social norms defined by the authority and society (conventionalism; Altemeyer 1996). Duckitt (2001) proposed a dual process model that outlines the personality, motivational and worldview antecedents of R.W.A. This model argues that individuals who believe their social environment is inherently dangerous and threatening are motivated to embrace ideological preferences that favour security and stability (Sibley et al. 2012). Consequently, Sibley and Duckitt (2013) demonstrated that the so-called dangerous worldview is associated with higher R.W.A. This is likely why R.W.A. has been shown to correlate with both generalised conspiracy thinking (e.g. Grzesiak-Feldman, Irzycka 2009) and belief in specific conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999). Also, Bilewicz et al. (2013) found R.W.A. to be weakly but significantly associated with the belief in the Jewish conspiracy in Poland (although this relationship was not observed in a different study of the same paper involving similar variables).

Some argue, however, that authoritarianism predicts different intergroup attitudes than a general conspiracy mentality (Imhoff, Bruder 2014). While authoritarianism predicts prejudice towards less powerful societal groups, conspiracy mentality can be seen as a distinct political attitude, with a stable ideological belief system that involves prejudicial attitudes towards more powerful groups. As previously discussed, in the process of scapegoating, outgroups are viewed as threatening when they are perceived as highly competent yet pursuing goals that are incompatible with the ingroup. Therefore, scapegoating usually fosters intergroup comparison with powerful outgroups (e.g. with high socio-economic agency; Koch et al. 2016). Conversely, R.W.A. can foster intergroup comparison with subordinate groups perceived as less powerful (see Imhoff, Bruder 2014). For example, an outgroup would be perceived as threatening if they were violating the perceived norms of the ingroup. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) argued that antisemitism was associated both with high levels of conspiracy mentality and R.W.A. Conspiracy mentality led to antisemitism through perceptions of Jews as more powerful, whereas R.W.A. led to antisemitism through perceptions of Jews as less powerful. Future research should examine in more detail the mutual associations between authoritarian tendencies and conspiracy beliefs.

The second path is the loss of control path. Rothschild et al. (2012) have argued that scapegoating an outgroup may also be a response to reduced feelings of personal control. People strive to feel in control over their life and environment – it is a fundamental human motivation (e.g. Deci, Ryan 1987, 2000). When people feel they do not have control over their fate, they tend to compensate by attributing control to other agents, be it God, government or powerful outgroups (Kay et al. 2008). In line with this reasoning, low personal control might increase a belief in powerful enemies conspiring against the ingroup. Indeed, Imhoff (2015) demonstrated that long-term lack of control was associated with general conspiracy beliefs (but see Bruder et al. 2013). Also, a high external locus of control (deferring responsibility for one’s actions to external
Conspiracy theories and group relations

explanations) was associated with high levels of paranoia and conspiracy beliefs specifically (Hamsher et al. 1968; Mirowsky, Ross 1983). Finally, in a study by Sullivan et al. (2010), an experimental manipulation highlighting low personal control over external threat strengthened belief in the conspiratorial power of a political enemy (see also Whitson, Galinsky 2008).

Another factor that might show similar effects is uncertainty. In fact, personal control and uncertainty often elicit similar sense-making processes (Van Den Bos 2009; Park 2010). When feelings of uncertainty and reduced control are induced by crises, ‘a conspiracy theory helps people to make sense of the world by specifying the causes of important events, which further helps them predict, and anticipate, the future’ (van Prooijen, Douglas 2017: 327). Indeed, in an experiment by van Prooijen and Jostmann (2013), inducing uncertainty increased conspiracy beliefs about governments or big companies, especially when these entities were perceived as immoral. Also, a chronic intolerance for uncertainty has been found to be associated with blaming other national groups for dramatic social events (such as plane catastrophes), especially when these lacked a plausible official explanation (Marchlew ska et al. 2018a).

The third path is the lack of recognition path. The two previous sections highlighted the role of threat and the frustration of basic needs in predicting conspiracy beliefs. These findings can at least partially explain why conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among members of powerless and minority groups (Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Stempel et al. 2007; Crocker et al. 1999; Imhoff, Bruder 2014), especially when they feel their disadvantage is not recognised. In fact, conspiracy beliefs seem to be stronger when group members experience relative deprivation: perceiving their group as being worse off and not given the same opportunities as other groups (e.g. Runciman 1966).

For example, van Prooijen et al. (2018) demonstrated that, for Muslims in the Netherlands, group-based deprivation significantly predicted both ethnic/national identity-relevant (e.g. ‘I.S.I.S. was created by the U.S.A. and Israel’) and identity-irrelevant conspiracy beliefs (e.g. ‘The economic crisis of 2007 was created deliberately by bankers’). This suggests that the relative deprivation experienced by minority groups is associated with belief in general conspiracy theories, regardless of whether these theories are thought to target the ingroup directly. Van Prooijen et al. (2018) argued that this is due to the perception that the overarching societal system is rigged. Similarly, Bilewicz and Krzeminski (2010) found that economic deprivation in Poland was associated with antisemitic Jewish stereotypes. In both Poland and Ukraine, economic deprivation was associated with increased discriminatory intentions towards Jews, but the association with conspiracy stereotypes was only observed in Poland. This might be due to the fact that conspiracy-based antisemitism is prevalent in Poland (see Krzeminski 2004; Kofta, Sedek 2005), while groups other than Jews may have been focal objects of scapegoating in Ukraine (e.g. Caucasian ethnic groups). This difference led the authors to conclude that economic deprivation partially explains antisemitic scapegoating in those countries where previous ideologies point to the responsibility of Jews for economic situations.

When individuals feel powerless, the self-ascribed social identity of victim can lead to so called competitive victimhood (Suciu 2008; Reid 2010) – the motivation to establish that one’s ingroup has endured more suffering and injustice than the outgroup (Noor et al. 2012). It is likely that competitive victimhood is a functional compensatory reaction to feelings of powerlessness due to a lack of control and feelings of intergroup threat (see Shnabel, Noor 2012). Competitive victimhood can result in a lack of intergroup trust and empathy (Bar-Tal, Antebi 1992; Noor et al. 2008), as well as searching for outgroups that can be blamed for the ingroup’s misfortunes. This can lead ingroup members to endorse conspiracy theories that unite the ingroup against a common scapegoated enemy (see Reid 2010). For example, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2014) demonstrated that strong Islamic identity was linked to competitive victim-
hood and subsequent belief in a Western conspiracy against Islam. This effect was especially prevalent when people felt a high degree of distrust towards the West. Also, Bilewicz and Krzeminski (2010) found a positive relationship between competitive victimhood and beliefs in a Jewish conspiracy in Poland. Overall, these studies suggest that long-term feelings of deprivation and victimhood can lead to the development of a form of collective conspiracy mentality – ‘a more general collective mental state in which other nations are viewed as hostile and negatively intended toward one’s own nation’ (Soral et al. 2019: 373).

Such a mentality appears to lead to the perception that outgroups conspire against the ingroup, and would make conspiracy-driven explanations of political events more acceptable. Ultimately, it could create a societal rift between conspiracy-believers and conspiracy-nonbelievers. A study performed in Poland following the Smolensk air catastrophe shows that the tendency to interpret this event as caused by an anti-Polish Russian conspiracy was prevalent among people who focused their attention on the historical victimisation of their nation (Bilewicz et al. 2019). Those who believe in unique ingroup victimhood seem to treat their national history, as they see it, as a universal heuristic that allows them to understand current intergroup relations.

Feelings of the ingroup being relatively deprived and victimised are also associated with a broader defensive identification with one’s social group, captured by the concept of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Cichocka et al. 2016; Marchlewksa et al. 2018b). Like competitive victimhood, collective narcissism involves the conviction that others do not sufficiently appreciate the uniqueness of one’s group. However, collective narcissism also involves an inflated sense of ingroup greatness, contingent on external recognition, often leading to destructive intergroup attitudes (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Cichocka et al. 2016). The constant need for validation means that collective narcissists are especially sensitive to any signs of threat or disrespect coming from other groups. They also tend to be convinced that others seek to undermine the ingroup intentionally, which forms a fertile ground for conspiracy theorising (see also Kramer, Schaffer 2014).

Several lines of study have demonstrated that collective narcissism predicts belief in outgroup conspiracy theories. For example, Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012) found that Polish national collective narcissism predicted a belief in the Jewish conspiracy. In another set of surveys conducted in Poland by Cichocka et al. (2016), national collective narcissism was associated with the conviction that other nations are conspiring to undermine Polish achievements in fighting communism, and that Russians conspired to kill the former president (who died in the Smolensk plane crash in 2010). American collective narcissism also predicted a general conviction that other (although not one’s own) governments are conspiring against the American people. The association between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs was driven by heightened perceptions of threat.

In all of these studies, ingroup identification without the narcissistic component was negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs, suggesting that only the defensive, narcissistic need for ingroup recognition, rather than ingroup positivity in general, drives conspiracy beliefs. In a different intergroup context, Marchlewksa et al. (2019) found that collective narcissism in relation to Catholics as an ingroup was linked to a belief in a so-called ‘gender conspiracy’ – a conviction that gender theory and gender studies are part of a conspiracy aimed at destroying traditional family values. Taken together, these studies suggest that conspiracy beliefs might stem from a conviction that any group misfortunes or failures are due to a conspiring enemy. Arguably, such a conviction might protect and restore feelings of ingroup superiority (see also Kofta, Sedek 2005).

In this section, we have outlined factors that can lead to outgroup conspiracy beliefs. For example, feelings of threat and low personal control can lead to a tendency to make sense of one’s experience by seeing others as intentionally malevolent. Furthermore, viewing one’s social
Conspiracy theories and group relations

group as disadvantaged and lacking recognition can foster the need to blame other groups for the ingroup’s misfortunes. This can lead to conspiracy beliefs as a defensive reaction to protect the ingroup image. We next explore the potential consequences of intergroup conspiracy beliefs.

What are the intergroup consequences of beliefs in intergroup conspiracy theories?

Although some researchers have argued that conspiracy theories can be utilised to confront social hierarchies and offer alternatives to the status quo (e.g. Sapountzis, Condor 2013; Imhoff, Bruder 2014), most empirical evidence suggests that they are likely to result in detrimental consequences more often than not. For example, conspiracy beliefs have been linked to undesirable health choices, political alienation and antisocial behaviours (e.g. for a review see Chapter 2.7; see also Jolley, Douglas 2014a, 2014b; Douglas, Leite 2017; Jolley et al. 2019). Here, we will consider the consequences of conspiracy beliefs for intergroup relations and perceptions of the overarching political system. Specifically, we will discuss implications for 1) prejudice and intergroup discrimination and 2) legitimisation of injustice.

The key outcomes that tend to be associated with intergroup conspiracy beliefs are prejudice and intergroup discrimination. Some researchers have argued that conspiracy stereotypes lead to ‘high supportiveness for in-groupers combined with complete disregard for out-groupers’ (Kofta, Sedek 2005: 42). As we highlighted before, conspiracy beliefs allow individuals to blame the outgroup for events that negatively affect the ingroup. In this way, they provide a ‘moral justification for immoral actions’ (Winiewski et al. 2015: 24), such as intergroup discrimination. Indeed, multiple studies have linked conspiracy beliefs to hostile intergroup attitudes. For example, Bilewicz et al. (2013) demonstrated that belief in Jewish conspiracies was the most prevalent predictor of antisemitic prejudice above all other forms of antisemitism (e.g. religiously grounded stereotypes). Beliefs in Jewish conspiracy theories were also linked to anti-Jewish social distance (being unwilling to accept the outgroup as their neighbours or co-workers; Bilewicz et al. 2013; Bilewicz, Sedek 2015), legal discrimination (support for laws that prevent the outgroup from establishing companies or buying land; Bilewicz, Krzeminski 2010), electoral discrimination (Bilewicz et al. 2013) and discriminatory decision making (e.g. in terms of fund allocation; Bilewicz et al. 2013). Furthermore, Jolley et al. (2019) recently showed that experimental exposure to antisemitic conspiracy theories increased prejudice and discrimination towards Jews.

This evidence shows that conspiracy stereotypes are strongly linked to different forms of discrimination of outgroup members who are accused of conspiring. The possible aim of such discrimination is to decrease ostensible control possessed by outgroup members, regardless of the perceived strength and power of such people. Interestingly, conspiracy stereotypes of certain outgroups (e.g. Jews) are strong predictors of discriminatory intentions toward other, unrelated outgroups (e.g. Germans; Kofta, Sedek 2005; Bilewicz, Sedek 2015; Jolley et al. 2019). This suggests that ascriptions of conspiracies to groups can cause more general discriminatory approaches to outgroup members, even if those outgroups are not perceived as directly involved in the conspiracy.

This shows similar results to the secondary transfer effects observed in the contact hypothesis research (Pettigrew 2009; Tausch et al. 2010): Having contact with members of a given outgroup improves attitudes toward unrelated outgroups. In the case of conspiracy beliefs, the reverse seems to be true: endorsing conspiracy theories about one outgroup can translate into more negative attitudes toward many unrelated groups. This supports the view that conspiracy
stereotypes are elements of a general mindset, or conspiracy mentality (Imhoff, Bruder 2014). Furthermore, people believing in conspiracy theories tend to be more Machiavellian (Douglas, Sutton 2011), building their own conspiracies to defend against conspiring groups. Therefore, discrimination (depriving outgroups of their rights and resources) can be an observable strategy of such Machiavellian approaches to intergroup relations that are typical for conspiracy believers.

Kofta and Sedek (2005) suggested that the link between conspiracy beliefs and discrimination might depend on situational factors. For example, the motivation to detect and defend against any potential threats to the ingroup’s power might be higher during political elections. As conspiracy theories might be especially useful in identifying threatening outgroups, they should predict prejudice more strongly in times of political uncertainty. Indeed, Kofta and Sedek (2005) demonstrated that conspiracy stereotypes about Jews in Poland were significant predictors of social distance towards Jews just before the election, but not a couple of weeks after. Similarly, in another analysis, the link between conspiracy stereotypes of Jews, and the social distance towards Jews and other outgroups (e.g. Germans), was strong in an election year, but became almost invisible in a year without elections (Bilewicz, Sedek 2015). The election circumstances may have temporarily heightened fears of what would happen in the event of a successful ‘collective enemy’.

Intergroup conspiracy theories also have implications for legitimisation of injustice. Goertzel argued that ‘a conspiracy theory gives believers someone tangible to blame for their perceived predicament, instead of blaming it on impersonal or abstract social forces’ (2010: 494). Jolley et al. (2018) proposed that conspiracy theories may therefore function as a system justifying mechanism, deflecting the blame from the dysfunctional components of the system to a small group of malevolent people. Consequently, they found that conspiracy theories increased when the legitimacy of a social system was threatened. Conspiracy theories also bolstered satisfaction with the status quo, causing people to increasingly attribute societal issues to malevolent groups. This has particularly problematic implications for the situation of disadvantaged groups. For example, as relative deprivation (Bilewicz, Krzeminski 2010) and competitive victimhood (Bilewicz et al. 2013) are used to justify conspiracy beliefs, it is possible that disenfranchised groups will turn to conspiracy theories to explain their societal position, rather than focus on the more pervasive components of the societal structure that contribute to their disadvantaged position. Therefore, conspiracy beliefs might theoretically hinder social change for the groups that need it most.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we sought to highlight the intergroup dimensions of conspiracy beliefs. We reviewed both chronic predispositions and situational factors that can strengthen people’s endorsements of intergroup conspiracy beliefs. First, we explained that perceptions of outgroups as competent yet immoral are likely to breed conspiracy explanations for their actions. These perceptions are also likely to be motivated by individual perceptions of threat and lack of control, as well as by the general need for understanding the disadvantaged position of one’s social groups. All of these factors can increase vigilance to potential threats stemming from other groups, as well as increasing the need to find explanations for one’s misfortunes. Finally, we highlighted research that suggests that conspiracy beliefs can have undesirable consequences for intergroup relations, but at the same time these beliefs are difficult to change. Thus, in order to curtail the negative effects of intergroup conspiracy beliefs, interventions might need to target their varied psychological and societal antecedent.
References


Mikey Biddlestone et al.


Conspiracy theories and group relations


