

Review

An interpretation of meta-analytical evidence for the link between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories

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Abstract

Meta-analytical evidence indicates the robust association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories is moderated by the content of conspiracy theories. Belief in conspiracies of specific outgroups fits collective narcissistic posture of intergroup hostility but collective narcissism is also bound to other conspiracy theories because it simultaneously comprises a committed belief (that the ingroup is great) and a threatening belief (that the ingroup is unrecognized). This creates compensatory motivations to believe in conspiracy theories that protect the committed belief and to seize on any conspiracy theory as a meaning-making activity. Collective narcissism and conspiracy theories may also co-occur because they serve to coordinate undemocratic leaders and their constituencies. They produce threatening environments that justify coercion, violence and undemocratic governance.

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Keywords

Collective narcissism, Conspiracy theory, Conspiracy mindset, Meta-analysis, Populism, Meaning maintenance.

Conspiracy theories, explanatory beliefs that attribute causes of salient events to secret and malevolent plotting of collective actors [1,2], represent a vastly heterogeneous phenomenon. Regardless of their specific content though, they are (more often than not) explanations of intergroup injustice and moralizing attributions of blame [2]. While real conspiracies do exist, we believe the most intriguing aspect of conspiracy theories is that they tend to disregard logic and evidence [2,3]. We argue that they serve to collectively construct rather than accurately explain reality. Since the interest in psychological underpinnings of conspiracy theories exploded in recent years, collective narcissism has been identified as a predictor of the proclivity to endorse a variety of specific conspiracy theories [1,2,3,4]. Collective narcissism is a belief that the ingroup's exaggerated greatness is not sufficiently recognized by others [5,6]. It proclaims the ingroup's mistreatment regardless of the ingroup's objective situation [5,7]. Thus, collective narcissism tends to be as delusional as conspiracy theories.

We present comprehensive meta-analytical evidence for the association of collective narcissism and a vast array of conspiracy theories as well as generic conspiracy thinking, i.e., a propensity to form suspicions about malevolent collective agents [8,9]. The association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories is robust but moderated by the content of conspiracy theories. We explain why the strength of this association depends on the content of conspiracy theories and their specific circumstances. First, theories attributing conspiracies to specific outgroups (the strongest association) provide the best explanations of why the extraordinary ingroup is not universally revered and justify a posture of intergroup hostility characterizing collective narcissism.

However, even when no threatening events are salient (as in the case of generic conspiracy thinking), the association

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Category	Examples (for details see Supplemental Materials)
<p><u>Specific Outgroup Conspiracies:</u> Conspiracy theories attributing malevolent intentions and secretive actions to specific outgroup Those conspiracy theories were typically assessed as mediators predicting prejudice and discrimination of the targeted outgroups or the rejection of the foreign aid to the ingroup from the targeted outgroup</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Immigrants in France conspiring with ISIS and other terrorist groups to take over Europe - Immigrants in France conspire with the European Union to destroy French culture and to destroy French economy - Russians conspired to bring down the plane that crashed near Smolensk and killed the Polish president and over 90 Polish officials - Jews conspire to take control over the world and the government in Poland - 'Gender ideology/studies/activism' are a liberal conspiracy to undermine the Catholic Church - Chinese institutions and companies conspire against the US/American institutions and companies conspire against China - China conspired to produce the COVID-19 pandemic to undermine the Western world - 2004 tsunami in Indonesia was caused by US and Israel conspiracy, Lapindo Mud Disaster in Indonesia was caused by the conspiracy between the government and the British
<p><u>Conspiratorial explanations of other salient threats:</u> Miscellaneous theories regarding various threats orchestrated by unspecified powerful 'others' with intention to control 'us' or 'the people' Those conspiracy theories were typically assessed as mediators predicting specific actions in accordance to the content of the theory: climate change denial, refusal of vaccination; refusal to follow health and safety measures to contain COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Malevolent unspecified outgroup plots to spread the Zika disease - Scientific findings regarding climate change are fabricated by people who have something to gain - A small group of people and corrupt elites hide dangers of vaccines or modify vaccines to monitor members of the ingroup - COVID-19 pandemic is a result of deliberate action of a small powerful group working in secret to profit from the pandemic - COVID-19 does not exist, the information about the threat of the pandemic is spread by a malevolent group to manipulate others - A malevolent, secretive group (such as "big pharma") benefits from vaccines that are harmful and allow for human control (e.g. via microchips)
<p>Generic conspiracy thinking This generic predisposition was shown to increase in time as a function of collective narcissism and predict</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A predisposition to believe that 'our' lives are controlled by a small group of people who work in secret to control things, run the country and are against 'us' [9] - A predisposition to engage in 'conspiracist ideation' about malevolent actions of government, extraterrestrial cover-up and malevolent global conspiracies [3] - Beliefs in a series of well-known conspiracy theories that climate change is a fake, Princess Diana was assassinated, AIDS was created by humans in a lab, 9/11 was a governmental plot, moon landing was fake, governments hide evidence about extraterrestrials visiting to the Earth, CIA was involved in Kennedy's assassination [18]

still exists for two other reasons. First, collective narcissism is simultaneously a committed belief (that the ingroup is extraordinary) and its violation (that nobody recognizes it). This produces a chronic motivation to engage in any meaning-making activity [10,11]. All conspiracy theories, regardless of their content, satisfy this motivation very well. They provide unifying, even if false and ineffective [12], frameworks to interpret threatening salient events that are otherwise difficult to connect and explain [13,14]. Conspiracy theories that explain salient threatening events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) are preferred to those that explain less salient events (e.g., the death of Princess Diana).

Second, collective narcissism and conspiracy theories serve the same political functions. They create threatening environments for authoritarian leaders to advance dictatorial forms of governance and authoritarian followers to justify intergroup hostility and political violence as means of advancing the ingroup's goals. Thus, to understand motivations underlying collective narcissism and conspiracy theories we also need to

understand why people reject democracy and accept political violence.

The association of collective narcissism and conspiracy theories

Although the link between conspiracy theories and collective narcissism has frequently been acknowledged [1–3], there has been no comprehensive meta-analytical summary of this association. To address this gap we performed a meta-analysis of published effect sizes for this association. The meta-analytical evidence (presented in detail in [Supplemental Materials](#)) based on 20 published reports from predominantly cross-sectional studies, covering 75 effect sizes from 33 independent samples indicates a significant, medium-sized ($r = .34$, 95%CI [.29, .42], $k_{effects} = 48$), highly heterogeneous association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories. Non-narcissistic positive ingroup identification (conceptualized as positive evaluation and subjective importance of a social identity to the self, labeled, for example collective self-esteem [15] or positive ingroup regard [16]), although positively related to collective

narcissism [5,6], is not associated with conspiracy thinking or endorsement of specific conspiracy theories ($r = .00$, 95% CI [-.04, .05], $k_{effects} = 27$). While collective narcissism is arrogant, irrational and portentous in its exaggeration of the ingroup's importance, non-narcissistic ingroup positivity is a more objective evaluation of the ingroup not contingent on its recognition from others.

We differentiated three categories of conspiracy theories linked to collective narcissism: (1) theories pertaining to conspiracies of specific outgroups; (2) theories attributing specific salient threats to conspiracies of unspecified collective 'others' and (3) generic conspiracy thinking also assessed as a tendency to believe in miscellaneous and unrelated conspiracy theories (Table 1). The content of conspiracy theories significantly moderated the association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories (Figure. 1).

The association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories is the strongest ($r = .42$, 95%CI [.33, .51], $k_{effects} = 19$) for those conspiracy theories attributing secretive malevolent intentions and harmful deeds to specific outgroups in specific intergroup contexts (see Table 1 for examples). Next, there is a medium size association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories pertaining to miscellaneous threats attributed to vaguely defined, powerful 'others' ($r = .35$, 95%CI [.27, .43], $k_{effects} = 17$). Finally, the weakest, but still significant, is the association between collective narcissism and generic conspiracy thinking ($r = .17$, 95%CI [.04, .30], $k_{effects} = 12$).

Why is the association the strongest for conspiracy theories about specific outgroups? Content match

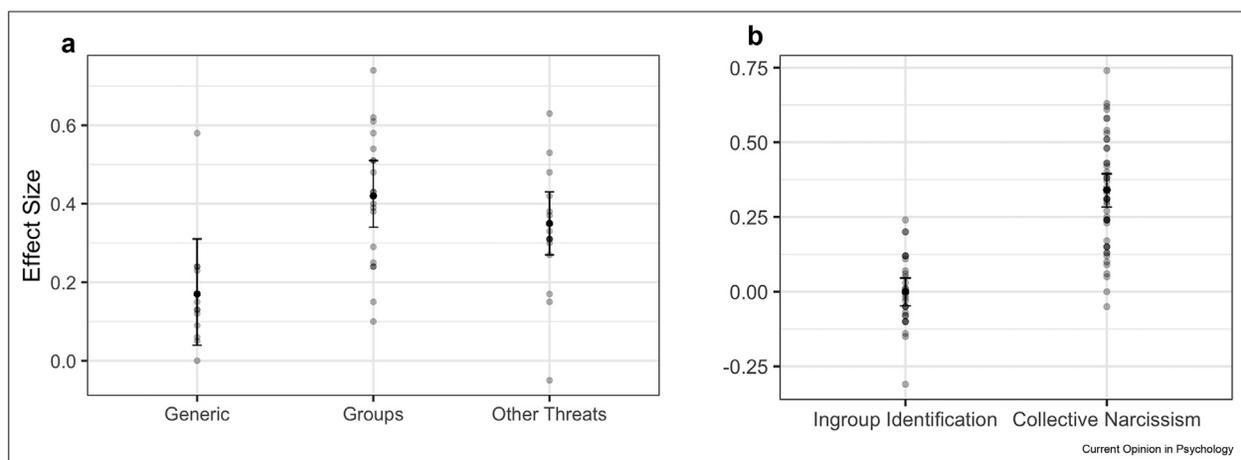
Conspiracy theories that attribute malevolent plots to specific outgroups provide a fitting and flattering

explanation for why others fail to acknowledge the ingroup's greatness. A belief that outgroups conspire against the ingroup serves as an external explanation for why the ingroup does not receive the recognition it deserves: It is because others conspire to undermine the ingroup out of spite, fear and especially, jealousy. Such conspiracy theories fortify the belief that the ingroup is extraordinary and important since it attracts conspiracy attacks. Although all conspiracy theories, and conspiracy thinking in general, fit and perpetuate the collective narcissistic hypersensitivity to intergroup threat [3], theories about specific outgroups fit this hypersensitivity particularly well as they provide a specific target of blame. They fuel the glorification of the ingroup's perceived harm and vulnerability which justifies intergroup hostility. The 'necessary defence' justifies the ease with which collective narcissists engage in aggression, violence and war and the certainty with which they diminish others and proclaim hatred towards them [5,6].

Why does collective narcissism also correlate with other conspiracy theories? Motivated reasoning

While the complementary content of collective narcissism and some conspiracy theories can easily be seen, other conspiracy theories do not seem to fit the narration about the ingroup's misunderstood greatness in an obvious way. The belief that Russians conspired to undermine Poland serves to boost the belief that it is Poland's fate to 'rise from its knees' and wage revenge [3]. But why would the belief that the ingroup's greatness is not recognized by others be associated with the belief that Princess Diana was assassinated, AIDS was created in a scientific lab, the moon landing was a fake, or that governments hide evidence about extra-terrestrials visiting to the Earth? We propose that this is because conspiracy theories also address a different need generated by collective narcissism: the need to

Figure 1



Effect sizes of collective narcissism on conspiracy beliefs by conspiracy content (a) and collective narcissism versus other forms of ingroup identification (b).

engage in a meaning-making activity and to hold any belief rather than face uncertainty [3].

We propose that collective narcissism represents a case of violation of a committed belief which produces a motivation to believe in *any* conspiracy theory. Whatever the reason for group members to claim that the ingroup is great and exceptional, central to collective narcissism is the resentment that this very greatness is not visible to others. In other words, collective narcissism simultaneously comprises two contradictory ideas: that the ingroup is great and that nobody notices it. The violation of a committed belief (that the ingroup is great) by the disconfirming belief (that the ingroup is unrecognized) elicits aversive states (anxiety, uncertainty, threat, loss of agency and control) and a desire to compensate [10,11]. This desire is especially strong when the committed belief is relevant to the self-evaluation [10], which is the case with collective narcissism [17]. Indeed, collective narcissism is positively associated with various forms of motivated reasoning such as a motivation towards cognitive closure [5], and general gullibility, as well as negatively associated with careful and reflective evaluation of information [18].

Compensation can be executed by changing the meaning of the disconfirming belief or affirmation of another, unrelated belief even if it does not share any content with the belief that was violated. It should, however, be coherent and abstract enough to dispel uncertainty [10,11]. The meaning of the disconfirming belief that the group is unrecognized is changed by conspiracy theories attributing the lack of recognition to alleged malevolent and envious intentions of others. The belief in resentment and continuous threat from others explains how the group can be at the same time exceptional and not appreciated. However, any conspiracy theory, even one that does not immediately explain the lack of recognition of the ingroup, provides an explanation and interpretation of disperse events that are otherwise difficult to connect and account for. People who endorse collective narcissism may be chronically motivated to affirm such interpretations whatever their content.

In other words, we argue that collective narcissism represents a case of motivated reasoning both in terms of a need to arrive to a certain conclusion (that the ingroup is still exceptional while being unrecognized) and a need to hold on to any belief that provides an assuring explanation of salient events. Indeed, collective narcissism is related not only to conspiracy theories that specify the conspiring outgroup but also to conspiracy theories that explain events that are salient, threatening and engaging such as the COVID-19 pandemic [18]. The association between collective narcissism and such conspiracy theories is stronger than the association between collective narcissism and

generic conspiracy thinking or endorsement of conspiracy explanations of less visible but also troubling or difficult to explain events.

Collective delusions that render violence a 'logical conclusion'

The meta-analytical association between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs may not only reflect a causal link suggested by our argument above. After all, the majority of existing evidence is cross-sectional. This association may also be due to similar political functions of collective narcissism and conspiracy theories, which also explains their recent omnipresence. Both conspiracy theories and collective narcissism have moved from political extremes to the mainstream [19,20,21]. They are actively promoted by leaders of destructive social movements and keenly endorsed by their followers [22,23], often with troubling consequences. For example, Donald Trump, who succeeded (among others) by promoting national narcissism as a way to define American national identity [21], has often retweeted and praised followers of QAnon conspiracy theory about a Satanic cabal conspiring against President Trump during his term in office [22,23]. QAnon conspiracists featured among the crowd that stormed the Capitol on 6th of January 2021 becoming an infamous symbol of the weakening of American democracy. Trump was impeached for incitement to resurrection.

More generally, conspiracy theories and collective narcissism are advanced by politicians favoring dictatorial governance that limits civil liberties [19,20,21]. People who support such politicians endorse conspiracy beliefs [24] and generic conspiracy thinking [25]. Collective narcissism as well as conspiracy beliefs of various contents are linked to preference for illiberal leaders who use coercive and undemocratic means to stay in or achieve power. For example, collective narcissism was associated with support for attacks on the Capitol in January, 2021 and for Donald Trump using force to stay in power [26]. Similarly, conspiracy beliefs are associated with support for non-normative political engagement including political violence [27,28]. Both conspiracy theories [29] and national collective narcissism [5] are also closely associated with right wing authoritarianism: a cluster of attitudes comprising of conventionalism, submission to dictatorial leaders, and aggression towards dissenters and groups scapegoated by those leaders. Proclivity towards conspiratorial ideation characterizes the political right *and* dogmatic political extremes [30,31].

Both conspiracy theories and collective narcissism normalize and justify coercion and violence as a means of advancing the ingroup's goals. Those goals correspond to specific motivations of group members who endorse conspiracy theories and collective narcissism. People

belong to groups to satisfy multiple psychological needs e.g., for positive self-definition, a sense of meaning, belonging or social connectedness [32]. However, positive ingroup identification that satisfies those needs [33] was not associated with conspiracy beliefs in our meta-analysis. We believe this highlights that collective narcissism and endorsement of conspiracy theories both satisfy qualitatively different needs to positive ingroup identification. Both express a sense of entitlement and a need to render oneself (individually and collectively) exceptional and better than others. Indeed, both collective narcissism [5] and conspiracy beliefs [34,35] are robustly associated with a need for uniqueness, individual narcissism and narcissistic rivalry.

To be better, one needs others to be worse. Thus, conspiracy theories justify outgroup derogation and intergroup hostility although different conspiracy theories justify hostility towards powerful and advantaged vs. disadvantaged and powerless groups [36]. Disadvantaged, extremist groups use conspiracy theories in the attempt to justify redressing their circumstances by violent means [37]. Indeed, endorsement of conspiracy theories is associated with relative disadvantage e.g., minority status [38] or lower formal education [25,39]. Generic conspiracy mentality is related to the willingness to engage in violent actions against formal political and state authorities representing the advantaged groups [27,28]. Similarly, collective narcissism in extremist organizations representing ethnic and religious minorities is associated with acceptance of terrorist violence against the powerful majorities [40]. Moreover, collective narcissism in disadvantaged groups is associated with distrust and conspiracy theories about the more powerful groups leading to rejection of their aid to advance the disadvantaged ingroup [41].

Members of advantaged groups endorse conspiracy theories that justify discrimination of disadvantaged groups. They believe in secretive and malevolent intentions of minorities such as Jews [42], Muslims [43] or refugees and immigrants [44]. Endorsement of conspiracy theories regarding specific minorities justifies and perpetuates prejudice and hostility towards them [45]. Analogously, evidence links collective narcissism in advantaged groups to inequality supporting prejudice [7] and lack of solidarity with disadvantaged groups [46]. For example, gender collective narcissism among men predicts rejection of gender equality [7,46] and inequality justifying sexism [47], national collective narcissism predicts prejudice towards immigrants [48]. Among Whites in the USA, ethnic collective narcissism predicts denial of racism, support for White Lives Matter slogans and using the state power to crush the Black Lives Matter movement [7]. The present meta-analysis suggests that collective

narcissism is particularly strongly linked to conspiracy beliefs justifying discrimination of specific minorities (e.g., immigrants in France, Jews in Poland and the USA, sexual minorities in Poland).

Both, conspiracy theories [49] and collective narcissism [5,6] also characterize biased perceptions of groups involved intergroup conflict. The present meta-analysis points to the association between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories about national opponent (e.g., Russians or Germans in Poland, China in the USA and the USA in China). Thus, we argue conspiracy theories and collective narcissism serve (both to politicians and their audiences) a common function to justify and perpetuate societal polarization and intergroup tensions between groups at different levels of social hierarchies and intergroup hostilities in the context of intergroup conflicts. They help create and perpetuate threatening environments where violence easily escalates and people rally around authoritarian leaders, preferring undemocratic to democratic governance [50] (at least in its representative and deliberative forms [51]).

Concluding remarks

Conspiracy theories and collective narcissism are endorsed by undemocratic leaders and constituencies. Both beliefs produce a sense of threat, attribution of blame and justifications that moralize violence. Both produce and perpetuate vicious circles of intergroup polarization and conflict which sustain preference for undemocratic governance. Collective narcissism is a particularly insidious belief about the ingroup as it produces general gullibility, predilection towards conspiracy thinking with a specific preference for conspiracy theories that justify intergroup violence. More studies should examine the role of motivated cognition for the link between collective narcissism and conspiracy theories. Studies should also consider whether the ingroup's relative status affects the content of conspiracy theories towards which collective narcissists in those groups gravitate.

CRedit author statement

Golec de Zavala, conceptualization, supervision, project management, investigation, funding acquisition, writing. **Bierwiazzonek**: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, visualization, writing. **Ciesielski**: investigation, data curation, writing.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101360>.

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* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

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