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MOTIVATED TO BELIEVE: AN INTEGRATIVE NARRATIVE REVIEW OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, POLITICAL, AND CONTEXTUAL DETERMINANTS OF CONSPIRACY BELIEFS (2017–2026)

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Abstract

Belief in conspiracy theories has moved from a marginal curiosity to a central topic in social and political psychology, driven in large part by Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka's (2017) tripartite framework, which organizes conspiracy belief around epistemic, existential, and social motives. Since that framework was formalized and subsequently tested meta-analytically (Biddlestone et al., 2022), a rapidly expanding literature has both supported and complicated it. This review integrates work published between 2017 and 2026 on four fronts that the original tripartite synthesis addressed only partially: (a) motivational constructs that sit awkwardly within the three-motive taxonomy, including need for uniqueness, need for chaos, and collective narcissism; (b) personality and cognitive correlates identified in subsequent meta-analyses, including reflective thinking, schizotypy, and Dark Tetrad traits; (c) the COVID-19 pandemic as a large-scale natural experiment that clarified both the strength and the limits of conspiracy belief's real-world consequences; and (d) the nascent intervention literature that asks whether conspiracy beliefs, once formed, can be durably reduced. We argue that the field has reached a point of theoretical crowding: multiple overlapping constructs (uniqueness, chaos, narcissism, powerlessness) are typically studied in isolation, inflating the apparent number of independent "motives" while obscuring a smaller number of underlying dimensions. We propose a three-level integrative model dispositional, situational, and structural intended to organize this literature going forward, and we close with methodological recommendations for a field that remains dominated by cross-sectional, self-report, WEIRD-sample designs.

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories propose that significant events or circumstances are the products of secret plots by powerful, malevolent actors (Douglas et al., 2019). They are not a fringe phenomenon: national surveys conducted across dozens of countries consistently find that large minorities, and sometimes majorities, of respondents endorse at least one prominent conspiracy theory (Douglas et al., 2019). What has changed over the past decade is not the prevalence of such beliefs, which appears relatively stable historically, but the

intensity of scientific interest in why people hold them. A Web of Science search on the term "conspiracy belief" shows the annual number of publications roughly doubling between 2016 and 2021 alone, a growth curve that accelerated further during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pilch et al., 2023).

Much of this growth has been organized, implicitly or explicitly, around the tripartite motivational framework proposed by Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017). The framework holds that people are drawn to conspiracy explanations, relative to non-conspiratorial ones, because conspiracy theories promise to satisfy three broad classes of psychological motive: epistemic motives, the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty; existential motives, the desire to feel safe and in control of one's environment; and social motives, the desire to maintain a positive image of the self and one's group (Douglas et al., 2017). The framework was influential precisely because it was parsimonious and because it reframed conspiracy belief away from a simple deficit model the idea that believers are merely gullible or irrational toward a motivational account in which conspiracy beliefs are, in principle, understandable responses to unmet psychological needs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

The framework has since been tested at scale. Biddlestone, Green, Cichocka, Douglas, and Sutton (2022) conducted a systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of the correlates of conspiratorial ideation, coding effect sizes for a large number of motivational constructs falling under the epistemic, existential, and social domains, and evaluating the tripartite model using Bayesian meta-analytic methods. Their synthesis provided broad support for the general proposition that motivational constructs across all three domains correlate with conspiratorial ideation, but it also surfaced substantial heterogeneity within domains: for example, within the social domain, ingroup identification showed small associations while perceived ingroup victimhood showed considerably larger ones, and several individual constructs produced only "uncertain evidence" under Bayesian criteria for supporting the broader tripartite structure (Biddlestone et al., 2024).

That meta-analysis, together with several other large syntheses that appeared in the same period on personality correlates (Stasielowicz, 2022a), on reflective thinking (Yelbuz et al., 2022), and on COVID-19 health responses (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2022) means the field now has a reasonably mature evidence base. What it has lacked is an attempt to read these parallel literatures together, alongside constructs that predate or sit outside the tripartite taxonomy (need for uniqueness, need for chaos, Dark Tetrad traits), and alongside the still-nascent intervention literature. That integration is the aim of this review.

This review is deliberately narrower in one respect and broader in another than the meta-analyses it discusses. It is narrower in that it does not attempt an independent quantitative synthesis; we do not recompute effect sizes or run new meta-analytic models, and every statistic reported below is drawn directly from a previously published source. It is broader in that it deliberately reads across literatures personality psychology, political science, cognitive psychology, and public-health research that are frequently cited by one another but rarely integrated within a single theoretical architecture. Our contribution is therefore interpretive and organizational rather than statistical: we ask what pattern emerges when the tripartite motivational framework, the personality-correlate literature, the political-science literature on anti-systemic sentiment, and the applied intervention literature are placed side by side, and we use that pattern to propose a three-level organizing model for future research.

We proceed in seven parts. First, we summarize the tripartite framework and its meta-analytic testing. Second, we provide a focused discussion on how conspiracy belief is operationalized across studies, given that measurement heterogeneity is a recurrent challenge in this literature. Third, we review motivational and dispositional constructs that have been studied largely independently of the tripartite taxonomy, asking how well they map onto it. Fourth, we review the specifically political and ideological correlates of conspiracy belief, including populism and partisan asymmetry,

which the original tripartite framework treats only implicitly. Fifth, we review cognitive-style correlates, focusing on the meta-analytic evidence for reflective thinking and illusory pattern perception. Sixth, we treat the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural experiment that both tested and extended existing theory. Seventh, we turn to the applied question of intervention, before proposing an integrative three-level model and discussing methodological limitations that cut across the literature we review.

The Tripartite Motivational Framework

Epistemic Motives

Epistemic motives concern the desire to have an accurate and internally consistent understanding of the world, particularly following events that are significant, sudden, or threatening (Douglas et al., 2017). A substantial literature connects conspiracy belief to situations of uncertainty and a lack of clear, authoritative explanation. Belief in conspiracy theories is more common for events that lack a clear, singular official account, and situational uncertainty appears to activate a "sense-making" motivation that conspiracy narratives can, at least subjectively, satisfy (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; van Prooijen, 2022). Ironically, several strands of evidence suggest that conspiracy beliefs do not straightforwardly satisfy epistemic needs once adopted: exposure to conspiratorial explanations can decrease, rather than increase, feelings of certainty and control (Douglas et al., 2019), a finding central to the tripartite framework's more cautionary second claim that conspiracy beliefs are motivated attempts at need satisfaction that frequently fail to deliver the outcomes they promise.

Cognitive style is closely tied to the epistemic domain. The clearest evidence here comes from Yelbuz, Madan, and Alper's (2022) meta-analysis of the relationship between reflective thinking and conspiracy beliefs. Drawing on 145 samples and 181 effect sizes from both published and unpublished correlational studies, they found a significant, medium-sized negative association between reflective (analytic) thinking and conspiracy belief (r = –.189), an association that held across both self-report and performance-based measures of reflective thinking (e.g., the Cognitive Reflection Test) and across both generic and specific conspiracy-belief measures. Notably, the authors found no strong evidence of publication bias, which strengthens confidence in the effect relative to many other findings in this literature. A separate meta-analysis of personality correlates similarly identified low cognitive ability as one of five reliable positive correlates of conspiracy belief (Stasielowicz, 2022a; discussed further below).

At the same time, the causal direction and interpretation of this association remain contested. Using the Cognitive Reflection Test to compare people who did and did not endorse various implausible claims, one study found that endorsers scored worse on the CRT overall but took longer to answer and were not disproportionately prone to the classic "intuitive lure" errors the test is designed to detect suggesting effortful but still inaccurate reasoning, rather than simple cognitive miserliness (Swami et al., 2023). This nuance matters for the epistemic-motive account: if conspiracy believers are not simply failing to engage in effortful thought, then the "epistemic deficit" framing implicit in some analytic-thinking research may need revision toward an account of motivated or misdirected effort rather than an absence of effort.

A second cognitive correlate of the epistemic domain is illusory pattern perception the tendency to perceive meaningful patterns and connections in random or unrelated stimuli. van Prooijen, Douglas, and De Inocencio (2018) found that pattern perception in randomly generated coin-toss sequences and in abstract art predicted both conspiracy belief and supernatural belief, with correlations in the .22 to .45 range across studies, and that experimentally induced pattern-search instructions increased conspiracy and supernatural belief indirectly through increased pattern perception. This provides some of the more direct experimental (rather than purely correlational) evidence in the epistemic-motive literature, though subsequent work using signal detection methods has cautioned that it remains unclear whether the effect reflects genuinely heightened pattern sensitivity, a general tendency

toward false alarms, or a broader "yes-saying" response bias (Swami et al., 2023).

Existential Motives

Existential motives concern the desire to feel safe, secure, and in control of one's environment and life circumstances (Douglas et al., 2017). The clearest evidence here concerns the relationship between conspiracy belief and feelings of powerlessness or lack of control. Early correlational work linked conspiracy belief to dispositional anxiety, death-related anxiety, lack of control, self-uncertainty, and powerlessness (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; as reviewed in van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Experimental work has shown that manipulations which reduce people's sense of control increase illusory pattern perception (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and that, conversely, interventions which restore a sense of control can reduce conspiracy endorsement (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015).

Low socioeconomic status and low education are robust correlates of conspiracy belief, and available evidence suggests this relationship is mediated not only by reduced analytic thinking but independently by feelings of powerlessness (van Prooijen, 2017). Marginalized group membership shows a related but analytically distinct pattern: some research finds that members of minority groups endorse conspiracy theories about their own group's circumstances at higher rates, a pattern attributed to a tendency to attribute group-level disadvantage to external, discriminatory forces rather than internal ones (Crocker et al., 1999). This is a useful reminder that "existential" motives are not merely intrapsychic; they are frequently a rational response to genuinely precarious social and economic circumstances, a point the original tripartite formulation acknowledges but that subsequent research has not always kept central.

Social Motives

Social motives concern the desire to maintain a positive image of the self and one's ingroup, particularly in the face of threats to that image (Douglas et al., 2017). This domain has arguably produced the most theoretically interesting complications for the tripartite model, because it comprises at least two partially opposed processes: motives to protect a threatened or victimized ingroup, and motives to feel personally distinctive or special. Biddlestone, Green, Cichocka, Sutton, and Douglas (2021) organized much of this literature around three "selves" individual, relational, and collective arguing that conspiracy belief can serve the individual self (feeling unique or special), the relational self (in-group bonding through shared, unconventional belief), and the collective self (defending a group's status or victimhood narrative) in distinct and sometimes conflicting ways.

Collective narcissism an inflated view of one's ingroup's greatness that requires external validation predicts belief in intergroup conspiracy theories, particularly when the group's status is perceived to be under threat (Cichocka et al., 2016). Perceived ingroup victimhood shows a similarly robust, and often larger, association with conspiratorial ideation than more general measures of ingroup identification (Biddlestone et al., 2022). This asymmetry is precisely the kind of within-domain heterogeneity that complicates a simple "social motives" label: mere identification with a group is a comparatively weak predictor, while perceiving that group as wronged or besieged is a comparatively strong one, suggesting that the operative ingredient is threat and grievance rather than group attachment per se.

A related empirical regularity in this domain is the well-documented tendency for belief in one conspiracy theory to predict belief in other, even logically unrelated or mutually contradictory, conspiracy theories sometimes described as a "monological" belief system, in which individual conspiracy theories function less as independent factual claims and more as instances of a single, generalized conspiratorial worldview (Wood et al., 2012). This monological pattern is one of the more robust findings in the literature and provides indirect support for the tripartite framework's emphasis on generalized motives rather than belief-specific reasoning: if conspiracy belief were driven primarily by the specific evidentiary merits of each individual claim, cross-theory correlations

of this kind, including between theories that cannot simultaneously be true, would be considerably harder to explain.

Operationalizing Conspiracy Belief: Measurement Heterogeneity and Its Consequences

Before proceeding to constructs that lie beyond the tripartite taxonomy, it is essential to address a recurrent methodological challenge that qualifies virtually every finding reviewed in this paper: the substantial heterogeneity in how conspiracy belief is measured. Researchers in this area typically use one of several distinct instruments, and the choice of instrument has nontrivial implications for the magnitude and even the direction of observed associations.

The *Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire* (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013) measures a generalized disposition toward conspiratorial thinking independent of any specific claim, treating conspiracy belief as a stable trait-like tendency to see conspiracies behind events. The *Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale* (GCBS; Brotherton et al., 2013) aggregates agreement across a standard set of well-known conspiracy narratives, capturing the extent to which an individual endorses specific popular theories. A third common approach involves study-specific scales targeting belief in a single named theory, such as vaccine-related, election-related, or COVID-19-specific conspiracy claims.

These measures are only moderately correlated with one another, and they show different patterns of association with external correlates. For instance, partisan and ideological skews are more pronounced for specific, politically charged conspiracy theories (e.g., election fraud claims) than for the generalized conspiracy mentality measured by the CMQ (Imhoff et al., 2022). Reflective-thinking effects have generally replicated across both generic and specific measures (Yelbuz et al., 2022), which strengthens confidence in the epistemic account, but the same cannot be said with equal confidence for every construct reviewed in later sections of this paper. Need-for-uniqueness effects, for example, appear somewhat larger when measured using generic scales than when using specific, real-world conspiracy theories (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017).

These measurement considerations have direct implications for both primary research and meta-analytic synthesis. We recommend that future primary studies routinely report both a generic measure of conspiracy mentality (e.g., CMQ or GCBS) and one or more specific, content-appropriate conspiracy measures. This dual-reporting strategy would allow meta-analysts to more cleanly separate measurement-driven heterogeneity from theoretically meaningful moderation by content domain. Moreover, researchers should be transparent about whether their outcome variable captures a generalized worldview, endorsement of specific factual claims, or a combination of both, as these may represent distinct psychological constructs with different motivational antecedents and downstream consequences.

Beyond the Tripartite Taxonomy: Motives That Do Not Fit Neatly

Need for Uniqueness

A separate line of research, developed largely independently of the tripartite framework, argues that conspiracy belief can serve a need for uniqueness a desire to see oneself as distinctive from, and often epistemically superior to, the ordinary or "duped" majority (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). Imhoff and Lamberty's foundational studies established a modest but consistent association between dispositional need for uniqueness and generalized conspiracy mentality, and showed experimentally that a fictitious conspiracy theory attracted more support among high-need-for-uniqueness individuals when it was described as a minority, rather than majority, position. A parallel and converging line of work by Lantian, Muller, Nurra, and Douglas (2017) reached similar conclusions; a combined meta-analytic estimate across both research programs put the association at r = .20, 95% CI [.13, .26], a modest but reliable effect that is comparable in magnitude to several of the constructs formally coded within the tripartite meta-analysis.

Conceptually, need for uniqueness sits awkwardly within the tripartite taxonomy. It is nominally a social motive, insofar as it concerns self-image relative
to a social comparison group, yet it is nearly the mirror image of the ingroup-protective social motives reviewed above: rather than seeking to belong to and defend a valued collective, the need-for-uniqueness account emphasizes a desire to differentiate the self from the collective. Some subsequent theorizing has tried to reconcile these strands by proposing that conspiracy theories function best when they are simultaneously unconventional enough to confer distinctiveness and popular enough to provide a validating community of fellow believers (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018), but this reconciliation has received only limited direct empirical testing.

Need for Chaos and Anti-Systemic Motivation

A distinct and largely separate research program, developed in political science rather than social psychology, identifies a "need for chaos" a disposition characterized by extreme discontent with the existing social and political order and a willingness to support the destruction of that order even without a constructive alternative in mind (Petersen et al., 2023). Across eight large studies, including a nationally representative U.S. sample, the authors found that need for chaos was a strong predictor of willingness to believe and share hostile political rumors, including conspiracy theories, and that this relationship held after accounting for partisanship. Critically, the authors argue that individuals high in need for chaos are often not motivated by genuine belief in the content of the rumors they spread; their goal is described as disruptive rather than epistemic, aimed at destabilizing established political elites generally rather than advancing a particular ideological program (Petersen et al., 2023). A key empirical qualification, replicated across the authors' studies, is that chaos-seeking individuals are found across the political spectrum, drawn in the relevant studies to both populist-right and populist-left figures rather than to one partisan camp exclusively.

More recent work distinguishes the private act of believing a conspiracy theory from the public act of sharing it, finding that belief remains the single strongest predictor of sharing, but that need for chaos exerts an independent, positive effect on the willingness to share conspiracy content regardless of its partisan valence unlike straightforwardly partisan motives, which predominantly predict sharing of ideologically congenial content (Farhart et al., 2023). This distinction is conceptually important for the present review because it clarifies that at least part of the "conspiracy belief" literature, when its outcome variable is sharing or endorsement behaviour rather than genuine private belief, may be capturing anti-systemic motivation rather than any of the three classic tripartite motives.

Personality Correlates and the Dark Tetrad

Where the tripartite framework organizes motives thematically, a parallel personality-psychology literature has instead organized correlates around stable individual-difference traits. Stasielowicz's (2022a) Bayesian three-level meta-analysis of personality correlates, based on 686 correlations from 127 independent samples, examined twelve personality constructs and found that, on average, people who hold pseudoscientific beliefs, who score higher on paranoia or schizotypy, who are more narcissistic, who report greater religiosity or spirituality, and who have relatively lower cognitive ability are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories. Heterogeneity across studies was only partially explained by the moderators examined, and the analysis did not find strong evidence of publication bias.

Narcissism recurs across several of the literatures reviewed here, appearing both as an individual-level "Dark Triad" trait and, at the collective level, as collective narcissism (reviewed above under social motives). A recent study examining narcissism, education, and cognitive reflection as joint predictors of conspiracy belief found that grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, need for uniqueness, and a "strive for supremacy" each predicted greater conspiracy endorsement, and counterintuitively that higher education attenuated the conspiracy-narcissism link less than

expected, with STEM education in particular failing to buffer highly narcissistic individuals against conspiracy belief in the way it did for less narcissistic individuals (Cichocka et al., 2023). A companion analysis of a large publicly available dataset (N = 51,404) found that narcissism and poorer cognitive reflection independently predicted COVID-19-specific conspiracy beliefs.

Broadening from narcissism to the full Dark Tetrad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism), recent research finds that narcissistic leadership and entitlement facets, along with psychopathic egocentricity and antisociality, are associated with conspiratorial ideation, and that most of these relations are statistically explained by intervening constructs such as odd beliefs, fatalism, and generalized distrust (March & Springer, 2020). A more recent mediation analysis similarly found that Dark Tetrad traits relate to conspiracy belief partly through their association with an intuitive, rather than rational, cognitive style, and partly through an elevated need for structure and closure linking the personality literature directly back to the cognitive-style and epistemic-motive literatures discussed above (Došenović & Dinić, 2024). This convergence is one of the more theoretically productive developments in the recent literature: rather than treating personality traits and cognitive styles as competing explanations, several research groups are now explicitly modeling cognitive style as a mediating mechanism through which stable personality dispositions translate into conspiracy belief.

Taken together, the personality literature suggests a genuinely distinct explanatory layer from the tripartite motivational taxonomy one concerned less with the situational activation of epistemic, existential, or social needs, and more with chronic individual differences that raise or lower a person's baseline susceptibility regardless of situation. This distinction between dispositional and situational determinants is central to the integrative model we propose later in this review.

Political and Ideological Correlates: Populism, Partisanship, and the Question of Symmetry

A fourth body of literature, developed largely within political science, situates conspiracy belief within citizens' broader political worldview rather than within individual motivation narrowly construed. The most influential construct here is populism, understood as a political mentality that divides society into a virtuous, homogeneous "people" and a corrupt, self-serving elite. Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay (2017) provided some of the earliest systematic evidence that populist attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs are empirically related but conceptually distinct constructs, using American samples to show that populist anti-elitism predicts endorsement of conspiracy theories about powerful actors specifically, above and beyond generalized distrust. This relation has since been replicated and extended across a range of national contexts and specific conspiracy content domains, including COVID-19: subsequent researchers have argued explicitly that populist worldview fosters conspiracy belief through mechanisms reduced trust in political institutions and in science that are conceptually distinct from, and can be measured independently of, standard left-right ideological placement (Eberl et al., 2021).

This distinction between populism and ideology matters for the present review because it offers a partial resolution to a long-running debate about whether conspiracy belief is ideologically symmetric (equally prevalent on the political left and right) or asymmetric (concentrated on one side, typically portrayed as the radical right). The populism literature suggests that at least part of the apparent ideological patterning in conspiracy belief may be better explained by a citizen's populist orientation which can, in principle, attach to either left-wing or right-wing politics than by their position on a single left-right ideological dimension. This is broadly consistent with the need-for-chaos literature reviewed above, which explicitly found chaos-seeking individuals drawn to both a right-wing populist figure and a left-wing populist figure in the same national context, rather than to a single ideological camp (Petersen et al., 2023). Reviews of the broader political-science

literature have also noted that specific conspiracy theories can carry a genuine partisan skew reflecting their content, since a conspiracy theory alleging wrongdoing by a specific incumbent government will naturally be more attractive to that government's opponents even when the underlying disposition toward conspiratorial thinking in general (conspiracy mentality) is comparatively balanced across the ideological spectrum (Uscinski et al., 2016).

A further political correlate concerns downstream behavioral consequences rather than belief formation. Conspiracy worldview has been shown to relate differently to normative and nonnormative forms of political engagement: experimentally inducing a conspiratorial mindset decreases stated intentions to participate in normative, legal political action (e.g., voting, contacting representatives) while simultaneously increasing stated intentions to engage in nonnormative, illegal action (Imhoff et al., 2021). This asymmetry is consequential for the structural level of our proposed model, discussed below, because it suggests that conspiracy belief's political significance lies not only in whom people vote for, but in whether they continue to see participation within the existing political system as worthwhile at all a question closely related to, but conceptually distinct from, the anti-systemic need-for-chaos construct.

Cognitive Style and Information Processing

Reflective Thinking

The epistemic-motive account places a premium on understanding the cognitive processes that underpin conspiracy belief. Beyond the meta-analytic evidence for a negative association between reflective thinking and conspiracy belief ($r = -.189$; Yelbuz et al., 2022), a growing body of work has sought to unpack the conditions under which this association holds and the mechanisms that explain it. Notably, the association appears robust to the inclusion of covariates such as education, political orientation, and demographic factors, suggesting that reflective thinking captures variance in conspiracy belief that is not reducible to these more commonly studied correlates.

However, the causal direction remains debated. While the cross-sectional association is well-established, longitudinal evidence is sparser. A small number of studies have examined whether changes in analytic thinking precede changes in conspiracy belief, or vice versa, with mixed results. Some experimental work has found that priming analytic thinking (e.g., via the CRT or through contextual cues) can reduce conspiracy belief in the short term, but these effects are often small and transient, and several studies have failed to replicate them (Yelbuz et al., 2022; see also the intervention section below). This disconnect between robust correlational findings and weak experimental effects is a puzzle that the field has only begun to address. One possible resolution, consistent with the three-level model proposed below, is that reflective thinking operates primarily as a dispositional factor that shapes chronic susceptibility to conspiracy belief, rather than as a state that can be easily manipulated in a single experimental session.

Illusory Pattern Perception and the Search for Meaning

A complementary cognitive pathway to conspiracy belief involves the tendency to perceive meaningful patterns where none exist. van Prooijen et al. (2018) provided the most direct evidence linking illusory pattern perception to conspiracy belief, showing that individuals who perceive patterns in random coin-toss sequences and abstract art are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories and supernatural beliefs. This relationship appears to be driven in part by a generalized tendency to impose order on ambiguous stimuli a process that may be particularly pronounced under conditions of uncertainty or lack of control.

Subsequent work has refined this account by distinguishing between two forms of pattern perception: *signal detection*, which involves correctly identifying genuine patterns, and *false alarm*, which involves perceiving patterns where none exist. Using signal detection paradigms, researchers have found that conspiracy believers show a heightened false-alarm rate they see patterns in random noise but do not necessarily

show superior signal detection (Swami et al., 2023). This suggests that the relationship between pattern perception and conspiracy belief is driven by a lowered threshold for perceiving meaningful connections rather than by genuine pattern-sensitivity per se. This distinction has important implications for intervention: attempts to reduce conspiracy belief by encouraging more systematic information processing may need to address the underlying tendency to see patterns in noise, rather than simply encouraging more deliberation.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Natural Experiment

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unusually large and geographically distributed natural experiment for testing conspiracy belief theory, because it combined the classic existential and epistemic triggers emphasized by the tripartite model an uncertain, threatening, and initially poorly understood global event with a directly measurable set of behavioral outcomes: vaccination, mask-wearing, and social distancing. Bierwiaczonek, Gundersen, and Kunst (2022) meta-analyzed correlational and longitudinal evidence from 53 studies (N = 78,625) conducted during 2020 and 2021. They found that conspiracy beliefs were weakly but consistently associated with greater reluctance to adopt prevention measures, both cross-sectionally and over time; conspiracy beliefs specifically predicted lower vaccination uptake and reduced social distancing, but were unrelated to mask-wearing and general hygiene behaviors. The association between conspiracy belief and reduced prevention behavior also strengthened as the pandemic progressed, and conspiracy beliefs predicted greater support for scientifically unsupported alternative treatments. The authors' overall conclusion that the effects were individually small but, aggregated across a population, represented a non-negligible public health concern has been influential in framing conspiracy belief as a policy-relevant rather than purely academic issue.

Subsequent work has refined the temporal dynamics of this relationship. A continuous-time meta-analysis coded 1,035 correlations from 17 longitudinal samples (N = 16,350) and found evidence for reciprocal effects between conspiracy belief and reduced preventive behavior, with the largest cross-lagged effects observed at intervals of three to six months information with direct implications for the timing of both future research measurement waves and real-world public health interventions (Stasielowicz, 2022b). This bidirectionality is theoretically important: it suggests that conspiracy belief is not merely a stable trait that predicts subsequent behavior, but a belief that can itself be reinforced by prior noncompliant behavior, potentially through a self-justification or cognitive-dissonance-reduction process.

Cross-national variation in these effects is also noteworthy. Studies conducted in countries with higher levels of institutional trust and more effective pandemic responses generally found weaker associations between conspiracy belief and noncompliance, suggesting that the behavioral consequences of conspiracy belief are moderated by contextual factors (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2022). This is consistent with the three-level model proposed below: the behavioral expression of conspiracy belief depends not only on individual-level motives but on the structural and institutional context in which those motives are activated.

The pandemic literature also illustrates a broader methodological point relevant to the entire field: content-specific conspiracy beliefs (e.g., "COVID-19 was deliberately created") sometimes show effects on behavior even when there is no logical connection between the specific content of the belief and the behavior in question for instance, believing COVID-19 is human-made has been shown to reduce adherence to social distancing despite no logical link between the two (Bierwiaczonek et al., 2020). This pattern is difficult to explain through the epistemic-motive account alone, since the specific content of the belief is not what predicts the behavior; it instead points toward a generalized distrust or oppositional orientation closely related to the need-for-chaos and anti-systemic constructs discussed above as the more proximal driver of behavior.

Can Conspiracy Beliefs Be Reduced? The Intervention Literature

If conspiracy beliefs are motivated, an obvious applied question follows: can they be durably changed once formed, and if so, by targeting which of the levels described above? Until recently, this question had been addressed almost entirely through small, one-off experimental studies rather than systematic synthesis. That gap has begun to close: Stasielowicz's (2026) meta-analysis of interventions addressing conspiracy beliefs represents the first systematic aggregation of this experimental literature, synthesizing the effectiveness of varied intervention approaches across the available controlled studies.

The meta-analysis included a wide range of intervention types, broadly categorized into: (a) *inoculation and prebunking* messages, which preemptively expose individuals to weakened versions of conspiracy arguments and refute them; (b) *analytic-thinking primes*, which attempt to activate reflective cognitive styles before or during conspiracy-relevant information processing; (c) *trust- or control-restoring manipulations*, which seek to address the existential motives by enhancing feelings of control or institutional trust; and (d) *perspective-taking and empathy-based* interventions, which target social motives by encouraging individuals to consider the consequences of conspiracy belief for themselves or others.

The meta-analytic findings reveal a consistent but modest overall effect. Across interventions, the pooled effect size (Hedges' *g*) was approximately 0.24, 95% CI [0.17, 0.31], indicating that interventions produce small-to-medium reductions in conspiracy belief relative to control conditions (Stasielowicz, 2026). However, substantial heterogeneity was observed, and effect sizes varied considerably across intervention types. Inoculation and prebunking approaches showed the most consistent immediate effects ($r \approx 0.30$), while analytic-thinking primes showed the weakest and most inconsistent effects ($g \approx 0.10$), with several individual studies failing to find any effect. This pattern is instructive: it suggests that briefly activating a reflective mindset in a single session is unlikely to durably shift conspiracy beliefs, even though dispositional reflective thinking is robustly correlated with lower conspiracy belief cross-sectionally.

Critically, the meta-analysis also examined durability. Only a minority of studies included follow-up assessments beyond the immediate post-test session, and among those that did, the effects tended to decay substantially over time. By one to three months post-intervention, most effects had attenuated to non-significance (Stasielowicz, 2026). This finding aligns with the three-level model we propose below: interventions that target situational triggers (e.g., specific uncertainty about a single event) are likely to produce short-term effects but may not address the underlying dispositional or structural factors that sustain conspiracy belief over time.

A further qualification concerns the distinction between private belief and public endorsement. Some interventions appeared to reduce the *willingness to share* conspiracy content without reducing private belief itself, consistent with the distinction drawn earlier in the need-for-chaos literature (Farhart et al., 2023). This is an important practical finding: even if interventions do not change what individuals privately believe, they may reduce the social transmission of conspiracy theories, which may be a more tractable intervention target in some contexts.

The layered view of intervention effects has direct practical implications. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *situational* activated by a specific, recent, poorly explained crisis may respond well to timely, authoritative, and epistemically satisfying communication that reduces uncertainty. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *dispositional* rooted in stable personality traits such as narcissism or schizotypy is unlikely to be shifted by brief informational messaging, and may instead require longer-term, perhaps therapeutic or educational, interventions that address the underlying trait. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *structural* rooted in a longstanding, arguably rational distrust born of genuine marginalization or systemic neglect is unlikely to respond to the same messaging, and may instead require the underlying structural grievance to be

acknowledged and addressed before any specific factual correction can gain traction. Treating all conspiracy belief as a single undifferentiated target for "debunking" risks wasting resources on situational fixes for what are, in some populations, structural problems.

Toward an Integrative Three-Level Model

The literatures reviewed above were, for the most part, developed independently, using different measures, different populations, and different theoretical vocabularies. Read together, however, they suggest that the field would benefit from distinguishing three levels of explanation that are frequently conflated under the single heading of "motives."

Level 1: Dispositional

The dispositional level comprises relatively stable individual differences that raise or lower a person's baseline propensity toward conspiratorial thinking regardless of situation: cognitive style (reflective versus intuitive thinking; Yelbuz et al., 2022), personality traits such as schizotypy and narcissism (Stasielowicz, 2022a; Došenović & Dinić, 2024), and dispositional need for uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). These constructs behave, empirically, much like traditional personality variables: they are measurable outside of any specific conspiracy-relevant context, they show reasonable temporal stability, and their associations with conspiracy belief tend to be modest in magnitude but highly replicable across samples. The dispositional level corresponds most closely to the epistemic domain of the tripartite framework (reflective thinking, need for cognition) but also includes elements of the social domain (dispositional need for uniqueness, narcissism).

Level 2: Situational

The situational level comprises motives that are activated or intensified by a specific triggering event or threat: the epistemic uncertainty following an unexplained crisis, the existential threat posed by a loss of control (as in the COVID-19 literature), and the social threat posed by a challenge to one's group's status (as in the collective narcissism and ingroup victimhood literatures). Unlike dispositional constructs, these motives are, by definition, context-dependent: the same person may show markedly different levels of conspiratorial thinking depending on whether they are currently experiencing an acute threat. This level corresponds most directly to the original tripartite framework as it was originally conceptualized as a theory of how *situational* needs drive conspiracy belief. Importantly, the effects of situational motives are likely moderated by dispositional factors: individuals high in trait paranoia or narcissism may be more susceptible to situational threat cues.

Level 3: Structural

The structural level, which is the least developed in the psychological literature, comprises the anti-systemic and chaos-seeking motives identified primarily by political scientists (Petersen et al., 2023), as well as the genuinely rational responses of marginalized groups to real patterns of discrimination and disadvantage (Crocker et al., 1999). This level differs from the first two in that it is not primarily about an individual's psychological need for understanding, security, or esteem, but about that individual's structural position within a social and political system, and their instrumental orientation toward disrupting or challenging that system. The structural level also encompasses the populist anti-elitism reviewed above (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2021), which reflects a worldview that is neither purely dispositional nor purely situational but is shaped by one's position in the social hierarchy and one's relationship to political institutions.

Crucially, the structural level includes both *instrumental* anti-systemic motivation (deliberate disruption of the status quo) and *expressive* or *identity-based* responses to systemic disadvantage (attributing group-level outcomes to external, discriminatory forces). These two subcomponents may have different psychological mechanisms and behavioral consequences, but they share a common feature: they are not reducible to the epistemic, existential, or social motives operating at the individual level. Someone who shares conspiracy theories to "cause chaos"

(need for chaos) may not genuinely believe the content of the theory, and someone from a marginalized group who endorses a conspiracy about systemic discrimination may be making a rational appraisal of their social position rather than satisfying a psychological need.

Mapping the Constructs

Table 1

Mapping of Key Constructs onto the Integrative Three-Level Model

Level	Core Mechanism	Key Constructs	Primary Tripartite Alignment
Dispositional	Stable individual differences in cognitive style and personality	Reflective/analytic thinking (Yelbuz et al., 2022); Need for uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017); Narcissism, schizotypy, Dark Tetrad traits (Stasielowicz, 2022a; Došenović & Dinić, 2024)	Epistemic (cognitive style) and Social (uniqueness, narcissism)
Situational	Motives activated by acute, context-dependent threats	Epistemic uncertainty (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017); Existential threat/lack of control (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015); Social threat/ingroup victimhood (Cichocka et al., 2016; Biddlestone et al., 2022)	Epistemic, Existential, and Social (tripartite core)
Structural	Position in social/political system; orientation toward system disruption	Need for chaos (Petersen et al., 2023); Populist anti-elitism (Castanho Silva et al., 2017); Systemic marginalization responses (Crocker et al., 1999)	Spans all three, but adds non-motivational (instrumental/rational) elements

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Interactions Across Levels

The three levels are not independent; they interact in theoretically important ways. Dispositional factors moderate the effect of situational triggers: individuals high in trait paranoia or low in reflective thinking are likely to be more responsive to situational uncertainty cues than individuals with more adaptive cognitive styles. Structural factors shape both the availability of situational triggers (e.g., marginalized groups are more likely to experience genuine threats and exclusion) and the interpretive frame through which those triggers are processed (e.g., a history of systemic discrimination may make conspiracy explanations more plausible and less "motivated" in the pathological sense). And situational triggers may, over time, crystallize into dispositional tendencies an individual who repeatedly experiences existential threat may develop a chronic conspiracy-prone worldview.

We suggest that much of the apparent proliferation of "motives" in the recent literature need for uniqueness, need for chaos, collective narcissism, personal narcissism, powerlessness, ingroup victimhood, and the original tripartite trio reflects not twelve or more independent constructs but a smaller number of underlying dimensions expressed at these three different levels of analysis.

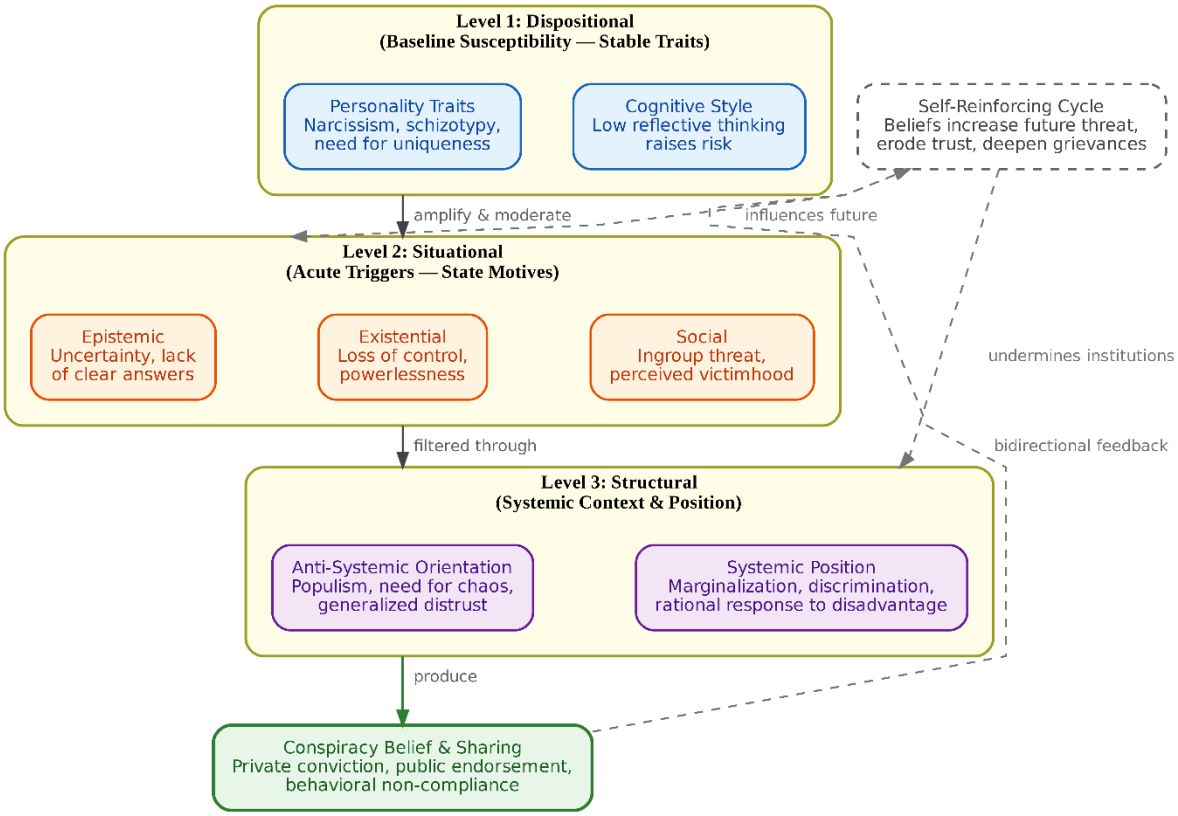

Figure 1 The Three-Level Integrative Model of Conspiracy Belief Determinants. Conspiracy beliefs emerge from the interaction of (Level 1) stable personality traits and cognitive styles, (Level 2) acute situational triggers (crises, uncertainty, threats), and (Level 3) structural factors (systemic distrust, marginalization, anti-establishment sentiment). Once adopted, conspiracy beliefs reinforce distrust and fear, creating a self-perpetuating feedback loop that increases future susceptibility

Progress on this front will likely require more studies that measure multiple candidate constructs simultaneously within a single sample, allowing formal tests of discriminant validity, rather than the current pattern in which each construct is typically studied in relative isolation from its conceptual neighbors.

Methodological Limitations Across the Literature

Several limitations recur across the studies and meta-analyses reviewed here, and are worth stating explicitly because they qualify essentially every substantive conclusion above.

Cross-Sectional and Correlational Designs

First, the overwhelming majority of the underlying primary studies are cross-sectional and correlational and rely on self-report measures of both conspiracy belief and its putative motivational correlates. Even where the theoretical language is explicitly motivational and causal ("driven by," "motivates"), the empirical designs are frequently unable to establish causal direction. Several of the relationships reviewed here for instance, between conspiracy belief and preventive health behavior during COVID-19 have since been shown to be genuinely bidirectional (Stasielowicz, 2022b) rather than unidirectional as originally framed. The field would benefit from a greater emphasis on longitudinal and experimental designs that can

establish temporal precedence and, where ethically feasible, causal manipulation.

WEIRD Samples and Limited Generalizability

Second, samples remain heavily skewed toward Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations, and predominantly English-language or Western European measurement instruments. This limits confidence that the specific effect sizes reported here for instance, the r = –.189 reflective-thinking association or the r = .20 need-for-uniqueness association generalize to non-WEIRD populations. Critically, even the pattern of correlations may differ across cultural contexts. For example, in societies with historically low institutional trust or recent experiences of state-sponsored misinformation, the association between existential motives and conspiracy belief may be stronger, while the association with dispositional cognitive style may be weaker or moderated by educational context. The structural level of our proposed model is likely to be especially sensitive to cultural and political context, as it concerns the individual's relationship to social and political systems that vary dramatically across countries. We recommend that future research prioritize cross-cultural replication and the development of culturally adapted measures, particularly for non-Western populations.

Measurement Heterogeneity

Third, measurement heterogeneity across the field is substantial, as discussed in detail above. Studies vary in whether they measure a generalized "conspiracy mentality" (e.g., via the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire), a generic multi-item conspiracist beliefs scale (e.g., the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale), or belief in one or more specific named conspiracy theories (e.g., a vaccine-specific scale). Several meta-analyses reviewed above explicitly note that effect sizes can differ depending on which type of measure is used, and that specific conspiracy theories may show a more politically or ideologically skewed distribution of belief than generic conspiracy mentality (Imhoff et al., 2022). Future primary studies would benefit from routinely reporting both generic and specific measures so that meta-analysts can more cleanly separate measurement-driven heterogeneity from theoretically meaningful moderation.

Construct Validity and Discriminant Validity

Fourth, and relatedly, several of the constructs we have reviewed under different labels need for uniqueness, need for chaos, collective narcissism, ingroup victimhood have rarely been measured together in the same study, which makes it difficult to establish their incremental or discriminant validity relative to one another. It remains an open empirical question whether, for example, need for chaos predicts conspiracy sharing behavior over and above collective narcissism and perceived ingroup victimhood, or whether these constructs substantially overlap once shared variance is accounted for. The field would benefit from studies that explicitly test competing models and establish the unique predictive power of each construct.

Integration Across Disciplines

Fifth, the psychological and political-science literatures reviewed here have developed largely in parallel, with limited cross-citation until relatively recently. Psychological work on the tripartite motives has, until recently, made comparatively little contact with the populism and anti-systemic-sentiment literatures reviewed in the fourth section above, despite substantial conceptual overlap between, for instance, perceived ingroup victimhood (a social motive) and populist anti-elitism (a political-science construct). Where the two literatures have begun to intersect for instance, in recent work explicitly relating populist worldview to COVID-19 conspiracy belief the results have generally been productive, suggesting that closer integration of psychological and political-science approaches is a promising, currently underexploited direction for the field.

Publication Bias and the File-Drawer Problem

Sixth, publication practices in this area may still understate the true heterogeneity of effects across cultural and linguistic contexts. Several of the

meta-analyses reviewed here explicitly checked for, and did not find strong evidence of, publication bias using standard statistical tests (e.g., Yelbuz et al., 2022; Stasielowicz, 2022a). However, these tests are better suited to detecting bias in effect-size magnitude within a body of already-published, already-English-language-dominant studies than to detecting the prior-stage bias introduced by which populations get studied and published on at all. This is a limitation of the available bias-detection tools generally, not a specific criticism of any single meta-analysis, but it is worth keeping in view when generalizing any of the pooled estimates reported in this review. Pre-registration of studies and open-science practices, including the publication of null results, would mitigate this concern.

Future Research Priorities

The three-level model and the methodological limitations discussed above point to a clear empirical agenda for the next phase of research on conspiracy beliefs. We highlight five priorities.

First, multi-level studies. The field needs studies that simultaneously measure dispositional (cognitive style, personality), situational (acute threat, uncertainty), and structural (perceived marginalization, anti-systemic sentiment) predictors within the same sample, ideally with longitudinal or experimental designs capable of establishing temporal precedence. Very few existing studies do this; most instead specialize in one level, using designs and measures optimized for that level alone. A modest number of well-powered, multi-level studies would likely do more to adjudicate between competing motivational accounts than a further round of single-construct correlational studies, however well-conducted, added to an already crowded literature.

Second, longitudinal and diary designs. The field would benefit from studies that track conspiracy beliefs, motivations, and behavior over time at the individual level, using daily diaries or repeated assessments. Such designs would allow researchers to examine the within-person dynamics of conspiracy belief for example, whether individuals become more conspiracy-prone on days when they experience greater uncertainty or threat, and whether these effects are moderated by dispositional factors. The bidirectional relationship identified between conspiracy belief and health behavior during COVID-19 (Stasielowicz, 2022b) is a case in point: only longitudinal designs can unpack such reciprocal dynamics.

Third, causal experiments that target multiple levels. The intervention literature, though still nascent, suggests that single-session interventions produce only modest and short-lived effects. Future experimental work should compare interventions that target dispositional (e.g., cognitive training), situational (e.g., uncertainty reduction), and structural (e.g., institutional trust-building) factors, and test whether multi-level interventions produce larger or more durable effects. It may be that addressing only one level is insufficient for example, reducing uncertainty (situational) without addressing an individual's chronic reflective deficits (dispositional) or institutional trust (structural) may produce only temporary change.

Fourth, cross-cultural and cross-national replication. As noted above, the field remains heavily WEIRD-dominant. Future research should prioritize replication in non-Western and non-English-speaking populations and should develop culturally adapted measures of conspiracy belief and its correlates. Cross-national comparisons would also allow researchers to examine the extent to which the three-level model holds across different political and institutional contexts. For example, in societies with high institutional trust, the structural level may be less relevant; in societies with a history of state-sponsored disinformation, the situational and structural levels may interact in ways not observed in Western democracies.

Fifth, discriminant validity and construct refinement. The field would benefit from studies that explicitly test the discriminant validity of the overlapping constructs reviewed above need for uniqueness, need for chaos, collective narcissism, ingroup victimhood, and the original tripartite motives using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to determine whether these constructs are genuinely distinct or are best understood as indicators of a smaller number of latent dimensions. This is essential for

theoretical parsimony and for avoiding the proliferation of redundant constructs that characterize the current literature.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

Beyond its implications for future primary research, the three-level model proposed here has two immediate applications.

First, for practitioners designing public communication or public-health messaging, it suggests that the appropriate intervention will depend on which level is driving belief in a given population or context. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *situational* activated by a specific, recent, poorly explained crisis may respond well to timely, authoritative, and epistemically satisfying communication that reduces uncertainty. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *dispositional* rooted in stable personality traits such as narcissism or schizotypy is unlikely to be shifted by brief informational messaging, and may instead require longer-term, perhaps therapeutic or educational, interventions that address the underlying trait. A population whose conspiracy belief is primarily *structural* rooted in a longstanding, arguably rational distrust born of genuine marginalization or systemic neglect is unlikely to respond to the same messaging and may instead require the underlying structural grievance to be acknowledged and addressed before any specific factual correction can gain traction. Treating all conspiracy belief as a single undifferentiated target for "debunking" risks wasting resources on situational fixes for what are, in some populations, structural problems.

Second, for theory development, the model suggests a concrete empirical agenda: studies that simultaneously measure dispositional (cognitive style, personality), situational (acute threat, uncertainty), and structural (perceived marginalization, anti-systemic sentiment) predictors within the same sample, ideally with longitudinal or experimental designs capable of establishing temporal precedence. Very few existing studies do this; most instead specialize in one level, using designs and measures optimized for that level alone. A modest number of well-powered, multi-level studies would likely do more to adjudicate between competing motivational accounts than a further round of single-construct correlational studies, however well-conducted, added to an already crowded literature.

Conclusion

The past decade of research on conspiracy beliefs has moved beyond simple deficit models toward sophisticated motivational accounts, yet the field now faces a different challenge: theoretical crowding. The proliferation of overlapping constructs need for uniqueness, need for chaos, collective narcissism, ingroup victimhood, and the original tripartite motives has inflated the apparent number of independent drivers while obscuring a smaller number of underlying dimensions. We have proposed that these diverse literatures can be productively organized into a three-level model distinguishing dispositional (stable personality and cognitive style), situational (acute threats and uncertainties), and structural (anti-systemic sentiment and systemic marginalization) determinants. This integrative framework clarifies that the same surface-level behavior endorsing a conspiracy theory may emerge from qualitatively different psychological processes at each level, with correspondingly different implications for intervention. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated both the real-world consequences of conspiracy beliefs and the limitations of treating them as a unitary phenomenon. As the field moves forward, the priority should shift from identifying new correlates to testing interactions across levels, employing longitudinal and multi-level designs, and subjecting overlapping constructs to rigorous discriminant validity tests. Only by distinguishing what is genuinely distinct from what is merely redundant can the field achieve the theoretical parsimony that the tripartite framework promised but has not yet fully delivered.

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