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The dark side of social movements: social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories

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Social change does not always equal social progress—there is a dark side of social movements. We discuss conspiracy theory beliefs – beliefs that a powerful group of people are secretly working towards a malicious goal – as one contributor to destructive social movements. Research has linked conspiracy theory beliefs to anti-democratic attitudes, prejudice and non-normative political behavior. We propose a framework to understand the motivational processes behind conspiracy theories and associated social identities and collective action. We argue that conspiracy theories comprise at least two components – content and qualities—that appeal to people differently based on their motivations. Social identity motives draw people foremost to contents of conspiracy theories while uniqueness motives draw people to qualities of conspiracy theories.

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Social change is mostly equated with social *progress* brought about by revolutionary movements such as the Arab Spring or #MeToo. However, social change is often destructive. Take the rising U.S. anti-vaccination movement. While measles vaccination rates have been steadily decreasing in many parts of the U.S. [1], the numbers of measles cases have skyrocketed from 86 cases in 2016–1282 cases in 2019 [2]. Recent statistics from Europe provide another example of potentially dangerous social change. The current European Parliament holds as many as nine far-right parties [3]. These parties include Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, Italy's The League and France's National Rally [4] — all of which exhibit

xenophobic thought and pursue anti-Islamic political agendas [4–7]. What motivates social movements that threaten social health, economic prosperity, and democratic principles? We argue that conspiracy theories — theories that a powerful group of people are secretly working towards a malevolent or unlawful goal [8**] can be one reason. Though not all conspiracy theories are wrong, irrational, or harmful for society, many of them are in fact closely intertwined with some of today's most powerful, destructive social movements. For example, 'The Great Replacement' conspiracy theory about a secret plot to ethnically and culturally replace White Europeans is one of the fastest growing far-right movements in Europe advocating to deport European immigrants [9]. In this article, we will explain how conspiracy theories can foster anti-democratic social movements. Our article will exclusively focus on the destructive social movements associated with conspiracy theories, although we do acknowledge that certain (true) conspiracy theories can foster democratic and progressive social movements such as anti-corruption movements.

Conspiracy theories as a threat to democracy

While healthy skepticism of government and elites is necessary for a functioning democracy, beliefs in certain conspiracies can pose a serious threat to democracy. Conspiracy theory beliefs⁴ are linked to political alienation and cynicism [10–12], decreased intentions to volunteer for a charity [13] and demotivate people to engage in normal, democratic practices [see Ref. 14] like voting [15, but see Ref. 16].

Conspiracy theories can even motivate unlawful anti-democratic political behavior (e.g. attacking people in power; [17**,18]). Conspiracy beliefs have been linked to right-wing authoritarianism [19], political extremism across the political spectrum [20] and grandiose beliefs about the nation [21,22*,23*].

People holding stronger conspiracy theory beliefs are more open to everyday crimes [24] and hold stronger hostile behavioral intentions towards outgroups [23*]. For instance, Jewish conspiracy theory beliefs are related to

⁴ Studies differ in their focus on beliefs in real-world conspiracy theories, novel conspiracy theories, conspiracy thinking, and conspiracy mentality. It goes beyond this paper to discuss and address psychological differences between these constructs. We will use 'conspiracy theory beliefs' as an overarching, simplifying term.

prejudice and discrimination against Jewish people [25–28] and several other outgroups [29**].

The two motivational allures of conspiracy theories: content and qualities

To understand why and how conspiracy theory beliefs fuel anti-democratic social movements it is crucial to understand their motivational underpinnings and relationship to social identity. Recent reviews [30,8**] distilled three main motivators behind conspiracy theory beliefs: conspiracy beliefs are higher when people want to (1) feel good about themselves and the groups they belong to [31,32,21–23], (2) make sense of their environment [33–35, cf. 60] or (3) feel safe and in control [36–38].

Yet, an overarching framework that captures how these motives are linked to belief in conspiracy theories is missing. We propose that conspiracy theories comprise at least two motivational allures – content and qualities – that draw people toward them. We argue that motives behind conspiracy theories are qualitatively different for those who are enticed by the content of the conspiracy theory as opposed to those enticed by the qualities of the conspiracy theory. Using this distinction, also clarifies the relationship between different motives (e.g. social identity motives, uniqueness motives) and conspiracy theory beliefs. Social identity motives draw people foremost to the content of a conspiracy theory while uniqueness motives draw people foremost to the qualities of a conspiracy theory.

One may think about endorsing conspiracy theories like choosing a movie to watch. Someone who enjoys a good thriller might be more inclined to randomly pick a movie from the ‘horror’ genre because its defining qualities (e.g. creepiness) promise to give them similar feelings. When and where the plot takes place might be inconsequential. Conversely, someone might be a fan of an actress (e.g. Julia Roberts) and picks a movie she’s starring in, regardless of its genre. Conspiracy theories can be understood as a genre of belief systems that is defined by certain qualities. Each individual conspiracy theory is a film with a unique content.

Content refers to the unique narrative elements of each conspiracy theory. While conspiracy theories all share the premise that a nefarious group is secretly working towards a malicious or unlawful goal, individual conspiracy theories vary in the specific group (e.g. Illuminati; government), which goal is pursued (e.g. New World Order, war) and which events can be explained (e.g. 2008 financial crisis, 9/11 terrorist attacks). This is similar to the contents of specific movies that people find appealing, like your favorite actor.

Qualities on the other hand refer to the structural properties that all conspiracy theories have in common. For

example, regardless of their specific content, most conspiracy theories are epistemic (i.e. explain most events) and counter-normative (i.e. challenge agreed upon knowledge). This is similar to the specific qualities that define a genre of movies and that certain people find appealing, like the creepiness of horror movies or the silliness of comedy movies.

We argue that depending on context and motivational states, different contents or qualities are more alluring. For instance, people who are prejudiced against Muslims might be motivated to believe any sort of false information that presents this group in a negative light, including conspiracy theories. This is consistent with evidence that participants’ beliefs in conspiracy theories depended on who the alleged conspirator was [39,40**]. In contrast, the belief in a flat earth might primarily emerge from the psychological benefits of holding contrarian beliefs rather than compelling physical arguments. This is consistent with findings that participants who believed in one conspiracy theory were also more likely to believe in others, even when they were contradictory [41,42] (Figure 1).

We illustrate our argument by the means of discussing two motives behind conspiracy theory beliefs in more detail: social identity motives and uniqueness motives.

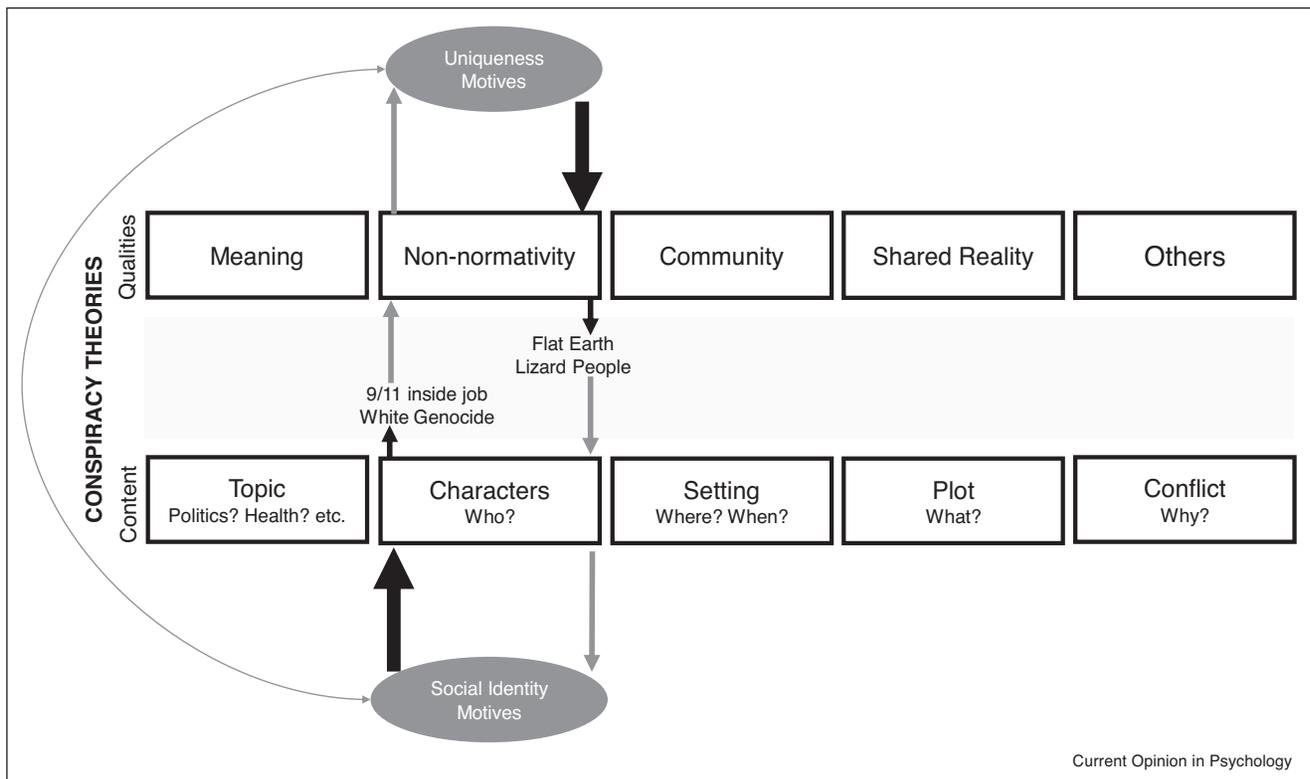
Content drawn motives: social identity motives

People are prone to form social identities in which group membership becomes part of the self. Social identities are connected with different motives including the need to hold positive beliefs about ingroups and negative beliefs about outgroups [43]. We argue that these motives draw people primarily to certain *contents* of conspiracy theories.

Before the 2012 U.S. Presidential election, Democrats and Republicans equally expected that electoral fraud would occur. Once President Obama was re-elected, however, Republicans were more likely to believe that electoral fraud had occurred [44]. After the elections, fraud beliefs might have helped Republicans to uphold a positive partisan identity [see Ref. 45**]. In another line of research conducted in the United States, a chronic need for the recognition of national greatness (i.e. collective narcissism) was associated with a conviction that foreign governments (outgroup members), but not the U.S. government, are involved in conspiracies [21]. In both of these examples, the specific content of the conspiracy theory (e.g. who conspired) is crucial for its appeal.

In these cases, conspiracy theory beliefs psychologically greatly overlap with other kinds of false beliefs and can be explained by affiliated psychological models. For instance, in line with the identity-based model of political beliefs [45**], social identity motives increased participants’ likelihood to believe in fake news that

Figure 1



Conspiracy theories comprise at least two allures: Content and Qualities.

Conspiracy theories lure people with at least two different components — content and qualities. People who are enticed by the content of the conspiracy theory are driven by motives different to those who are enticed by the qualities of the conspiracy theory. The figure illustrates this process using social identity motives and uniqueness motives as two examples. Social identity motives draw people primarily to the content of a conspiracy theory. Uniqueness motives draw people primarily to certain qualities of a conspiracy theory. Both motives interact with each other and can foster each other.

represented their own political party as moral [46]. Likewise, participants were more likely to believe conspiracy theories that aligned with their party's political stances and vilified the opposite party [39,40,47,48]. Sometimes people may be predominantly drawn to conspiracy theories because their content allows them to legitimize and enforce pre-existing beliefs and attitudes.

Quality drawn motives: examples of epistemic and uniqueness motives

Various psychological needs may draw people to conspiracy theories, primarily because their *qualities* promise (see Ref. [30]) to meet these needs. For instance, conspiracy theories imbue events with meaning and help people to make sense of events. Notably, research suggests that conspiracy theories might only be epistemically relevant when a situation is uncertain and conspiracy theory explanations are particularly salient ([34]; see also Ref. [49]). If alternative explanations for events are present, conspiracy theories can forfeit their epistemic allure. We take this as preliminary evidence that people sometimes

turn to conspiracy theories foremost because of their qualities (here: ability to explain an event).

Further, all conspiracy theories assert to know of secret information [32] and are unconventional (i.e. challenge social agreed upon knowledge and beliefs). This way, holding conspiracy theory beliefs means to be special and unique. Unsurprisingly, studies found that stronger uniqueness needs were linked to stronger conspiracy theory beliefs [31,32,36]. Important for our distinction between content and qualities, participants with high (versus low) uniqueness needs were only more likely to believe in a novel conspiracy theory if it was supported by a minority (versus majority) of people [31]. It seems that for people with high uniqueness needs, the content of the conspiracy theory could be secondary to its qualities.

Implications and predictions for social movements

The distinction between content and qualities allows us to make several predictions regarding conspiracy theory

beliefs and associated social movements. For brevity, we discuss predictions pertaining to social identity motives and uniqueness motives.

Social identity motives might be a major driver of conspiracy movements that are concerned with the loss of status such as 'The Great Replacement'. Indeed, research suggests that people who believe in their group's superiority but are anxious about its recognition are drawn to conspiracy theories about outgroup members [21, see also Refs. 22*,23*].

Social identity concerns might also foster social movements that advance political polarization and intergroup aggression. For instance, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to endorse Qanon⁵ – the far-right theory that a Deep State is conspiring against President Trump [50]. In contrast, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to believe that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an inside job [51]. These differences might emerge from motivations to defend one's ingroup from external threats and represent outgroups as morally inferior. Together with evidence that conspiracy theories that implicate outgroups can further prejudices, discrimination, and inter-group hostility [23*,25–28,29**] social identity motives might foster a vicious cycle where conspiracy theories intensify inter-group conflict and inter-group conflict fosters conspiracy theories.

Uniqueness needs may be particularly relevant for understanding people's engagement in fringe movements. People might be allured by these movements because their ideas are extremely unusual and non-normative rather than substantive (e.g. moonlanding was faked). Uniqueness needs may also partly explain why conspiracy theories are often connected to movements that deviate from democratic norms. Similar to why people with high uniqueness needs are more likely to choose unusual products [52], they might also be more likely to choose political actions that deviate from social norms (e.g. shadowing alleged conspirators).

Our motivational distinction is a theoretical one. In the real world, none of the mentioned constructs operate in isolation. People are driven by multiple motives and conspiracy theories can meet these various motives at the same time. Further, motives can interact with each other, as can the content and qualities of conspiracy theories. This has important implications for the dynamics of conspiracy movements. For instance, the need for uniqueness may be understood as an innocuous pursuit of originality. However, by challenging official narratives conspiracy theories can actually undermine people's trust in broader societal structures (cf. [53]) leading to

alienation and anomie [10–12,54,55] which in turn is linked to non-normative political activism [17**,18].

Further, people are likely most allured by conspiracy theories and movements that promise to fulfill the highest number of relevant needs at the same time (see Refs. [8**,30]). For instance, because liberals tend to have stronger uniqueness needs [56], they might be especially drawn to conspiracy theories and related movements that are both unpopular and identify the supposedly 'correct' conspirators (e.g. business people [57]).

Closing remarks

Conspiracy theories pose a threat to democratic systems. With the development of social media, conspiracy theorists acquired a new platform to spread unsubstantiated claims at an unprecedented rate and organize dangerous social movements. In fact, false information on Twitter travels faster and reaches larger audiences than accurate information [58]. Social media has allowed for destructive beliefs to spread and fester in large communities. For instance, within the same time period, the hashtag #Qanon has been used roughly as many times (15 million) as #metoo, one of the most transformative social movements in recent memory. Recently, the FBI labeled Qanon as 'conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists' threatening domestic safety [59]. Motivationally distinguishing between content and qualities of conspiracy theories will be crucial to stopping the spread of pernicious beliefs.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Anni Sternisko: Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing, Visualization. **Aleksandra Cichocka:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing. **Jay J Van Bavel:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.02.007>.

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6 Social change (rallies, riots and revolutions) (2020)

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