# People have an accurate folk theory of conspiracy believers

Marius Mercier[1], Noëmon Baudouin[1], Hugo Mercier[1*]

[1]Institut Jean Nicod, Département d'etudes cognitives, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Université PSL, EHESS, CNRS, 75005 Paris, France
*Corresponding author: hugo.mercier@gmail.com

**Abstract**: Seeing someone endorse a conspiracy theory could be informative of which other conspiracy theories they might endorse and reveal broader personality traits. Across three pre-registered experiments (N = 775 US participants), we show that these inferences are supported by the nested structure of conspiracy beliefs: individuals who endorse less popular theories tend to endorse more popular ones, but not vice versa. This pattern holds for real-world conspiracy theories (false and true) as well as for invented ones. When presented with the information that someone endorses or rejects a conspiracy theory, participants could predict which other theories that individual would endorse or reject. Moreover, participants could infer the personality traits of conspiracy believers (e.g., narcissism, manichaeism) by appropriately weighing the rarity of the endorsed conspiracy theory. These findings suggest that people use a folk theory of latent conspiracism to draw broadly accurate inferences about conspiracy believers (or non-believers) from limited information.

**Keywords:** conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, conspiracist ideation, impression formation, social cognition, belief system, personality

# 1. Introduction

People who endorse conspiracy theories share a set of traits that make them potentially problematic partners or friends (Enders et al., 2023), such as extremism (Rottweiler & Gill, 2022), paranoia (Stasielowicz, 2022), or Dark Triad traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism, Kay, 2021). But is believing that the government hides evidence of alien life as diagnostic of these traits as believing that the Sandy Hook shooting was a false flag operation? Given the importance of accurately perceiving others and the potential information provided by conspiracy theory endorsement, we should expect people to possess some "folk theory" of conspiracy believers. This folk theory would guide fine-grained inferences about conspiracy believers, treating some endorsements as carrying more information about their beliefs and personality traits than others.

This graded structure of conspiracy beliefs doesn't derive directly from existing results, which show that endorsement of one conspiracy theory tends to correlate with endorsement of others (even when the theories are unrelated or fictitious; Alper et al., 2025; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Goertzel, 1994; Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Swami et al., 2010, 2011). This clustering is suggestive of a general conspiracy mentality: a tendency to interpret important events as caused by hidden, malicious conspiracies orchestrated by powerful actors (Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013; Frenken & Imhoff, 2021; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). However, it doesn't imply that conspiracy theories vary in how diagnostic they are regarding believers' worldview.

Consistent with the idea that conspiracy beliefs are broadly associated with each other, the literature has focused on perceptions of conspiracy believers as a whole, not on any specific belief. Politicians who endorse conspiracy theories are judged as less trustworthy, less

predictable, and less competent (Green et al., 2023). More generally, people who spread conspiracy theories are perceived as less warm and competent, but also more dominant (Cao et al., 2025; Gundersen et al., 2025), and believers and spreaders of conspiracy theories are judged as higher in narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Gundersen et al., 2025). People are even able to anticipate these negative consequences, expecting to be negatively evaluated when they defend conspiracy theories (Lantian et al., 2018). These findings are in line with the literature on impression formation, which suggests that people are able to form relatively accurate judgments of others, even from minimal cues (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Funder, 1995; Letzring et al., 2021). Moreover, people routinely rely on behaviors, preferences, and expressed beliefs to infer others' personality traits (Back et al., 2010; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006; Tamir & Thornton, 2018; Uleman et al., 2008). Moral and political opinions are especially revealing, shaping impressions of others' character and trustworthiness (Brandt, 2017; Everett et al., 2018; Goodwin et al., 2014). Because many conspiracy theories concern politically or morally charged issues, their endorsement might be diagnostic of underlying personality traits, in a more fine-grained manner than previously investigated.

The literature on the perception of people who endorse conspiracy theories already demonstrates a broad match between people's perceptions and reality. For instance, people who endorse conspiracy theories are perceived as higher in the Dark Triad traits (Gundersen et al., 2025), which aligns with evidence that conspiracy believers tend to score higher on these traits (Kay, 2021). However, we do not know how well calibrated these perceptions are, or whether observers are sensitive to fine-grained differences in how diagnostic different endorsements are. For people to draw such precise inferences, there must be some structure in how conspiracy beliefs are organized within individuals. However, research on how conspiracy beliefs cluster has

not settled on this question. Some analyses favour a single dimension (Frenken & Imhoff, 2021), while others identified content-based clusters (Brotherton et al., 2013; Enders et al., 2021). Other accounts, whether grounded in psychological needs (Biddlestone et al., 2025; Douglas et al., 2017), cognitive biases (Brotherton & French, 2014; Pennycook et al., 2015), or monological belief systems (Goertzel, 1994; Vlasceanu et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022), explain why conspiracy beliefs correlate but do not predict how they are organized.

We propose that conspiracy endorsement follows a systematic order that can be formalized within an Item Response Theory framework (Embretson & Reise, 2013; Rasch, 1960). Each individual can then be characterized by a latent disposition to endorse conspiracy theories, and conspiracy theories can be treated as items that vary in endorsement thresholds, that is, in the level of latent conspiracism at which endorsement becomes likely. This implies a nested structure of conspiracy beliefs: participants high in latent conspiracism should endorse both common and rare conspiracy theories, whereas participants lower in latent conspiracism should endorse only the more common ones (Figure 1).

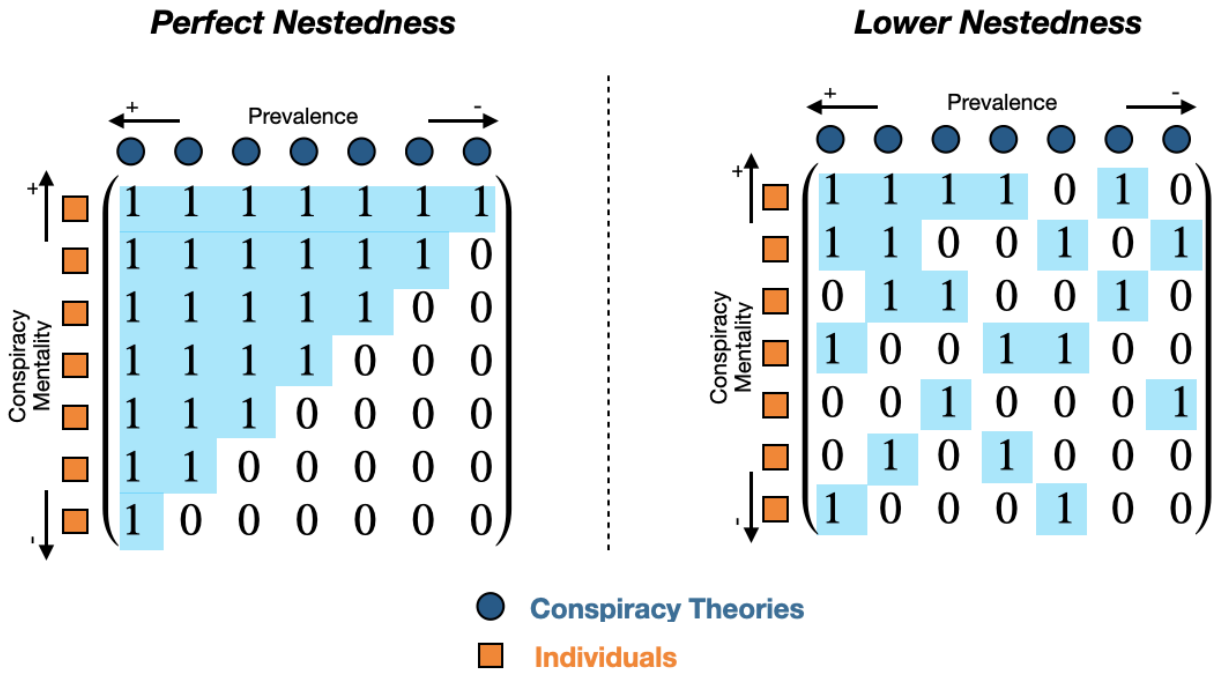

*Figure 1.* A perfectly nested matrix of endorsement (left) contrasted with an imperfectly nested matrix (right). Yellow squares represent individuals, and blue circles represent conspiracy theories; 1/0 indicates endorsement/non-endorsment.

Such a structure would allow observers to judge others' underlying dispositions from specific conspiracy endorsements. People are known to exploit similar nested structures in adjacent domains, such as inferences of competence (Dubourg et al., 2025; Mercier, de Lanerolle, et al., 2026; Mercier, Morin, et al., 2026). If observers hold a folk theory of conspiracy belief, they should treat endorsement of rarer conspiracy theories as stronger evidence of a high latent conspiracism, and use a single observed endorsement to predict both (i) what other theories the individual would likely endorse and (ii) the traits associated with conspiracy mentality.

In three pre-registered studies, we test three claims: first, whether conspiracy endorsement is nested (Studies 1 and 2); second, whether observers use this nested structure to infer what conspiracy theories people endorse from the endorsement or rejection of a single theory (Studies 1 and 2); third, whether observers use the same information to infer psychological traits (Study 3). To do so, we ask participants to observe the endorsement or rejection of different "virtual individuals" on a single conspiracy theory, and to predict their endorsement of other theories (Studies 1 and 2) or their psychological traits (Study 3). We compare these assessments to a ground truth obtained by asking participants whether they agree with these same conspiracy theories or personality scale items.

# 2. Research Transparency Statement

## 2.1 General disclosures

**Conflict of interest:** All authors declare no conflicts of interest. **Funding:** The authors acknowledge financial support from Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR PACE ANR-25-CE28-0318 to Hugo Mercier, ANR-17-EURE-0017 to FrontCog, and ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02 to PSL). **Artificial intelligence:** The authors occasionally used AI for proofreading and minor language editing of the manuscript. **Ethics:** This research received approval from the Paris School of Economics Institutional Review Board (ID: 2025-051).

## 2.2 Study 1 disclosure

**Preregistration:** All hypotheses, methods, materials, and analysis plan were pre-registered prior to data collection (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/knes9?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Materials:** All study materials are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/knes9?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Data:** All primary data are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Analysis scripts:** All analysis scripts are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75).

## 2.3 Study 2 disclosure

**Preregistration:** All hypotheses, methods, materials, and analysis plan were pre-registered prior to data collection

(https://osf.io/4nupw/files/cajft?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Materials:** All study materials are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/cajft?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Data:** All primary data are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Analysis scripts:** All analysis scripts are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75).

## 2.4 Study 3 disclosure

**Preregistration:** All hypotheses, methods, materials, and analysis plan were pre-registered prior to data collection (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/6egvq?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). Note that between Studies 2 and 3, we conducted two exploratory pre-registered studies on the reputational consequences of conspiracy theory endorsement as part of a separate project. These pre-registrations appear in the OSF project but are not reported here. **Materials:** All study materials are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/6egvq?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Data:** All primary data are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75). **Analysis scripts:** All analysis scripts are publicly available (https://osf.io/4nupw/files/github?view_only=2c8283549aaa4a78b197f197f0a45b75).

# 3. Study 1

Study 1 tests whether true and false conspiracies are integrated into a nested structure, as predicted if nestedness arises from gradations in latent conspiracism. We pre-registered the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Conspiracy theory endorsement is nested.

**H1'** (corollary of H1)**:** The less prevalent an endorsed conspiracy theory, the greater the total number of conspiracy theories the endorser holds.

**H2:** Participants accurately estimate the prevalence of conspiracy theories.

**H3:** Participants' estimates of conditional endorsement probabilities (i.e. the probability of endorsing a conspiracy theory given the endorsement or non-endorsement of another conspiracy) positively correlate with the actual conditional probabilities.

We also preregistered robustness analyses investigating heterogeneity across participants. We computed a conspiracy score for each participant, based on the number of conspiracy theories they endorsed, and then tested whether H2 and H3 replicated separately in the top 30% (H2t/H3t) and bottom 30% (H2b/H3b) of the score distribution (see preregistration for full details).

## 3.1 Methods

### *3.1.1 Participants*

We recruited 300 U.S. participants on Prolific. We pre-registered two exclusion criteria: two participants were excluded from the analysis for failing the attention check, and 54 participants were excluded for answering at least twice in ways that directly contradicted the instructions. We prevented automated responses with a reCAPTCHA checkbox. 244 participants were included in the analysis (126 women, 118 men, $M_{Age}$ = 46, $SD_{Age}$ = 13).

### *3.1.2 Procedures*

The experiment comprised two phases. In the judgment phase, participants evaluated five virtual individuals, each described by their agreement or disagreement with one of sixteen conspiracy theories (the "observed" theory, randomized). No additional information was provided regarding virtual individuals. For each virtual individual, participants predicted whether that individual would agree or disagree with each of the remaining fifteen theories, as well as the observed theory itself (as an attention check). After making their predictions, participants estimated the prevalence of the observed theory by reporting how many participants out of a hundred would agree with it. This procedure was repeated five times.

In the questionnaire phase, participants indicated whether they tended to agree or disagree (binary measure) with the same sixteen conspiracy theories. This phase provided the actual endorsement rates and co-endorsement structure against which participants' predictions were evaluated.

### *3.1.3 Materials*

We used a subset of the conspiracy theories from Pennycook et al. (2025), including both true conspiracy theories (theories that are warranted by epistemic authorities) and false conspiracy theories. See Table 1 for the full list.

*Table 1.* Study 1: Descriptive statistics for each conspiracy theory. The actual and estimated prevalence are represented in each cell with standard deviations in parentheses.

| CT | Description | Actual Prevalence | Estimated Prevalence, Full Sample | Estimated Prevalence, Bottom 30% endorsers | Estimated Prevalence, Top 30% endorsers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| F1 | The 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was staged by actors and never actually happened. | 0.04 | 0.14 (0.16) | 0.1 (0.1) | 0.19 (0.21) |
| F2 | Jews are plotting to establish control over the world and dominate it by promoting capitalism. | 0.09 | 0.16 (0.16) | 0.12 (0.1) | 0.22 (0.2) |
| F3 | Governments put fluoride in public water sources because it helps control the masses. | 0.09 | 0.23 (0.17) | 0.2 (0.14) | 0.28 (0.19) |
| F4 | Planned Parenthood is rooted in eugenics and disproportionately targets Black women in order to decrease the number of African-American people. | 0.17 | 0.24 (0.17) | 0.27 (0.19) | 0.29 (0.18) |
| F5 | Dominion voting machines used in some states were programmed to either flip votes to favor Biden or delete votes for Trump in the 2020 U.S. Election. | 0.19 | 0.32 (0.18) | 0.28 (0.16) | 0.4 (0.19) |
| F6 | The Clintons are responsible for murdering a variety of political rivals including Vince Foster. | 0.17 | 0.21 (0.15) | 0.19 (0.15) | 0.23 (0.1) |
| F7 | Billionaire George Soros paid people to protest against the Trump Administration. | 0.32 | 0.34 (0.17) | 0.26 (0.12) | 0.4 (0.16) |
| F8 | Proof of alien contact is being concealed from the public. | 0.45 | 0.4 (0.25) | 0.32 (0.21) | 0.5 (0.23) |
| T1 | The Dalai Lama received a six-figure salary during the 1960s from the U.S. government. | 0.19 | 0.28 (0.21) | 0.25 (0.19) | 0.37 (0.23) |
| T2 | The US Department of the Treasury poisoned alcohol during Prohibition causing people to die. | 0.2 | 0.22 (0.19) | 0.13 (0.09) | 0.31 (0.21) |
| T3 | In 1953 the United States Atomic Energy Commission examined the impact of radioactive fallout on the world's population and was stealing parts of dead bodies to conduct the research. | 0.33 | 0.28 (0.22) | 0.21 (0.19) | 0.38 (0.24) |

| CT | Description | Actual Prevalence | Estimated Prevalence, Full Sample | Estimated Prevalence, Bottom 30% endorsers | Estimated Prevalence, Top 30% endorsers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T4 | The FBI was spying on former Beatle John Lennon. | 0.51 | 0.41 (0.27) | 0.25 (0.2) | 0.51 (0.26) |
| T5 | A criminal conspiracy by the Church of Scientology during the 1970s aimed to purge unfavorable records by infiltration and theft from government agencies, foreign embassies, etc. | 0.51 | 0.37 (0.23) | 0.3 (0.21) | 0.45 (0.23) |
| T6 | The U.S. government secretly employed more than 1,600 German scientists, including former leaders of the Nazi Party, between 1945 and 1959. | 0.53 | 0.4 (0.24) | 0.27 (0.18) | 0.56 (0.2) |
| T7 | The Nixon administration continuously attempted to cover up its involvement in the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Washington, D.C. Watergate Office Building. | 0.81 | 0.64 (0.24) | 0.59 (0.25) | 0.7 (0.23) |
| T8 | For decades, tobacco companies buried evidence that smoking is deadly. | 0.95 | 0.68 (0.25) | 0.61 (0.29) | 0.8 (0.13) |

## 3.2 Results

All statistical analyses were conducted in R (v.4.4.2), using RStudio (2025.09.1+401). All linear mixed effect models were computed with the "lmerTest" package to obtain p-values via Satterthwaite's degrees of freedom method (Kuznetsova et al., 2017). All β coefficients are standardized.

### *3.2.1 Confirmatory Analyses*

Consistent with H1, conspiracy theory endorsement was significantly nested. We used two standard nestedness measures (NODF, Almeida‐Neto et al., 2008; and temperature; see Dubourg et al., 2025), using the vegan R package (Oksanen et al., 2013) and compared them to 5,000 randomly permuted datasets preserving item prevalence and the average number of endorsed conspiracy theories. Both measures indicated significant nestedness in conspiracy beliefs (NODF = 68.3, $p < .001$, Temperature = 14.9, $p < .001$). Congruently, participants who

endorsed rarer items tended to endorse more conspiracy theories overall (H1': $\beta = .9$, $t(14) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .79$, see Figure 2A).

Participants accurately estimated the prevalence of individual conspiracy theories. The average estimated prevalence of each conspiracy theory was highly correlated with actual prevalence (H2: $\beta = .97$, $t(14) = 14.85$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .94$, see Figure 2B). Participants who agreed with four or fewer theories (i.e. bottom 30% of endorsers), and those who agreed with seven or more theories (i.e. top 30% of endorsers) were also able to accurately guess the prevalence of individual conspiracy theories (H2b: $\beta = .90$, $t(14) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .79$; H2t: $\beta = .97$, $t(14) = 15.36$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .94$; see Figure S1).

Participants were able to predict the co-endorsement structure of conspiracy beliefs: the average estimates of conditional endorsement probabilities positively correlated with the empirical conditional probabilities (H3: $\beta = .77$, $t(478) = 26.05$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .59$, see Figure 2C). This result was robust when testing on the bottom 30% (H3b: $\beta = .66$, $t(478) = 19.17$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .43$) and the top 30% of endorsers (H3t: $\beta = .74$, $t(478) = 24.39$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .55$).

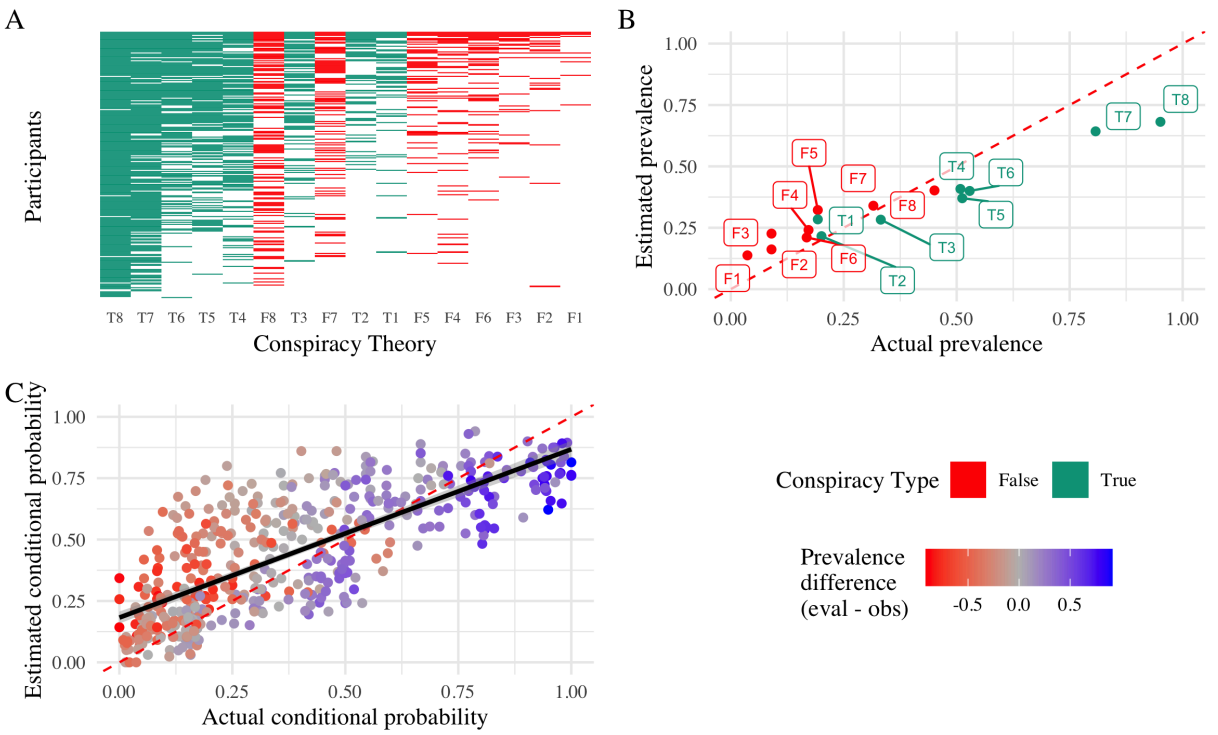


*Figure 2.* Panel **A** shows the nested structure of conspiracy theory endorsement. Each row is a participant (sorted by number of endorsements), each column is a conspiracy theory (sorted by prevalence), and colored tiles indicate endorsement. Panel **B** shows the average estimated prevalence per conspiracy theory (aggregated across participants) compared to the actual prevalence. Panel **C** shows the average estimated conditional probability (aggregated across participants) of endorsing a conspiracy theory given information about another conspiracy theory, plotted against the actual conditional probabilities. Each data point corresponds to a pair of observed-evaluated conspiracy theories ($N_{pairs}$ = 480: 240 [possible pairs] x 2 [endorsement or non-endorsement]).

### *3.2.2 Exploratory analyses*

Since the preregistered analyses for H2 and H3 were conducted at the item level, averaging across participants, we conducted trial-level robustness checks to rule out the possibility that accurate average estimates merely reflect a wisdom-of-the-crowd effect. For H2, we fitted a linear mixed-effects model predicting estimated prevalence from actual prevalence, with random intercepts for observed conspiracy theory and participant, as well as a by-participant random slope for actual prevalence. Predictions remained correlated with actual prevalence ($\beta = .57$, $t(28.16) = 9.72$, $p < .001$). For H3, we fitted a mixed-effects binomial regression model predicting binary endorsement judgments from actual conditional probability, with random intercepts for observed conspiracy theory, judged conspiracy theory, and observed endorsement, plus a random slope and intercept for participant. Predictions were significantly predicted by actual conditional probabilities ($b = 1.33$, $z = 22.54$, $p < .001$).

# 4. Study 2

Study 1 showed that conspiracy endorsement is nested and that participants are able to estimate the prevalence of conspiracy theories and to predict co-endorsement patterns. However, since many of the conspiracies used in Study 1 were popular ones, participants' estimates might also be grounded in their own observations of co-occurrence patterns, instead of a folk theory of latent conspiracism. To rule out the possibility that exposure to specific conspiracy theories explains the results of Study 1, Study 2 replicates Study 1 using only conspiracy theories invented specifically to be used in experiments.

We pre-registered the same hypotheses as in Study 1 (H1/H1', H2, H3, H2t/H3t, H2b/H3b) as well as the exploratory individual-level analyses conducted (H2i, H3i).

## 4.1 Methods

### *4.1.1 Participants*

We recruited 300 U.S. participants on Prolific for this study. To prevent AI-generated responses, a reCAPTCHA checkbox prevented automated responses, and a reCAPTCHA v3 score monitored participants' behavior throughout the survey. We excluded participants who failed the attention check (N = 1), were flagged by anti-bot software (reCAPTCHA v3 score below 0.7; N = 8), or contradicted the provided information at least twice (N = 49). The final sample included 242 participants (124 women, 112 men, 5 non-binary, 1 prefer not to say, $M_{Age}$ = 42, $SD_{Age}$ = 13).

### *4.1.2 Procedures*

The procedures were identical to those in Study 1, except for the materials.

### *4.1.3 Materials*

We reused 5 of the 6 fictitious conspiracy theories developed by Alper et al. (2025) and created 10 additional conspiracy theories (see Table 2).

*Table 2.* Study 2: Descriptive statistics for each conspiracy theory. The actual and estimated prevalence are represented in each cell with standard deviations in parentheses. * indicates theories created by Alper et al. (2025)

| CT | Description | Actual Prevalence | Estimated Prevalence, Full Sample | Estimated Prevalence, Bottom 30% endorsers | Estimated Prevalence, Top 30% endorsers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N1 | India and Pakistan pretend to be enemies to hide that they are working together on a secret weapon of mass destruction that will allow them to dominate Asia. | 0.07 | 0.26 (0.21) | 0.2 (0.16) | 0.37 (0.26) |
| N2 | In the Everglades, biologists created a frozen crocodile-flamingo hybrid which they plan to promote as the new symbol of the United States. | 0.03 | 0.14 (0.18) | 0.11 (0.15) | 0.19 (0.23) |
| N3 | Psychiatric hospitals serve as “brainwashing centers” designed to influence the patients' political orientation. | 0.08 | 0.2 (0.19) | 0.13 (0.13) | 0.31 (0.24) |
| N4 | The reason the average height in Central Asia is shorter than in the rest of the world is due to experiments conducted by China on the gene for short stature in the 1940s.* | 0.12 | 0.25 (0.23) | 0.17 (0.17) | 0.37 (0.26) |
| N5 | Some artists' unstable mental state is the result of an experimental brain surgery developed by the industry to improve creativity and performance. | 0.09 | 0.2 (0.21) | 0.11 (0.11) | 0.3 (0.25) |
| N6 | Some powerful countries organize attacks on other countries' agricultural areas using robot flies produced in laboratories, aiming to damage agricultural activities and trigger economic crises.* | 0.19 | 0.17 (0.19) | 0.11 (0.12) | 0.27 (0.24) |
| N7 | South Korea secretly provides North Korea with intelligence on military technology to ensure the continued U.S. military presence in the region.* | 0.16 | 0.29 (0.19) | 0.23 (0.17) | 0.32 (0.23) |
| N8 | AirPods emit ultrasounds capable of slowing brain activity to render us more docile. | 0.19 | 0.23 (0.21) | 0.19 (0.16) | 0.3 (0.27) |
| N9 | Amy Winehouse was poisoned by her record label because she was about to break her contract. | 0.18 | 0.26 (0.21) | 0.2 (0.16) | 0.35 (0.23) |
| N10 | In Algeria in the 1890s, powdered chemicals were mixed into the air through factory chimneys to make workers more docile to their bosses.* | 0.21 | 0.25 (0.18) | 0.19 (0.17) | 0.34 (0.19) |
| N11 | The 2011 Tōhoku earthquake in Japan could have been avoided if the European Union had agreed to transmit to Japan the seismic data they had collected. | 0.27 | 0.32 (0.24) | 0.24 (0.18) | 0.44 (0.29) |
| N12 | The high price of bedding is the result of major mattress companies forming a cartel. | 0.21 | 0.27 (0.24) | 0.24 (0.23) | 0.36 (0.24) |
| N13 | Public Wi-Fi has been created by the government in order to record all private data of American citizens. | 0.3 | 0.43 (0.24) | 0.27 (0.19) | 0.57 (0.23) |

| CT | Description | Actual Prevalence | Estimated Prevalence, Full Sample | Estimated Prevalence, Bottom 30% endorsers | Estimated Prevalence, Top 30% endorsers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N14 | The Super Bowl was created in 1967 in order to display subliminal advertising to the widest possible audience. | 0.33 | 0.34 (0.21) | 0.21 (0.12) | 0.44 (0.19) |
| N15 | China helped organize and fund the 2020 coup carried out by Assimi Goïta in Mali. | 0.3 | 0.36 (0.21) | 0.33 (0.19) | 0.36 (0.21) |
| N16 | A secret underground city called Xioya was built in Russia to ensure wealthy families survive in the event of great chaos.* | 0.4 | 0.3 (0.21) | 0.21 (0.13) | 0.48 (0.24) |

## 4.2 Results

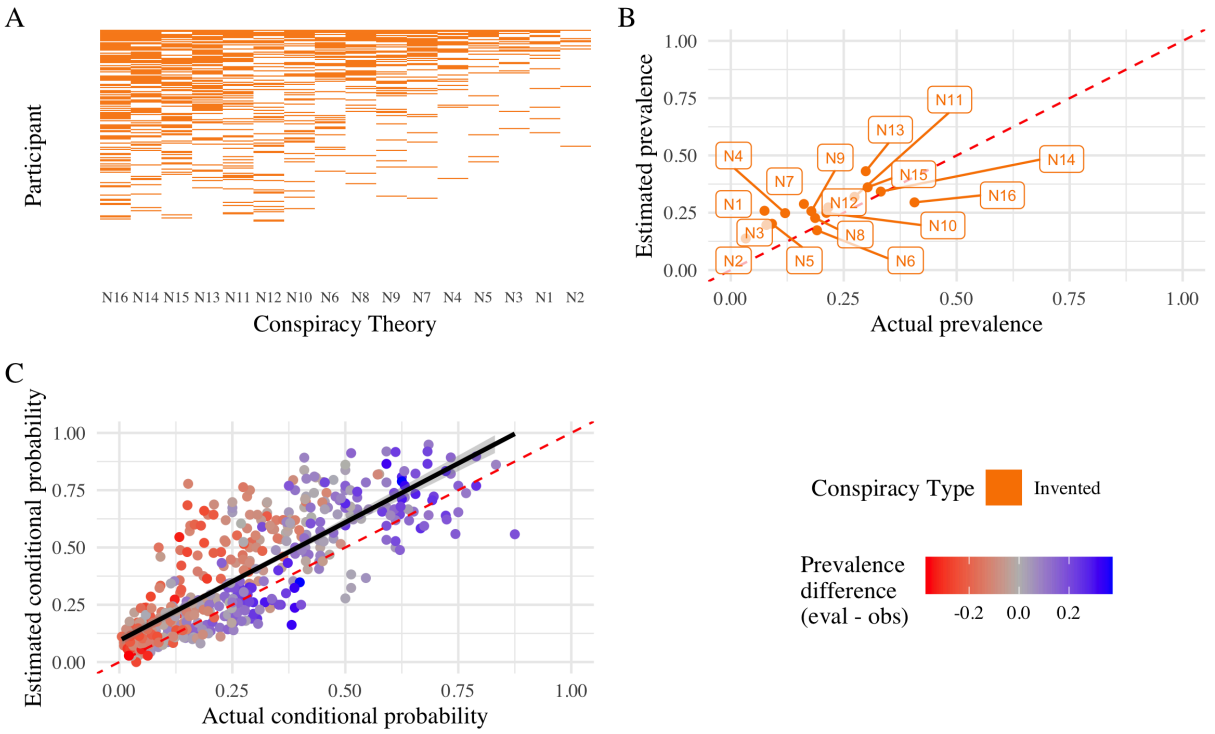


*Figure* 3. Panel **A** shows the nested structure of conspiracy theory endorsement. Each row is a participant (sorted by number of endorsements), each column is a conspiracy theory (sorted by prevalence), and colored tiles indicate endorsement. Panel **B** shows the average estimated prevalence per conspiracy theory (aggregated across participants) compared to the actual prevalence. Panel **C** shows the average estimated conditional probability (aggregated across participants) of endorsing a conspiracy theory given information about another conspiracy theory, plotted against the actual conditional probabilities. Each data point corresponds to a pair of observed-evaluated conspiracy theories ($N_{pairs}$ = 480: 240 [possible pairs] x 2 [endorsement or non-endorsement]).

Endorsement was significantly nested for these invented theories. Both nestedness measures exceeded chance levels (NODF = 25.88, $p < .001$, Temperature = 11.29, $p < .001$). Moreover, participants who endorsed rarer conspiracy theories also endorsed more conspiracy theories overall (H1': $\beta = .91$, $t(14) = 8.15$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .81$, see Figure 3A).

Despite having no prior exposure to these theories, participants estimated their prevalence with reasonable accuracy: aggregated estimates correlated with empirical endorsement rates (H2: $\beta = .74$, $t(14) = 4.16$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .52$, see Figure 3B). This held among both participants who endorsed few conspiracy theories (H2b: $\beta = .65$, $t(14) = 3.23$, $p = .006$, Adjusted $R^2 = .39$) and participants who endorsed many conspiracy theories (H2t: $\beta = .74$, $t(14) = 4.13$, $p = .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .52$, see Figure S2). Trial-level robustness analyses show that individual participants' answers also tracked actual prevalence (H2i: $\beta = .2$, $t(25.23) = 2.98$, $p = 0.006$).

Finally, participants' estimates of conditional endorsement probabilities tracked the empirical conditional probabilities (H3: $\beta = .81$, $t(478) = 30.45$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .66$, see Figure 3C), even in high- or low- endorsement subsamples (H3b: $\beta = .78$, $t(478) = 27.23$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .61$; H3t: $\beta = .72$, $t(478) = 22.63$, $p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .52$), and even at the trial level, using the mixed-effects logit model of Study 1 (H3i: $b = 1.16$, $z = 17.67$, $p < .001$).

# 5. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 suggest that participants infer people's latent conspiracy mentality and use it to predict which other conspiracy theories they will endorse. Does this folk theory extend beyond conspiracy beliefs to personality traits? Conspiracy mentality correlates with a broad constellation of traits and attitudes (Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Enders et al., 2023). In Study 3, we

ask whether participants' inferences track these correlations: when someone endorses a conspiracy theory, do participants also expect them to be more likely to possess traits associated with conspiracy mentality, such as psychopathy or distrust of science? And do they do so more when someone endorses a rarer conspiracy theory?

First, we establish a ground truth of the relation between endorsement and possession of a set of traits related to conspiracy mentality.

**H1.** Participants who endorse a conspiracy theory are more likely to possess traits associated with conspiracy mentality.

**H2.** Participants who endorse rarer conspiracy theories are more likely to possess traits associated with conspiracy mentality.

Second, we test whether participants' expectations track these associations:

**H3.** Participants' average estimates of the conditional probability that someone possesses a trait associated with conspiracy mentality, given their endorsement or non-endorsement of a conspiracy theory, positively correlate with the actual conditional probabilities.

**H4.** The rarity of the observed conspiracy theory modulates participants' trait attributions.

We also pre-registered two robustness analyses similar to previous studies, replicating H3 in the bottom and top 30% of conspiracy theory endorsers (H3b/H3t), and at the individual level (H3i).

## 5.1 Methods

### *5.1.1 Participants*

We recruited 300 U.S. participants on Prolific for this study based on the results of a power analysis showing this sample size would give us more than 90% power to detect the interaction between participants' trait attributions and the rarity of the conspiracy theory they observed. This study implemented the same checks as the previous ones to detect AI-generated responses with the addition of Prolific's Authenticity Check feature. We excluded participants who failed the attention check (N = 2) or were flagged by anti-bot software (reCAPTCHA v3 score below 0.7, N = 4; Prolific's Authenticity below "High", N = 5). The final sample included 290 participants (161 women, 121 men, 7 non-binary, 1 preferred not to say, $M_{Age}$ = 37, $SD_{Age}$ = 12).

### *5.1.2 Procedures*

The experiment comprised two phases and mirrored Studies 1 and 2, with two modifications: participants judged trait items rather than other conspiracy theories, and they did not estimate the prevalence of the conspiracy theories or the traits. In the judgment phase, each virtual individual was described by endorsement or rejection of one of the eight false conspiracy theories from Study 1 (F1–F8), and participants predicted whether that individual would agree or disagree with each of thirteen trait items. In the questionnaire phase, participants indicated whether they tend to agree or disagree with each of the eight conspiracy theories and with the thirteen trait items. Participants were then debriefed.

### *5.1.3 Materials*

The set of conspiracy theories was reused from Study 1 (False Conspiracies F1–F8). For trait items, we selected statements that were highly correlated with conspiracy mentality in a large U.S. survey (Enders et al., 2023, see Table 3). We complemented this set of traits with a

trust-in-science item (Cologna et al., 2025), which is also known to strongly negatively correlate with conspiracy mentality (Vranic et al., 2022).

Table 3: Study 3: Descriptive statistics for each personality item. Values show the proportion of participants who agreed with the statement (SD in parentheses). Items marked (R) are reverse-scored in the analyses so that higher values reflect the conspiracy-prone direction.

| Item | Psychological trait | Description | Agreement Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Populism | What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles. | 0.38 (0.49) |
| P2 | Anomie | It is hardly fair to bring a child into today's world. | 0.47 (0.5) |
| P3 | Manicheanism | Politics is a battle between good and evil. | 0.41 (0.49) |
| P4 | Violence | Violence is sometimes an acceptable way for Americans to express their disagreement with the government. | 0.28 (0.45) |
| P5 | False info | I share information on social media about politics even though I believe it may be false. | 0.04 (0.19) |
| P6 | Psychopathy | I tend to be callous or insensitive. | 0.1 (0.31) |
| P7 | Argumentative | I like to argue online with other people. | 0.11 (0.32) |
| P8 | Distrust police | I trust the police. (R) | 0.47 (0.5) |
| P9 | National narcissism | I will never be satisfied until the United States gets the recognition it deserves. | 0.13 (0.34) |
| P10 | Narcissism | I tend to expect special favors from others. | 0.06 (0.23) |
| P11 | Machiavellianism | I tend to exploit others towards my own end. | 0.05 (0.21) |

| Item | Psychological trait | Description | Agreement Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| P12 | Dogmatism | On important public issues, I believe you should either be for them or against them and not take a middle course. | 0.37 (0.48) |
| P13 | Distrust of science | I have confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public. (R) | 0.74 (0.44) |

## 5.2 Results

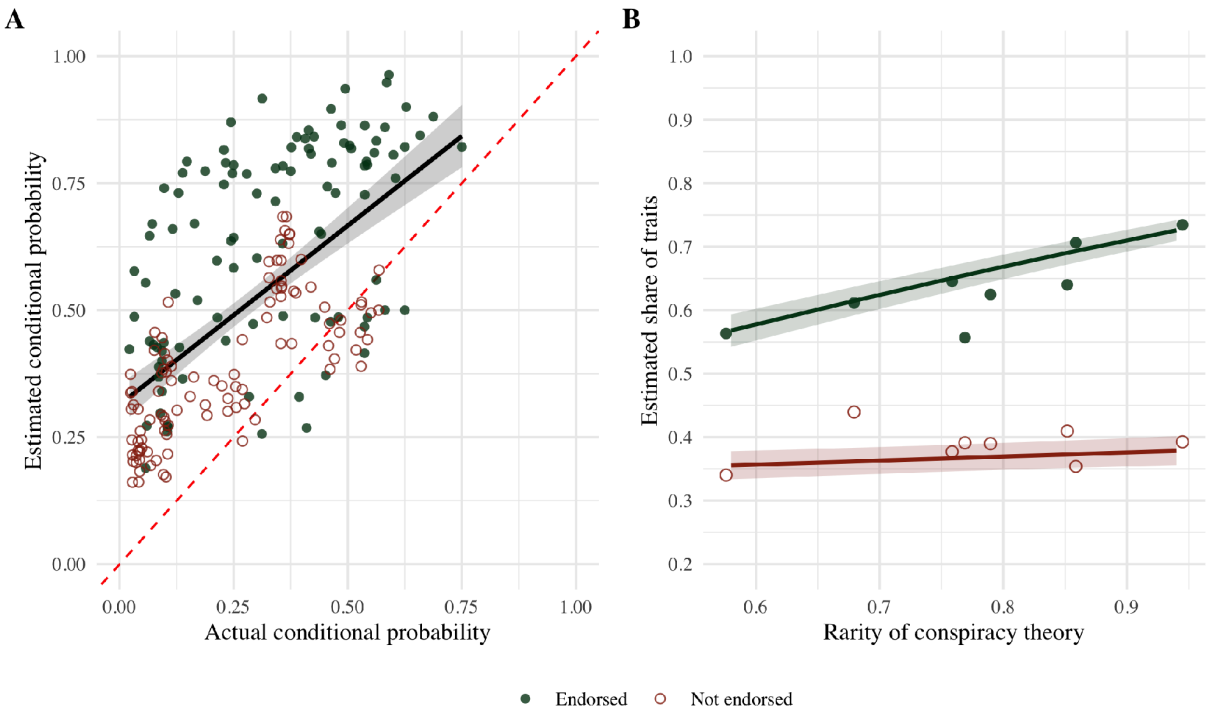


*Figure* 4. (**A**) Average estimated conditional probability of possessing a trait given endorsement of a conspiracy theory. (**B**) Interaction between observed endorsement and rarity on the mean number of conspiracy mentality-related traits attributed (H4). Points are the mean attribution probabilities per observed conspiracy theory, averaged across participants and traits. Lines are population-level predictions from the H4 glmer, holding random effects at zero. Shaded ribbons are 95% confidence intervals computed with the "ggeffects" package.

We fitted a mixed-effects logistic regression with trait agreement as the dependent variable, conspiracy endorsement as the fixed predictor, and random intercepts per conspiracy theory and per trait. Conspiracy endorsement was a significant positive predictor of trait

possession (H1: b = 0.48, z = 13.99, p < .001). Adding an interaction with rarity showed that endorsing rarer conspiracy theories was more diagnostic of trait possession (H2: b = 0.26, z = 7.31, p < .001, see Figure S3 for results per traits). When comparing average trait attributions to the actual probability of possessing each trait conditional on conspiracy endorsement, we found that attributions tracked the empirical conditional probabilities (H3: β = .62, t(206) = 11.47, p < .001, Adjusted $R^2$ = .39, see Figures 4A). Calibration was robust among both the bottom 30% (H3b: β = .52, t(206) = 8.80, p < .001, Adjusted $R^2$ = .27) and top 30% of endorsers (H3t: β = .69, t(206) = 13.61, p < .001, Adjusted $R^2$ = .47), and held at the trial level in a mixed-effects model (H3i: b = 1.43, z = 25.74, p < .001).

Finally, participants' trait attributions were modulated by the rarity of the observed conspiracy theory, as evidenced by the positive significant interaction between conspiracy endorsement and rarity on trait attribution (H4: b = 0.17, z = 4.92, p < .001, see Figure 4B). Participants were thus sensitive to the higher diagnosticity of rare conspiracy theories, and their trait attributions aligned with the actual correlations between conspiracy endorsement and trait possession.

# 6. General discussion and conclusion

Previous research has established that belief in one conspiracy theory tends to correlate with the endorsement of other conspiracy theories, even if they appear unrelated (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Sutton & Douglas, 2014; Swami et al., 2010, 2011). This literature, however, has not specified the structure underlying these belief systems. Understanding this structure matters

because it determines how much can be inferred from limited information, as some endorsements are more diagnostic than others.

In Studies 1 and 2, we demonstrate that participants' endorsement of different conspiracy theories is nested: people who endorse rare theories also tend to endorse more common ones, while the reverse is not true. This nested structure holds across false and true, as well as invented theories. This finding suggests that conspiracy mentality can be understood as a unidimensional latent trait, where the main predictor of whether someone endorses a given theory is not its specific topic but features making it a more or less extreme conspiracy theory (Denovan et al., 2026; Frenken & Imhoff, 2021). Further research could try to understand what makes different conspiracy theories more or less extreme, such as their (im)plausibility (Hattersley et al., 2022), or how interesting they would be if true (Altay et al., 2022). This would explain why, in our sample, a conspiracy theory about a cartel of mattress manufacturers (N12) was less widely endorsed than arguably more implausible—but also more exciting—conspiracy theories (e.g. that the superbowl was created to display subliminal advertising, N14).

Our results also reveal that people possess a "folk theory" of this nested structure. Across the studies, participants accurately inferred the conspiracy beliefs and psychological traits of conspiracy believers from a single piece of information. Participants tracked the conditional structure of endorsement, recognizing that rare endorsements are especially diagnostic. This ability extended to newly invented conspiracy theories, suggesting that participants were not simply relying on observations of their social environment. Instead, results suggest that participants relied on a folk theory of conspiracy mentality to predict which specific beliefs someone scoring higher on this latent trait would hold, and which personality traits they would be more likely to possess.

Our studies have several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, our binary measure of endorsement was appropriate for nestedness analyses, but it does not capture differences in belief strength and might inflate estimations of conspiracy belief (Clifford et al., 2019). Graded measures could allow for even more precise inferences. Second, our studies do not determine exactly how participants estimate the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Participants may anchor estimations on their own beliefs (Nickerson, 1999) or draw on intuitions about plausibility and social appeal.

Studies had already shown that conspiracy mentality is associated with a set of traits that are typically not socially desirable, from psychopathy to narcissism. Our results suggest that people are sensitive to these associations, and can use minimal cues—the endorsement of one specific conspiracy theory, and the rarity of that theory—to infer a latent trait of conspiracism accurately and, from there, what other conspiracy theories someone believes and what traits they possess.

# 7. Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Clara Chevrier and Liam Scott Maillard for their help with the draft of materials and data collection, and to Pascal Boyer for informative discussions.

# 8. References

Almeida‐Neto, M., Guimarães, P., Guimarães, P. R., Loyola, R. D., & Ulrich, W. (2008). A consistent metric for nestedness analysis in ecological systems: Reconciling concept and measurement. *Oikos*, *117*(8), 1227–1239. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0030-1299.2008.16644.x

Alper, S., Elcil, T., Karaca, N., Bayrak, F., & Yilmaz, O. (2025). Fictitious conspiracy, paranormal, and pseudoscience beliefs are closely related to their regular counterparts. *Current Psychology*, *44*(7), 6376–6395. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-07654-w

Altay, S., de Araujo, E., & Mercier, H. (2022). "If This account is True, It is Most Enormously Wonderful": Interestingness-If-True and the Sharing of True and False News. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(3), 373–394. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1941163

Ambady, N., & Rosenthal, R. (1992). Thin slices of expressive behavior as predictors of interpersonal consequences: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *111*(2), 256–274. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.2.256

Back, M. D., Stopfer, J. M., Vazire, S., Gaddis, S., Schmukle, S. C., Egloff, B., & Gosling, S. D. (2010). Facebook Profiles Reflect Actual Personality, Not Self-Idealization. *Psychological Science*, *21*(3), 372–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797609360756

Biddlestone, M., Green, R., Douglas, K. M., Azevedo, F., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2025). Reasons to believe: A systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of the motives associated with conspiracy beliefs. *Psychological Bulletin*, *151*(1), 48–87. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000463

Brandt, M. J. (2017). Predicting Ideological Prejudice. *Psychological Science*, *28*(6), 713–722.

Brotherton, R., & French, C. C. (2014). Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *28*(2), 238–248. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2995

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Conspiracy mentality questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology*. https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037/t31566-000

Cao, S., Van Prooijen, J., & Van Vugt, M. (2025). The motivations and reputational consequences of spreading conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *64*(1), e12784. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12784

Clifford, S., Kim, Y., & Sullivan, B. W. (2019). An Improved Question Format for Measuring Conspiracy Beliefs. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(4), 690–722. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz049

Denovan, A., Dagnall, N., Peverell, M., Drinkwater, K. G., Escolà-Gascón, Á., & Carter, D. (2026). Evaluating the psychometric properties of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale: A Rasch modelling approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *17*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1721668

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*(3), 544–552. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02018.x

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2023). What Are Conspiracy Theories? A Definitional Approach to Their Correlates, Consequences, and Communication. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *74*(Volume 74, 2023), 271–298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Dubourg, E., Morin, O., & Mercier, H. (2025). Using the Nested Structure of Knowledge to Infer What Others Know. *Psychological Science*, *36*(6), 443–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976251339633

Embretson, S. E., & Reise, S. P. (2013). *Item Response Theory for Psychologists*. Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410605269

Enders, A., Diekman, A., Klofstad, C., Murthi, M., Verdear, D., Wuchty, S., & Uscinski, J. (2023). On modeling the correlates of conspiracy thinking. *Scientific Reports*, *13*(1), 8325. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-34391-6

Enders, A., Uscinski, J. E., Klofstad, C. A., Seelig, M. I., Wuchty, S., Murthi, M. N., Premaratne, K., & Funchion, J. R. (2021). Do conspiracy beliefs form a belief system? Examining the structure and organization of conspiracy beliefs. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *9*(1), 255–271. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.5649

Everett, J. A. C., Faber, N. S., Savulescu, J., & Crockett, M. J. (2018). The costs of being consequentialist: Social inference from instrumental harm and impartial beneficence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *79*, 200–216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.07.004

Frenken, M., & Imhoff, R. (2021). A Uniform Conspiracy Mindset or Differentiated Reactions to Specific Conspiracy Beliefs? Evidence From Latent Profile Analyses. *International Review of Social Psychology*, *34*(1), 27. https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.590

Funder, D. C. (1995). On the accuracy of personality judgment: A realistic approach. *Psychological Review*, *102*(4), 652–670. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.102.4.652

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology*, *15*(4), 731–742. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791630

Goodwin, G. P., Piazza, J., & Rozin, P. (2014). Moral character predominates in person perception and evaluation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *106*(1), 148–168. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034726

Green, R., Toribio-Flórez, D., Douglas, K. M., Brunkow, J. W., & Sutton, R. M. (2023). Making an impression: The effects of sharing conspiracy theories. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *104*, 104398. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104398

Gundersen, A. B., Biddlestone, M., & Kunst, J. R. (2025). The Dual Impact of Believing and Spreading Conspiracy Theories: Independent and Interactive Effects on Social Perceptions and Orientations. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 17470218251396952. https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218251396952

Hattersley, M., Brown, G. D. A., Michael, J., & Ludvig, E. A. (2022). Of tinfoil hats and thinking caps: Reasoning is more strongly related to implausible than plausible conspiracy beliefs. *Cognition*, *218*, 104956. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2021.104956

Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (Un–)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as A Generalised Political Attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, *28*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930

Kay, C. S. (2021). Actors of the most fiendish character: Explaining the associations between the Dark Tetrad and conspiracist ideation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *171*, 110543. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110543

Kuznetsova, A., Brockhoff, P. B., & Christensen, R. H. B. (2017). lmerTest Package: Tests in Linear Mixed Effects Models. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *82*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v082.i13

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., Klein, O., Berjot, S., & Pantazi, M. (2018). Stigmatized beliefs: Conspiracy theories, anticipated negative evaluation of the self, and fear of social exclusion. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(7), 939–954. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2498

Letzring, T. D., Murphy, N. A., Allik, J., Beer, A., Zimmermann, J., & Leising, D. (2021). The judgment of personality: An overview of current empirical research findings. *Personality Science*, *2*, e6043. https://doi.org/10.5964/ps.6043

Mercier, M., de Lanerolle, R., Morin, O., Quillien, T., & Mercier, H. (2026). Inferring Arithmetic Skill from Speed and Accuracy. *PsyArXiv*. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/bp9uc_v1

Mercier, M., Morin, O., Mercier, H., & Quillien, T. (2026). Who knows what? Bayesian competence inference guides knowledge attribution and information search. *Cognition*, *273*(106533). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2026.106533

Nickerson, R. (1999). How we know - And sometimes misjudge - What others know: Imputing one's own knowledge to others. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*, 737–759. https://doi.org/10.1037//0033-2909.125.6.737

Oksanen, J., Blanchet, F. G., Kindt, R., Legendre, P., Minchin, P. R., O'hara, R. B., Simpson, G. L., Solymos, P., Stevens, M. H. H., & Wagner, H. (2013). Package 'vegan.' *Community Ecology Package, Version*, *2*(9), 1–295.

Pennycook, G., Binnendyk, J., & Rand, D. G. (2025). Overconfidently Conspiratorial: Conspiracy Believers are Dispositionally Overconfident and Massively Overestimate How Much Others Agree With Them. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 01461672251338358. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672251338358

Pennycook, G., Fugelsang, J. A., & Koehler, D. J. (2015). Everyday Consequences of Analytic Thinking. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *24*(6), 425–432. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721415604610

Rasch, G. (1960). *Studies in mathematical psychology: I. Probabilistic models for some intelligence and attainment tests* (pp. xiii, 184). Nielsen & Lydiche.

Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. D. (2006). Message in a Ballad: The Role of Music Preferences in Interpersonal Perception. *Psychological Science*, *17*(3), 236–242. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01691.x

Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2022). Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *34*(7), 1485–1504. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

Stasielowicz, L. (2022). Who believes in conspiracy theories? A *meta*-analysis on personality correlates. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *98*, 104229. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2022.104229

Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). 14 Examining the monological nature of conspiracy theories. *Power Polit. Paranoia Why People Are Suspicious Their Lead*, *29*, 254–272.

Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *24*(6), 749–761. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1583

Swami, V., Coles, R., Stieger, S., Pietschnig, J., Furnham, A., Rehim, S., & Voracek, M. (2011). Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious

conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology*, *102*(3), 443–463. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.2010.02004.x

Tamir, D. I., & Thornton, M. A. (2018). Modeling the Predictive Social Mind. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *22*(3), 201–212. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2017.12.005

Uleman, J. S., Saribay, S. A., & Gonzalez, C. M. (2008). Spontaneous Inferences, Implicit Impressions, and Implicit Theories. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *59*(Volume 59, 2008), 329–360. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093707

Vlasceanu, M., Dyckovsky, A. M., & Coman, A. (2024). A Network Approach to Investigate the Dynamics of Individual and Collective Beliefs: Advances and Applications of the BENDING Model. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *19*(2), 444–453. https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231185776

Williams, M. N., Marques, M. D., Hill, S. R., Kerr, J. R., & Ling, M. (2022). Why are beliefs in different conspiracy theories positively correlated across individuals? Testing monological network versus unidimensional factor model explanations. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *61*(3), 1011–1031. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12518

# Electronic Supplementary Materials

Electronic Supplementary Materials for People have an accurate folk theory of conspiracy believers.

# 1. Preregistration deviations

**Table S1:** Preregistration deviations

| # | Details | | Original wording | Deviation description | Extent of deviation | Judgement of impact |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Study | 2 | `h2i = lmer(perceived_prevalence ~ true_prevalence + (1 + true_prevalence\|Participant_id), data)` | We added a random effect for observed CT to better match the task's design. | *Minor* | Results were qualitatively unchanged. |
| | Type | Analyses | | | | |
| | Reason | Typo/Error | | | | |
| | Timing | After data access | | | | |
| 2 | Study | 2 | `h3i <- glmer(binary_prediction ~ true_conditional_prob + (1 \| observed_CT_id) + (1 \| evaluated_CT_id) + (1 + prob_true \| id_participant), family= binomial, data = long_data)` | We added a random effect for the endorsement condition to better match the task's design. | *Minor* | Results were qualitatively unchanged. |
| | Type | Analyses | | | | |
| | Reason | Typo/Error | | | | |
| | Timing | After data access | | | | |
| 3 | Study | 3 | `h1 <- glmer(trait ~ CT_endorsed + (1 \| participant) + (1 \| CT_id) + (1 \| trait_id), family = binomial)` | We removed the participant random effect, as it was statistically inappropriate. | *Minor* | The preregistered random-effects structure was misspecified for the data structure. Participant-level trait responses were repeated across CT-level rows, so including a participant random intercept absorbed the between-participant variance targeted by the fixed effect of CT endorsement. Results from the preregistered model are reported for transparency but are not interpreted as the primary test. |
| | Type | Analyses | | | | |
| | Reason | Typo/Error | | | | |
| | Timing | After results known | | | | |
| 4 | Study | 3 | `h2 <- glmer(trait ~ CT_endorsed*CT_rarity + (1 \| participant) + (1 \|` | We removed the participant random effect, as it was | *Minor* | The preregistered random-effects structure was misspecified for the data structure. Participant-level trait responses were repeated across CT-level rows, so including a participant random intercept absorbed the between-participant variance targeted by the fixed effect of CT endorsement. Results from the |
| | Type | Analyses | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reason | Typo/Error | `CT_id) + (1 \| trait_id), family = binomial)` | statistically inappropriate. | | preregistered model are reported for transparency but are not interpreted as the primary test. |
| | Timing | After results known | | | | |

# 2. Pre-registered Models

For transparency, we refit each model with deviations from the preregistration using its original specification (Table S1) and report the results below.

Study 2 H2i: ($\beta = 0.22$, $t(224.33) = 6.39$, $p < .001$)

Study 2 H3i: ($b = 1.80$, $z = 28.07$, $p < .001$)

Study 3 H: ($b = 0.03$, $z = 0.59$, $p = 0.558$)

Study 3 H2: ($b = 0.01$, $z = 0.25$, $p = 0.800$)

# 3. Supplementary Figures

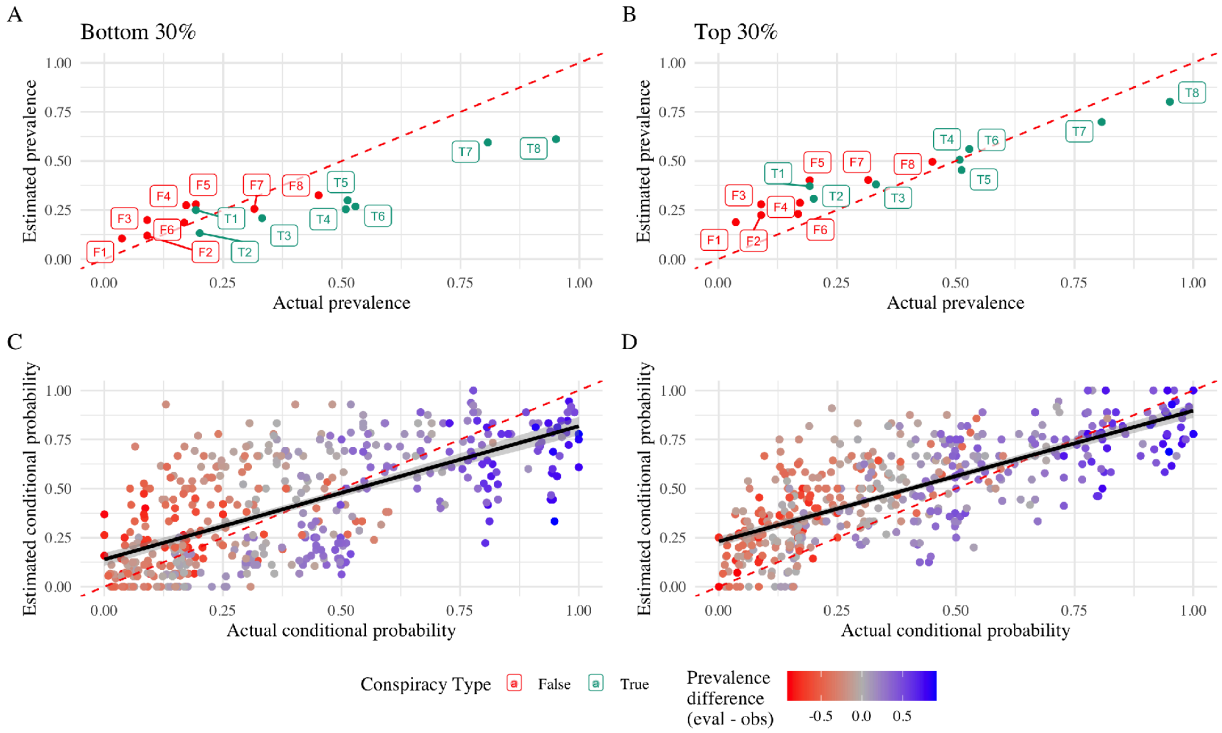


*Figure* S1. Study 1: Bottom 30% and Top 30% subsamples. The top row (A, B) shows the average judged prevalence compared to actual prevalence. The bottom row (C, D) shows the average judged conditional probability compared to the actual conditional probability.

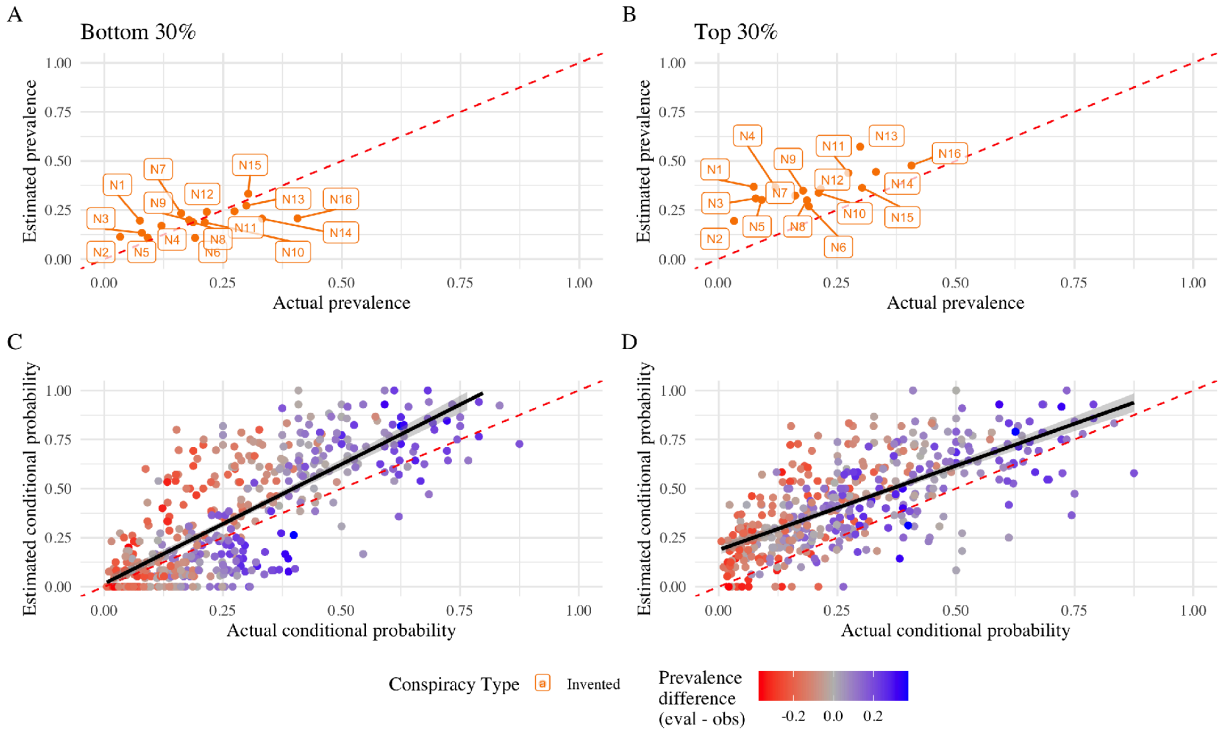


*Figure* S2. Study 2: Bottom 30% and Top 30% subsamples. The top row (A, B) shows the average judged prevalence compared to actual prevalence. The bottom row (C, D) shows the average judged conditional probability compared to the actual conditional probability.

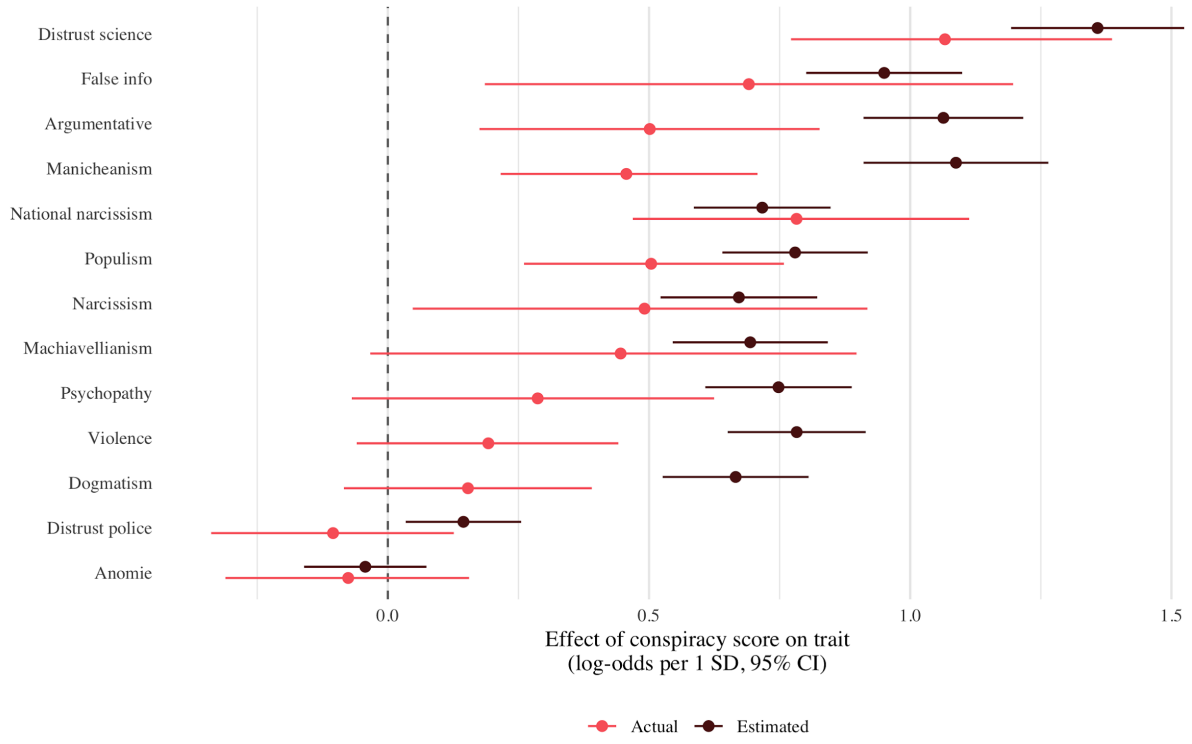


*Figure* S3. Per-trait effect of conspiracy score (i.e. how many conspiracy theories out of the eight presented they endorsed) on trait agreement (Actual), and attribution (Estimated). Points show log-odds coefficients (per 1 SD) with 95% CIs. Actual: per-trait logistic regression of self-reported traits on participants' own conspiracy score. Estimated: per-trait mixed-effects logistic regression of attributed traits on the virtual individual's conspiracy score, with participant random intercepts. The virtual individual's score is the conspiracy score a participant would attribute to the virtual individual from the observed endorsement, derived from Study 1's conditional endorsement estimates. See Table S2 for regression details.

# 4. Per-trait GLM coefficient for Figure S3

Table S2: Per-trait GLM coefficients for the conspiracy-score slope shown in the Figure 3. True: per-trait glm(trait ~ scale(conspi_score), family = binomial), one row per participant. Judged: per-trait glmer(evaluation ~ scale(judged_score) + (1 | Participant), family = binomial), where judged_score is the S1-inferred conspiracy score of the target. Estimates are log-odds per 1 SD of the conspiracy score.

| Series | Item | Domain | Estimate | SE | 95% CI | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| True | P1 | Populism | 0.50 | 0.13 | [0.26, 0.76] | < .001 |
| | P2 | Anomie | -0.08 | 0.12 | [-0.31, 0.16] | 0.522 |
| | P3 | Manicheanism | 0.46 | 0.13 | [0.22, 0.71] | < .001 |
| | P4 | Violence | 0.19 | 0.13 | [-0.06, 0.44] | 0.130 |
| | P5 | False info | 0.69 | 0.25 | [0.19, 1.20] | 0.006 |
| | P6 | Psychopathy | 0.29 | 0.18 | [-0.07, 0.62] | 0.102 |
| | P7 | Argumentative | 0.50 | 0.16 | [0.18, 0.83] | 0.002 |
| | P8 | Distrust police | -0.10 | 0.12 | [-0.34, 0.13] | 0.374 |
| | P9 | National narcissism | 0.78 | 0.16 | [0.47, 1.11] | < .001 |
| | P10 | Narcissism | 0.49 | 0.22 | [0.05, 0.92] | 0.025 |
| | P11 | Machiavellianism | 0.45 | 0.23 | [-0.03, 0.90] | 0.056 |
| | P12 | Dogmatism | 0.15 | 0.12 | [-0.08, 0.39] | 0.203 |
| | P13 | Distrust science | 1.07 | 0.16 | [0.77, 1.39] | < .001 |
| Judged | P1 | Populism | 0.78 | 0.07 | [0.64, 0.92] | < .001 |
| | P2 | Anomie | -0.04 | 0.06 | [-0.16, 0.07] | 0.470 |
| | P3 | Manicheanism | 1.09 | 0.09 | [0.91, 1.26] | < .001 |
| | P4 | Violence | 0.78 | 0.07 | [0.65, 0.91] | < .001 |
| | P5 | False info | 0.95 | 0.08 | [0.80, 1.10] | < .001 |
| | P6 | Psychopathy | 0.75 | 0.07 | [0.61, 0.89] | < .001 |
| | P7 | Argumentative | 1.06 | 0.08 | [0.91, 1.22] | < .001 |
| | P8 | Distrust police | 0.14 | 0.06 | [0.03, 0.26] | 0.010 |

| Series | Item | Domain | Estimate | SE | 95% CI | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | P9 | National narcissism | 0.72 | 0.07 | [0.59, 0.85] | < .001 |
| | P10 | Narcissism | 0.67 | 0.08 | [0.52, 0.82] | < .001 |
| | P11 | Machiavellianism | 0.69 | 0.08 | [0.55, 0.84] | < .001 |
| | P12 | Dogmatism | 0.67 | 0.07 | [0.53, 0.81] | < .001 |
| | P13 | Distrust science | 1.36 | 0.08 | [1.19, 1.52] | < .001 |