

Summary of the Ph.D. Thesis

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The title of the thesis: *Does a life full of threats generate beliefs in conspiracies?*

Integrating evolutionary, dispositional, motivational, and contextual perspectives.

Key words phrases: beliefs in conspiracies, motivation, personality, perceived situation, adversity, life history theory

Abstract

Research on beliefs in conspiracies remains fragmented, with few direct comparisons of competing explanations. This dissertation addresses that gap by comparing and integrating four perspectives: (1) an evolutionary and developmental view based on ecological calibration, (2) a personality perspective that includes the Big Five and antagonistic traits, (3) a motivational systems account that focuses on the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), (4) and a situational account based on perceived situation characteristics and cues. The program comprised three cross-sectional studies and two experiments. Measures covered general and local beliefs in conspiracies, personality traits, BAS and BIS, perceived ecological adversity (harshness and unpredictability), and situational characteristics.

Three robust patterns emerged. First, whenever both domains were assessed, general beliefs in conspiracies were found to be higher than local beliefs in conspiracies. Second, brief inductions of harshness or unpredictability did not increase endorsement. In pooled analyses across Studies 4 and 5, safety and harsh contexts yielded higher endorsement than predictability, unpredictability, and neutral conditions, which points to the role of emotional tone and momentary engagement. Third, correlational evidence partly supported ecological

calibration. Endorsement tracked perceptions of a harsh, competitive, and dangerous world, whereas a global life history speed index showed no clear association. Higher endorsement also co-occurred with lower analytic reflection, higher BAS Drive and BAS Fun Seeking, and a perception of situations as more adversarial, deceptive, and negative, as well as more positive, social, and mating-relevant. Within the context of antagonistic traits, Machiavellianism partially mediated the link between childhood adversity and general beliefs in conspiracies. Links with coping were weak or null, and sex differences were minor and unstable. A locally developed measure showed promising reliability and initial EFA and CFA.

Taken together, people appear to weigh multiple cues, and the weights shaped by development, traits, motivation, and context yield judgments that can manifest as beliefs in conspiracies. The added value of the thesis lies in: (1) integrating four approaches, (2) demonstrating a replicated domain-level effect, whereby general beliefs in conspiracies measures outperform content-specific (local) measures, and (3) delineating the limits of brief, short-term experimental inductions. It recommends more credible and engaging manipulations, along with manipulation checks and direct assessments of identity and embeddedness, when predicting local beliefs. In addition to the empirical work, the author developed her research and organizational skills. A detailed list of these activities is included at the end of the dissertation.