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# From QAnon to the climate change hoax: Using 'Moral Politics Theory' to explain conspiracy mentality among the ideological right

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## Abstract

Research on conspiracy theories and predictors that explain susceptibility to believing in conspiracy theories (conspiracy mentality) has already led to a considerable body of academic contributions. Nevertheless, we see the necessity to continue working on higher-level frameworks that summarize and explain various of these predictors under one umbrella. Only focussing on individual correlates can certainly make well-founded statements about individual susceptibility to conspiracy theories, but cannot formulate a holistic explanation due to the supposed lack of connection between the predictors. This means that, for example, only very fragmentary recommendations can be derived for preventive concepts. The present research proposes a metatheoretical framework for conspiracy mentality based on 'Moral Politics Theory' (Lakoff, 2016). The central thesis of this paper is that conspiracy mentality can be understood as an inherent component of so-called 'Strict Father Morality', i.e. the conservative ideology in Moral Politics Theory. This not only has implications for research theory, but also concrete imperatives for action for socio-political actors.

**Keywords** Conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, Moral Politics Theory, Strict Father Morality, ideology

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**Introduction**

At the latest during the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories have increasingly moved to the center of social debate and have manifested themselves in several movements (Kużelewska & Tomaszuk, 2022). In Germany, for example, the 'Querdenken' movement, which is characterized by its distrust of the political system and a proximity to conspiracy narratives (Koos, 2021), emerged in reaction to preemptive measures imposed by the German government to counteract the spread of the Virus. Microsoft founder Bill Gates in particular was accused of all kinds of evil endeavors, but WEF Chairman Klaus Schwab also came into the crosshairs of conspiracy theorists with his publication on the "Great Reset" (Kaiser, 2021).

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that research in various scientific disciplines developed an increased interest in why people tend to believe in conspiracy theories. There are a number of potential explanations for this, such as the feeling of an increasing loss of control, the narcissistic motive for uniqueness or the attempt to develop a stable subjective certainty in volatile times (see Douglas et al., 2017 for a review). In addition to these socio-psychological explanations, socio-political causes such as the general loss of trust in political institutions can also play an important role (Schlipphak et al., 2022; on post-democratic tendencies see Crouch, 2008).

The aim of this article is to examine and discuss the phenomenon of conspiracy mentality from another perspective that has yet received little attention despite holding a potential predictive power. Rather than approaching it as an independent component of a more comprehensive worldview, we propose that conspiracy mentality can also be understood as an inherent component of an ideologically conservative worldview based on 'Moral Politics Theory' (MPT) (Lakoff, 2016).

This thesis is not fundamentally new; as early as 1964, the American historian Richard J. Hofstadter first addressed the connection between authoritarian thinking and conspiracy mentality in his essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (Hofstadter, 1964). The connection between ideology and conspiracy mentality was also investigated in recent years (e.g., Dyrendal et al., 2021; Imhoff, Zimmer, et al., 2022). Findings show that there might be a relationship between extreme right-wing attitudes and conspiracy mentality. For example, van der Linden et al. (2020) observe that "conservatives in the United States were not only more likely than liberals to endorse specific conspiracy theories, but they were also more likely to espouse conspiratorial worldviews in general" (p. 23). However, theories, results and measurement tools for political ideologies vary widely within the existing literature. Here we see potential for improvement in order to summarize correlates with conspiracy mentality that not only represent a common ideological context, but also show concrete practical options for action. For this reason, we want to draw on an approach from cognitive linguistics that (to the best of our knowledge) has not yet been considered as a theoretical basis with regard to the development of a conspiracy mentality. Later in the paper, we will also discuss existing metatheoretical frameworks and show in detail what added value our model provides.

We define ideology as a means to "describe or interpret the world as it is – by making assertions or assumptions about human nature, historical events, present realities, and future possibilities" (Jost et al., 2009, p. 309) while offering a "sense of identity, belongingness, and shared reality" (Jost, 2017, p. 168). By conservative ideology, we refer to the 'Strict Father Morality' (SFM) introduced by the American linguist George Lakoff (Lakoff, 2016) as one of two ideological models of MPT. Behind SFM lies an ideological system with more than 30 ideal-typical sub-points (Wehling, 2013), for which we will show that they overlap strongly with the correlates of conspiracy mentality. In the remainder of the paper, we will first offer a definition of conspiracy mentality and provide an overview of its various correlates, before we reflect

existing metatheoretical models. Afterwards, we will give a basic introduction to the central elements of the concept of SFM. Finally, these two parts will be brought together in a new metatheoretical framework linking SFM and conspiracy mentality and we will also demonstrate its relevance for research and practical political action.

**Conspiracy Mentality and its Correlates**

Before we turn to the extensive literature on conspiracy mentality and the variables associated with it, it is necessary to inspect the definition of the term and the construct behind it more closely. By conspiracy theories, we understand narratives in which two or more actors are secretly working on actions with negative consequences for society (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Conspiracy belief refers to the tendency to believe in specific conspiracy theories and is therefore context-dependent on the conspiracy theory in question. However, Wood et al. (2012) were able to show in this context that people often believe in several conspiracy theories at the same time - even if these contain opposing or contradictory narratives. Therefore, a superordinate construct is assumed that reflects the general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. In the remainder of the paper, we focus on this construct: conspiracy mentality. In contrast to conspiracy beliefs, we understand conspiracy mentality as an underlying tendency to suspect secret plots behind societal events. Since a conspiracy mentality is independent of specific conspiracy theories and can therefore be regarded as a generally stable character trait (Imhoff, Bertlich, & Frenken, 2022), it is best suited as a link to the moral values and general world beliefs of SFM that we will discuss later.

Nevertheless, we also include studies that have measured conspiracy beliefs in the following overview, as conspiracy mentality is a consistently strong predictor of different conspiracy beliefs (Bruder et al., 2013).

*Trust*

In the scientific literature, trust has been established as an important correlate of conspiracy mentality and is one of the protective factors. Pierre (2020) argues that an epistemic loss of trust - the loss of trust in established knowledge and institutions that hold and generate this knowledge - is the main cause of believing conspiracy theories. Various studies show that conspiracy mentality is negatively related to trust in institutions (Freeman et al., 2020; Tonković et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2022), government (Bruder & Kunert, 2022; Banai et al., 2021) and science (Agley & Xiao, 2021; Constantinou et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2020; Tonković et al., 2021). Knowledge-generating institutions challenge the claims of conspiracy theories in a particular way, as their work removes the breeding ground for conspiracy theories. They are therefore often perceived as an enemy of conspiracy theory believers. Apart from this, trust in other people plays a role in how susceptible one is to conspiracy theories, as Brotherton et al. (2013) and Frenken and Imhoff (2023) were able to demonstrate.

*Thinking patterns*

Various thinking patterns have also been linked to conspiracy mentality. For example, critical thinking (Lantian et al., 2021), analytical thinking (Gligoric et al., 2021), rational thinking (Swami et al., 2014) and especially scientific thinking (Čavojová et al., 2020) are negatively related to conspiracy mentality. Scientific thinking patterns can help to recognize and discredit the falsely assumed causal chains of conspiracy theories more quickly, while critical thinking can make it more difficult for conspiracy narratives to be internalized prematurely and without questioning.

*Loss of control & threat perception*

According to Lamberty and Rees (2021), individuals who believe in conspiracy theories are driven, among other things, by the motivation to gain control and security over their lives. This

control and security is feigned by the alleged simple causal models of conspiracy theories (Lamberty and Rees, 2021). By believing in these simple causal models, according to regulatory theories, people should be able to compensate for an experienced loss of control. Although correlations between control deprivation and CT have been documented in some studies (Oleksy et al., 2021), Stojanov and Halberstadt (2020) point out in their meta-analysis that the effects are very small and only occur with specific conspiracy theories. Threat perception, on the other hand, appears to be a more robust correlate of CT (Heiss et al., 2021; Jutzi et al., 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it was shown that awareness of the danger of the virus to one's own person can also act as a protective factor against the development of a conspiracy mentality, albeit only with a small effect size (Tonković et al., 2021).

*In-group and out-group & collective narcissism*

Collective narcissism refers to the idea that members of a certain group extremely overestimate the size and abilities of this group and at the same time proclaim that these qualities are not valued enough by others (de Zavala et al., 2022). This extreme form of demarcation between in-group and out-group is also positively related to conspiracy mentality (de Zavala et al., 2022). The effect is stronger when the assignment of in-group and out-group refers to specific conspiracy theories. In the context of in-group/out-group thinking, there is also a negative correlation between attitudes towards refugees and conspiracy mentality (Molz & Stiller, 2019). This shows how conspiracy theories help to strengthen one's own group structure on the one hand, while at the same time separating oneself from others - be it those who do not believe in one's own conspiracy theory or those who are chosen as the enemy of the conspiracy theory - on the other.

*Narcissism*

The tendency to exaggerate one's own abilities is positively related to conspiracy mentality, as studies by Cichocka et al. (2016) and Gligoric et al. (2021) have shown. Cichocka et al. (2016) provide the following reasoning: People with a tendency towards narcissism often tend towards paranoid thought patterns in which other people are malicious towards them. At the same time, the narcissistic tendency to dominate others, which is also linked to conspiracy mentality, could explain this connection. They also cite the striving for uniqueness and the limited self-reflection of narcissistic people as characteristics that could explain the connection between narcissism and conspiracy mentality.

*Spirituality, belief in paranormal phenomena & religiosity*

Since conspiracy theories often assume dark, all-powerful actors in their narratives and sometimes use religiously charged motifs (for example, Satanist groups as antagonists), it is not surprising that spirituality, belief in paranormal phenomena and religiosity have also been investigated as predictors. With regard to religiosity, however, this relationship is controversial. Darwin et al. (2011) and Frenken et al. (2023) found a significant correlation, but this did not show up in studies by Farkhari et al. (2022) or Schwaiger et al. (2022). Spirituality, in contrast to religiosity, is not related to a specific religion. This more open-ended construct showed a significant positive correlation with conspiracy mentality in Darwin et al. (2011), Gligoric et al. (2021) and Schwaiger et al. (2022) - as did belief in paranormal phenomena (Darwin et al., 2011; Dyrendal et al., 2021).

*Ideological beliefs & extremism*

Synthesizing the findings in this area of research is particularly challenging, as different understandings were used to classify political attitudes. Imhoff, Zimmer, et al. (2022) used a classic left-right scale in their study and were able to show that participants who classified

themselves as being on the extreme right politically were more inclined to have a conspiracy mentality. Mancosu et al. (2017) were also able to prove the connection with right-wing political attitudes. However, Krouwel et al. (2017) and van Prooijen et al. (2015) showed a general correlation between extreme political positions and conspiracy mentality - both in the extreme left and extreme right spectrum. Looking at specific ideologies, far-right authoritarianism in particular correlated with conspiracy beliefs (Dyrendal et al., 2021, pp. 4-5). In addition, Schuler et al. (2020) were able to show that German voters of the right-wing populist party "Alternative für Deutschland" [Alternative for Germany] had the most pronounced tendency towards conspiracy narratives, while in Italy, supporters of the populist party "Movimento 5 Stelle" [Five Star Movement] in particular showed stronger conspiracy beliefs (Mancosu et al., 2017). Enders and Uscinski (2021) found evidence that it is not the political orientation per se, but the presence of the opposing political side as an enemy in the conspiracy theory that plays a central role in believing it. The results in the research field are thus still unclear. Although there are indications that an extreme attitude is an influencing factor regardless of political polarity, ideologies from the right-wing spectrum in particular, for example right-wing authoritarianism, could play an overriding role. Furthermore, there remains the problem of the way in which political orientation is operationalized in research, which is "fundamentally impacting the inferences researchers make" (Enders & Uscinski, 2021, p. 600). In this sense, we believe it is important to define political ideology on the basis of a sound theoretical foundation.

**Figure 1**

*Overview of established correlates of conspiracy mentality*
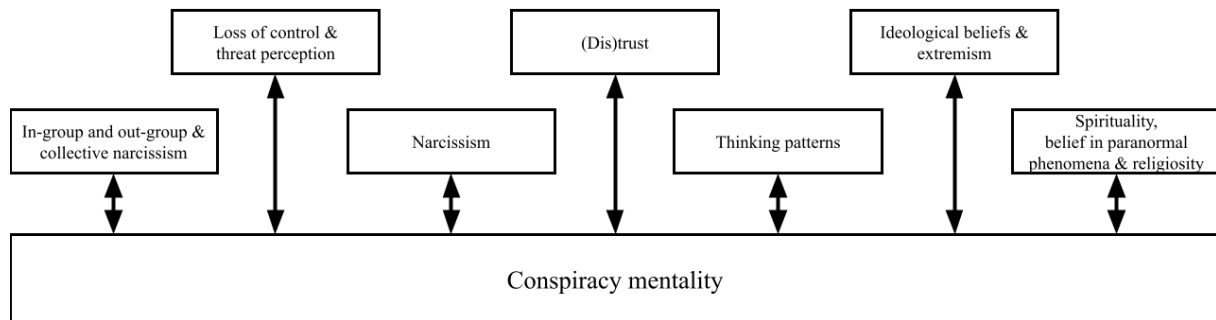


In summary, the existing studies offer a variety of correlates for conspiracy mentality. There are some contradictions here; however, we consider the lack of a common background for these separately considered correlates to be the biggest issue. In addition, cultural differences between countries and regions are more pronounced when looking at isolated factors. One example of this is the study by Stoica and Umbreș (2021), in which, in contrast to other studies, high education correlates with a high belief in conspiracies. The country-specific background of the Romanian sample was used as an explanation, as higher education was usually accompanied by a significantly increased distrust of the government and thus potentially also a higher belief in conspiracy theories (p. 257). This result suggests that even significant correlates in isolation can always be attributed to country-specific backgrounds.

**Current State of Metatheoretical Frameworks examining Conspiracy Mentality**

As Bowes et al. (2023) argues, it is "important to move beyond a single construct of interest" when researching conspiracy theories and its belief system (p. 27). Only by bringing together several factors in a metatheoretical framework with the intention of explaining the underlying mechanisms can we do justice to the complex nature of conspiracy mentality and provide helpful insights into possible countermeasures. We consider the following three functions of a framework to be important in order to further improve theory building: (1) Incorporating the

extensive catalog of known correlates, (2) explaining the reasons for belief in conspiracy using those correlates while (3) connecting the correlates to a theory-based set of fundamental values that evolve into a full-blown worldview. With these functions, frameworks can not only bundle predictors, but also explain and insert them into existing theoretical frameworks. The latter function in particular allows theory-based causality statements to be made. This consideration of causality is particularly crucial for the development and implementation of preventive measures.

There have already been efforts to consolidate correlates of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy mentality into overlying theoretical frameworks. Douglas et al. (2017) argue that conspiracy theories appeal to three fundamental needs, namely epistemic, existential and social motives which bundle most of the common variables associated with conspiracy belief. In this sense, people with "heightened epistemic, existential, and social motives" may be more prone to follow conspiracy theories – although in the end, these beliefs do not contribute to the fulfillment of these needs (p. 540). Focusing on epistemic mistrust and a dysfunctional use of information, Pierre (2020) proposes a two-component, socio-epistemic model that incorporates several correlates related to mistrust (e.g., towards institutions, media or science) as well as an affinity to belief in misinformation. In this model, belief in conspiracy theories is initiated by an epistemic loss of trust and further deepened by problematic information behavior. This model combines and explains various predictors of conspiracy mentality under its two components while also offering a normalizing perspective on a phenomenon that is often presented in a deficit model. Meanwhile Douglas & Sutton (2023) suggest a definitional approach to study conspiracy theories. Here, the authors find five properties fundamentally linked to conspiracy theories: (1) being oppositional, (2) describing malevolent or forbidden acts, (3) ascribing agency to individuals and groups, (4) being epistemically risky and (5) social constructs. This approach helps clustering correlates into those five domains, separating

conspiracy beliefs and other forms of beliefs, while also taking into account the variations of different conspiracy theories – that may result from the five properties being pronounced to a greater or lesser degree.

While these works have already made significant progress in the field of research, we still see potential for further work on frameworks that meet the above criteria. In particular, we see the integration into existing theories that describe comprehensive world views and can thus be made fruitful as the origin of conspiracy mentality to be an important contribution to current research. To this end, we introduce MPT and its conservative ideology of SFM as a potential framework to explain conspiracy mentality.

**On the State as Family - Conceptual Mapping in the Political Sphere**

Based on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), MPT assumes that moral values and basic principles of interpersonal interaction acquired in the family has a decisive influence on the ideological convictions of adults (Lakoff, 2016). Ecarius, Köbel, and Wahl (2001) suggest that the family plays a crucial role in determining an individual's future social placement, as the norms, values, and behaviors internalized through family relationships are considered to be particularly stable, although not entirely unchangeable. According to Lakoff and Wehling (2009), the connection between family-specific experiences and political attitudes can be summarized by considering the crucial question of how a child learns about moral behavior within their family. This question ultimately shapes our understanding of moral politics, as we unconsciously transfer our perception of moral authority in the family to the political sphere.

Based on the central premise of conceptual metaphor theory that immediate experiential knowledge arising from sensory perception is transferred through conceptual mapping to an abstract target domain (Yu et al., 2017, S. 231), the significance of family interaction for socio-

political attitude patterns can be plausibly illustrated. First of all, it is evident "[that] [o]ur earliest experience with being governed is in our families" (Lakoff & Rockridge Institute, 2006, p. 49). After all, children are in a subordinate role within the family, which is evident not least in the authority of their parents to give instructions: "They protect us, tell us what we can and cannot do, make sure we have enough money and supplies, educate us, and have us do our part in running the house" (Lakoff & Rockridge Institute, 2006, p. 49). The conceptual metaphor "Nation als Familie" [nation as family] (Lakoff & Wehling 2009, p. 34) thus goes hand in hand with a conceptual transfer of family-specific sensory experiences to the political sphere, which ultimately means as McAdams et al. (2008, p. 979) suggest, that political orientations ultimately reflect an individual's beliefs about what constitutes a good parent and how a well-functioning family should be structured. The directly accessible family sphere functions as the source domain, while the area of political-social coexistence represents the target domain. The conceptual mapping leads to "that people commonly and automatically draw on their beliefs about ideal family life when reasoning about politics and governance" (Wehling, 2013, p. 11). In this context, however, it is important to understand that not all people experience family life in the same way. Lakoff assumes two fundamentally different, almost diametrical family models, which ultimately also lead to different convictions: the 'Nurturant Parent Morality' (NPM), which conceptualizes progressive political thinking, and the 'Strict Father Morality' (SFM), which promotes conservative thinking.

**'Strict Father Morality' as Conservative Ideology**

The following definition from Feinberg and Wehling (2018) shall serve as a basis for the introductory remarks on SFM:

> The strict model builds on the belief that the world is a dangerous and competitive place. It revolves around strictness and emphasizes withstanding temptation, abiding to authorities, and

controlling oneself for the sake of maximal self-discipline and independence. Children are taken to have a natural tendency toward misbehavior and self-indulgence, and it is the parent's obligation to teach them self-reliance, self-discipline, and obedience (p. 3).

It is obviously a dominance-oriented, thus anti-egalitarian worldview that proclaims natural hierarchies and subordinating respect for social authorities. Worldly coexistence is understood less as cooperative togetherness and more as competitive confrontation in an agonal environment that ultimately brings the strongest and most self-disciplined individuals to the top. It is thus by no means a matter of attempting to deconstruct social power relations and advocating for the inalienable rights of minorities at risk of discrimination. Rather, the dominance-based, thus social Darwinist order is to be maintained as the natural and ideologically superior form of society.

SFM is also characterized by an essentialist character, based on the fundamental premise "that there are natural, strict, uniform, unchanging standards of behavior that must be followed if society is to function" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 90). Progressive-disruptive policies that counteract the central basic concerns of conservative ideology thus pose a threat to the natural order of things. This also goes hand in hand with the essential notion of homogeneity as a moral guiding principle, of a "metaphor of Moral Wholeness", fundamentally understood as "an overall unity of form that makes an entity strong and resistant of pressures" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 90) and the central conception of "Moral Purity" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 92). Just as physical impurities can contaminate a particular entity, a person or society is fundamentally devalued by moral impurities (Lakoff, 2016, p. 92). Furthermore, "[that] Moral Purity is often paired with Moral Essence", i.e. "essential moral qualities that determine certain kinds of moral or immoral behavior ... used to define virtues and vices of all sorts" (Lakoff, 2016, pp. 88-89, p. 93.). "Moral Essence" belongs to the ideology-overarching human conceptual system, but plays a special role in SFM due to the high priority of "discipline to character development" (Lakoff, 2016, p.

90). The meritocratic principle thus becomes the central factor of a social order that is fundamentally defined by the assumption "that the exercise of authority is itself moral; that is, it is moral to reward obedience and punish disobedience" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 67).

Parental acts of punishment are due to the ideological necessity that a harsh and dangerous environment imperatively requires individual strength and resilience, otherwise there would be the existential danger of failing in real-world confrontations. "Survival is a matter of competition, and only through self-discipline can a child learn to compete successfully" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 66), as Lakoff puts it. However, the prominent importance of personal responsibility and self-discipline by no means implies that there is no room for caring action and social responsibility in SFM. However, it is less about a universal willingness to help that makes no distinction between in-group and out-group, but rather about a particular idea of solidarity ("In-group nurturance") that only includes the respective in-group (Lakoff, 2016, pp. 96-97). From the basic premises of SFM outlined above, the conception of a "natural order" emerges as "the order of dominance that occurs in the world" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 81). For this hierarchical notion, Lakoff introduces the term "Moral Order," which postulates a natural worldview based on dominance and subordination (Lakoff, 2016, pp. 104-105). Accordingly, social actors are by no means in an egalitarian relationship to each other and meet at eye level. Rather, there is a substantial, authority-based status gap between them. Lakoff cites as an example the dominant position of God over humans, who in turn, according to Christian argumentation, are superior to nature. Moreover, the "Moral Order" includes a patriarchal notion of order that postulates a natural gender imbalance as well as heteronormative beliefs. Cultural chauvinist standpoints that locate Western industrialized nations above non-Western developing and emerging countries are also an integral part of the "Moral Order" (Wehling, 2013, pp. 16-17). Social coexistence is thus by no means to be shaped in an egalitarian manner; rather, a hierarchical togetherness is considered the normative ideal, since "the social survival

of the fittest can be seen as moral" (Lakoff, 2016, p. 135). Accordingly, for representatives of SFM, the focus is on perpetuating the notion of a worldview based on "rules and discipline" (McAdams et al., 2008, p. 980), as this represents the essential core of their ideological system. In addition, the assumption of a Manichean world order that enables a clear distinction between friend and foe, between good and evil, can be identified as a constitutive element of SFM (Wehling, 2013, p. 33).

The notion of reality as a dangerous, thus competitive-agonal place that demands maximum self-discipline and assertiveness from individuals also goes hand in hand with a particular emphasis on direct causality: "In the strict father model, there is individual responsibility and direct action operating: the father gives a directive, the child is expected to carry it out, and if not, the father punishes. Causation is direct and individual" (Lakoff, 2009, p. 188). Real-world conditions thus by no means have systemic, thus highly complex causal chains, but can be traced back to "direct, simple causes. For example, a lack of success is a direct result of a lack of self-discipline" (Wehling, 2013, p. 14). Finally, it should be noted that, although a large part of the studies on 'Moral Politics Theory' were conducted in the USA, there are now several analyses that demonstrate the international relevance of the two ideal-typical family models NPM and SFM. Accordingly, people in Western Europe, for example, also use the resulting values to understand political coexistence in a state (Feinberg et al., 2020; see also Bornschier, 2010).

**Relationship between 'Strict Father Values' and Correlates of Conspiracy Mentality**

**Figure 2**

*Framework of common correlates between conspiracy mentality and SFM*
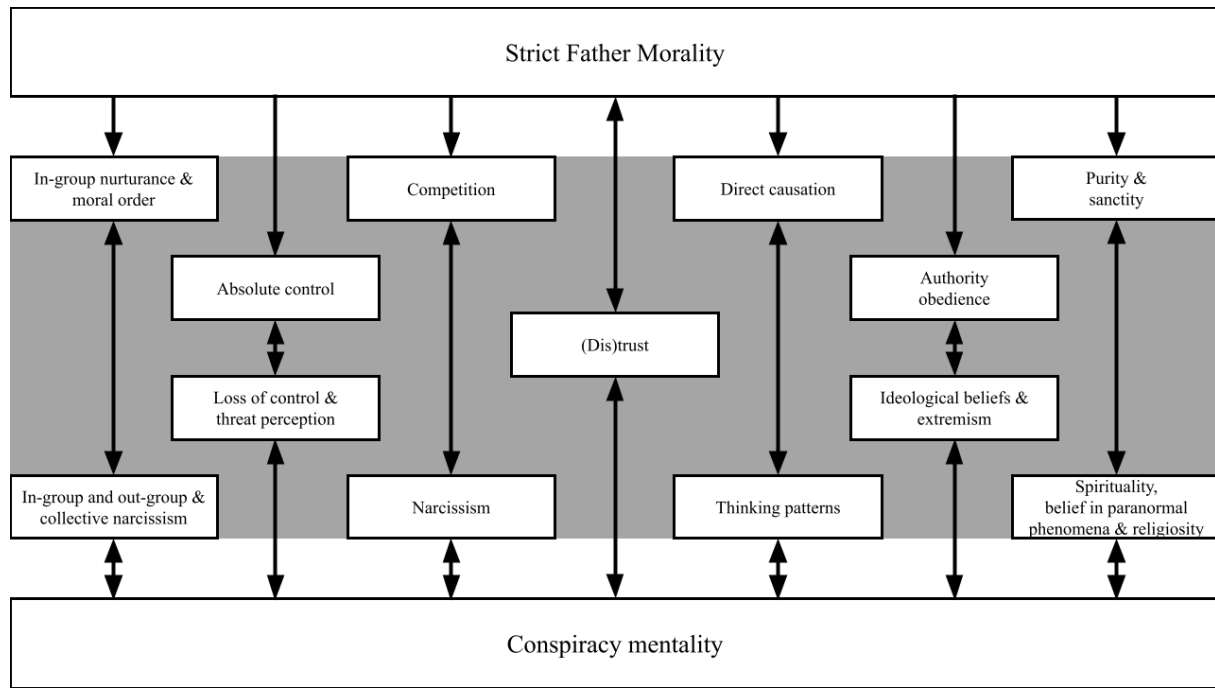


In the following, we will examine the intersections of SFM and conspiracy mentality and transfer them into a common theoretical model. Later, we will also discuss how this can be used to respond to a growing popularity of conspiracy theories in political and social discourse.

Starting with the general distrust of other people, this can be plausibly linked to SFM when one considers the Manichean worldview and the associated notion of a competitive society in which everyone has only their own advancement in mind, not the worries and needs of other people. It is evident that such a view of society is hardly likely to strengthen understanding and mutual respect among a population. Rather, such beliefs almost inevitably lead to growing skepticism and, ultimately, deep distrust within the population. After all, a person thinking in this way does not see in his or her counterpart a cooperative partner, but a distinct opponent who is in competition with him or her and therefore cannot be interested in his or her well-being. Based on these considerations, the correlate of threat perception can also be plausibly connected to

SFM: Those who find themselves in a competitive world populated by potential opponents obviously feel far more threatened than a person who assumes the possibility of cooperative coexistence in a society (Jost et al., 2017).

The empirical finding that scientific or analytical thinking skills correlate negatively with a conspiracy mentality is also not surprising against the background of our assumptions. After all, SFM is based on direct causality, that is, worldly events can always be traced back to a clear single cause and are not explicable by contingent processes. Scientific thinking, on the other hand, is generally determined by systemic-causal relationships (Lakoff speaks here of "systemic causation"; Lakoff, 2016), which often manifest themselves in complex causal chains (e.g., climate crisis) and cannot be traced back to a specific cause. We therefore assume that conservative narratives are far less connectable for people with scientific thinking skills than for people who think in terms of direct causality (De Pryck & Gemenne, 2017).

Continuing with ideological beliefs and extremism, it can be stated that studies suggest a connection between extreme, right-wing and authoritarian attitudes and conspiracy mentality. Even if not all studies commit to which ideology is the driver, we see a correspondence with "Obedience" (Wehling, 2013, p. 31) in SFM, where subordination to authorities is seen as moral and thus good. This sub-aspect of SFM subsumes a broad field of the proven ideologically shaped correlates with conspiracy mentality. At the same time, it does not simplify the connection between ideology and conspiracy mentality to a mere "right-left" spectrum, but offers a concrete ideological driver.

Extreme distinctions between in-group and out-group can also be demonstrated with our model, for example, in the already discussed Manichean worldview, but also the tendency toward exclusionary solidarity ("In-group nurturance") as well as the "Moral Order" of SFM. In this context, the "Moral Order" refers to the notion of a hierarchical order in which there is a clear upgrading and downgrading of certain groups. This goes hand in hand with the tendency to see

oneself as part of a superior group that occupies a position of power over other social actors, reflected in the concept of collective narcissism (Zavala et al., 2009).

Our model links individual narcissism with central conservative values of SFM like personal strength, dominance, and assertiveness. For only those who live according to these values can successfully assert their self-interest in the social interaction perceived as competitive and attain the high social status aspired to by many conservative people. Mayer et al. (2020) support this connection and find that the dimension "narcissistic rivalry" is particularly related to right-wing authoritarianism. Narcissistic rivalry encompasses traits such as dominance, aggression, and devaluation of others to emphasize one's own superiority, which are consistent with SFM values mentioned above. Individuals with high levels of narcissistic rivalry strive for high social status and perceive social interactions as competitive, which links them to SFM traits.

A comparatively large spiritual need is also plausible against the background of our model, since "purity" is one of the central values of SFM. The connection between religiosity and an above-average need for "purity" has been studied in research for a long time - in 2022 for the first time in a meta-analysis (Yu et al., 2022). We attribute the found connection to the striving of many religious people for spiritual purity, which presupposes a pious, non-sinful behavior. If an affected individual succeeds in displaying such behavior, this is accompanied intrasubjectively by a "non-secular transcendental emotional-reward value" (Yu et al., 2022, p. 276). The connection becomes even clearer when one uses the term "Sanctity", which is used in the thematically related 'Moral Foundations Theory' (Haidt, 2012) and is also used more or less synonymously with "purity" in some publications (Feinberg & Willer, 2013).

We have also identified a lack of trust in political and knowledge-generating institutions as a central correlate for conspiracy mentality. MPT in particular provides an answer to the question of why certain population groups have lost trust in established political-media institutions. To illustrate this connection, it is worth taking a look at the analyses of the popularity of the

German Islamophobic Pegida [Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident] and the rise of AfD's popularity ratings in Germany following the refugee movement in 2015 by Patzelt (Patzelt, 2015; Patzelt, 2018). He uses the term "Repräsentationslücke" [representation gap] to explain the increased social resonance of conservative-right positions and the prosperity of right-wing populism throughout Europe (Emendörfer, 2023). According to Patzelt, empirical studies across EU states show that, on average, MPs are further to the left than the population that elects them and that politicians favor further migration more strongly than the people they represent. This discrepancy has led to the flourishing of right-wing populism throughout Europe, repeatedly shaping elections and often resulting in right-wing governments (Emendörfer, 2023).

The discrepancy between government action perceived as progressive and the conservative convictions of certain population groups thus leads to a growing lack of representation for an increasing number of people who no longer feel represented, or at least not sufficiently represented, by the politicians in office and therefore gradually lose trust in state institutions (Patzelt, 2018). This insight can be sharpened against the background of MPT: Great or little trust in the political system depends not insignificantly on which ideological orientation the politically responsible persons reveal and whether this corresponds with the ideological positions of the represented persons.

Both the so-called euro rescue policy of the German federal government - which led to the founding of the AfD in 2013 - and the migration policy from 2015 - which contributed significantly to the increasing popularity of the party - were not shaped by a SFM, but far more by the progressive 'Nurturant Parent Values' (like showing solidarity with financially weak EU-countries or refugees). For this reason, conservatively oriented people may not have felt (any longer) represented by state institutions and instead increasingly placed their trust in political actors such as the AfD, who clearly display their conservative orientation.

Ultimately, the conservative values (and the inherent conspiracy mentality associated with them) of the affected individuals were at least a central reason for the growing loss of trust in political institutions perceived as progressive. An example of a conservative value contradicting both the euro rescue and migration policies would be "In-group nurturance". After all, in both cases, the federal government was not only in solidarity with its own group (the German population), but with refugees from various countries and other EU states, respectively. These political decisions can be plausibly explained against the background of NPM and the value "In- and out-group nurturance" existing there (Wehling, 2013), but they are difficult to reconcile with SFM.

**Socio-political Implications of our Model**

Before we summarize our findings and provide a research-theoretical outlook, we first want to point out the socio-political implications of the approach. In addition to the scientific added value of combining correlates of conspiracy mentality under one roof, our theoretical model offers the option of deriving concrete imperatives for action to prevent conspiracy mentality: If conspiracy mentality is actually an inherent component of the conservative ideology of SFM, as we assume, the originally cognitive-linguistic concept of moral framing, i.e. a "linguistic framing in terms of strict-father and nurturant-parent values" (Wehling, 2013, p. 27), offers a possible point of intervention. The basic idea is based on the phenomena of "mutual inhibition" and "Biconceptualism" originally introduced by Lakoff (Lakoff, 2009, p. 70). Under "Biconceptualism", Lakoff subsumes the observation that a large part of people cannot be assigned exclusively to either NPM or SFM. Instead, these people are biconceptual, that is, they think and act on the basis of one or the other moral system, depending on the situation and context (Lakoff, 2009). One could imagine, for example, a person who advocates a restrictive migration policy, but at the same time advocates for abortions and a comprehensive welfare state. In this case, the person's attitude on the issue of migration would be guided by

conservative values, while the stance on abortions and the welfare state would be guided by progressive values. However, the two ideological systems can never be cognitively activated in parallel, but only in a time-delayed manner. The activation of one deactivates the other, diametrically opposed system at the same time. This is what Lakoff means by the term "mutual inhibition". If political and social actors continuously activate progressive values (especially empathy and care) and thus the NPM, they simultaneously block the SFM and thus - according to our thesis - the affinity for conspiracy theories. For if a conspiracy mentality is an inherent component of SFM and this can be neurally weakened by activating the progressive model of NPM, the probability that the affected person will adopt attitudes and narratives based on this system also decreases.

**Conclusion**

In our work, we have elaborated the correspondences between a general tendency toward conspiracy theories (conspiracy mentality) and SFM and transferred them into a theoretical model. Our goal was to formulate a general ideological framework that explains conspiracy mentality as part of this ideology. Our model allows us to subsume important predictors under a conceptual roof and thus make a theoretical contribution to a better understanding of conspiracy mentality. The developed model can also be applied across cultures, as it builds on MPT and the theory of conceptual metaphors.

Another advantage of our model is that it suggests statements about the causal nature of previous relationships and can thus bring further clarity about possible predictors for conspiracy mentality. However, these relationships must first be further empirically tested. For this purpose, the items proposed by Wehling (2013) for surveying SFM as well as, in contrast, NPM are suitable. However, we also see a disadvantage of the model: Since the direction of effect, in our view, emanates from the underlying ideology, which could have been shaped at a very early point in time, it may well be that the test of causality could prove difficult. We assume

that the causal direction would have to go from SFM to conspiracy mentality, but since both constructs are time-stable variables (traits), a test using panel studies would only be possible over very long periods of time. However, we do not rule out that short-term individual events that are experienced as particularly drastic can also lead to the development of a conspiracy mentality in people who follow a SFM. The coronavirus pandemic is a good example of this: small changes in the social fabric could quickly turn individuals into groups that share conspiracy theory content. Such shifts could also allow measurable changes in shorter periods of time. An experimental design could also be conceivable to test the link between SFM and conspiracy mentality as well as the concept of mutual inhibition. Our model would hypothesize that participants exposed to stimuli that activate progressive values (NPM) would measure a reduction in conspiracy mentality compared to a control group. Furthermore, this design could be applied in the context of specific events, such as the coronavirus pandemic, to investigate how the activation of NPM might attenuate the development of specific conspiracy beliefs in response to dramatic social changes.

However, this also shows that our model cannot provide an exact explanation of the individual cases that lead to the adoption of conspiracy-theoretical patterns of thought. This requires further case studies and also qualitative research that focus on tipping points in the acquisition of concrete conspiracy-theoretical thoughts. As a middle-range theory (Merton, 1968), however, our approach makes it possible to derive and test hypotheses for an average relationship. In addition, our model sharpens the view for the ideology that could motivate these individual cases and also provides clues for vulnerabilities that can be traced back to underlying family concepts.

This work is to be understood as an attempt to understand conspiracy mentality as an inherent component of a comprehensive ideological orientation and is intended as an impulse to test this connection in empirical studies. We have already outlined the extent to which the current state

of research suggests the overlaps between SFM and conspiracy mentality. If this assumption is actually empirically substantiated, this would not only enrich the scientific discourse with an innovative perspective - socio-political actors would also have a promising lever at hand to counter the growing popularity of conspiracy theories.

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