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Conspiracy Theories Through a Cross-Cultural Lens

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Conspiracy Theories Through a Cross-Cultural Lens

Abstract

Conspiracy beliefs and an overarching conspiracy mentality binding them together are hot topics in psychology, not the least due to potential societal costs that are associated with them. Despite anecdotal evidence supporting the ubiquity of such beliefs across the globe, very little research has systematically explored cross-cultural differences, let alone tested theory-based hypotheses about such differences. The present paper highlights important methodological and theoretical considerations in developing a sound research program in predictors of country-level variations in conspiracy endorsement.

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories, suspicions that some events or circumstances of considerable relevance have been intentionally brought about by the secret coordination of a small powerful group that either intended or accepted to harm others in pursuit of their own benefit (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020a), have been observed for many events and contexts. They are often thought of as an almost natural response to crises (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017) and unexpected large-scale events that seem to beg for an equally scaled explanation (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007). As such, speculations about evil plots hatched in secret arise for tragic accidents like plane crashes, political events like terrorist attacks or assassinations and health threats like global pandemics (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020b). Although some conspiracy beliefs are highly context-specific both in their spread and connotation (e.g., the idea that the Polish presidential plane crash in Smolensk was intentionally brought about), others have become almost global icons (e.g., that 9-11 was an inside job or the notion of a Jewish world conspiracy). In the following, I want to take a closer look at conspiracy beliefs from a cross-cultural perspective. I will start by discussing the notion of conspiracy beliefs as a universal phenomenon as well as a culture-specific one, before turning to issues of measurement and an outlook on theoretically informed cross-cultural hypotheses.

Conspiracy Beliefs as a Universal Phenomenon?

Evolutionarily inspired theorizing would allow the assumption that conspiracy beliefs should be a universal phenomenon. Based on error-management theorizing, van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) argued that throughout human evolution, it has been adaptive to secretly coordinate with others to improve one's own outcome, but also to be particularly sensitive to such plots by others. Detecting that others planned to cheat on me might have been a lifesaver, whereas missing such a plot might have turned out extremely detrimental. On the other hand, ringing a false alarm and suspecting a secret plan when there was none might have had much less dramatic consequences. As such, the readiness to suspect conspiracies should have been adaptive. Hence, any genetically encodable form of readiness to engage in such suspicion might have reproduced selectively.

Another perspective that allows for the assumption of independently evolved readiness to suspect conspiracies is tied to a need-based model of conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2017). In this view, conspiracy narratives are successful to the extent that they at least hold the promise to quench people's epistemic, existential and social needs (although research to date does not support the idea that they successfully do). Epistemic and existential needs are closely related as blaming the fate of the world on a group of evil conspirators provides me with a firm answer (and hence epistemic certainty) that allows predictability, but also the feeling to understand the world, as well as an opportunity to exert actual control (stop the villains). The benefit of such an outlook on the world becomes

immediately apparent in contrast to the alternative of attributing the state of the world to chance or randomness. Here, the individual is prey to random chains of events unfolding without any opportunity to either foresee or control the turn of events. A similar argument has been made for the almost universal invention of gods (Kay et al., 2009, 2010). Likewise, unpleasant events are no longer attributed to randomness but to the will of god(s), which similarly introduces to possibility of control. Gods can be appeased by prayer or sacrifices, conspirators can be exposed and defeated. Randomness cannot. In line with that, like long postulated for religion (Barrett, 2000; Guthrie et al., 1980) conspiracy beliefs have been shown to strongly correlate with the tendency to perceive agency and intention where there is none (Douglas et al. 2016, Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

The literature on conspiracy beliefs thus holds some arguments as to why we should expect conspiracy beliefs to be an almost universal phenomenon. A strong version of such an evolutionary reasoning would suggest that cultural differences are pointless. Conspiracy thinking would thus have evolved anywhere because the environment facilitated those who were particularly prone to suspect conspiracies, who therefore fared better and hence had the upper hand in selective reproduction. As with any claim about universality, this of course is problematic and there are good reasons to explore cross-cultural differences in the extent and function of conspiracy beliefs. Perhaps surprisingly, very few studies have looked systematically at cross-cultural differences, partially because it is not trivial to entertain meaningful comparisons across cultures.

Issues with Measuring and Comparing Conspiracy Beliefs across Cultures.

Presuming that a certain cultural context more readily gives rise to conspiracy endorsement than another one (due to either contextual socio-economic differences or actual cultural cognition; see below), still requires quite some consideration of how to measure these differences. An almost ritualistic exercise in cross-cultural psychology is testing for measurement invariance to establish comparability of scales across the involved context. Testing for measurement invariance means conducting a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis and exploring how many parameters can be fixed to be equal across groups without impacting the fit of the model. Fixing the factor structure without losing fit is typically referred to as configural equivalence, successfully fixing the loadings yields metric equivalence (and allows comparing slopes or correlations between samples), whereas the strongest requirement, scalar equivalence, also calls for fixing the item intercepts to then meaningfully interpret mean differences between samples. Interested readers will find a very accessible introduction to the method and ways to deal with non-invariance in Milford and Fischer (2010). Satisfying measurement is hard to achieve, particularly with large samples that provide sufficient statistical power to detect minor deviations. Once a scale has been shown to be measurement invariant, it provides only little guarantee for future studies. Even if a scale was optimized to be measurement invariant across four contexts (Bruder et al., 2013),

the same scale may not live up to these expectations once the number of contexts increases (Imhoff et al., 2021). Even when successfully demonstrated, however, measurement invariance alone might not suffice to ensure meaningful comparisons.

As an arguably even less ambitious prerequisite, the same question should be asked in both contexts. That means that the alleged culprit of the conspiracy should be the same for all respondents. As trivial as it may sound, it is still noteworthy. To highlight this, a recent paper reported that Chinese participants expressed more intergroup conspiracy beliefs about the US government (i.e., beliefs that the respective other government was secretly trying to harm the own country) than vice versa and that this difference was partially mediated by a greater endorsement of power distance value among the Chinese sample (van Prooijen & Song, 2021). Although these results are among the first that show national differences in the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories and linked them to a common variable of cultural differences, one problem with this approach of intergroup conspiracy theories is that the respondents do not strictly complete the same scale. As Chinese participants were asked about secret harm conducted by the US government and US participants about conspiracies of the Chinese government, respondent and target nationality were fully confounded (despite establishing measurement invariance). As such, it may be that the greater endorsement by Chinese participants does not reflect their greater tendency to endorse conspiracies (they scored identically on generic conspiracy mentality), but the stronger truth-value of the statement (i.e. the American government does indeed conduct more secret operations to harm China than vice versa).

Thus, if we want to explore cross-cultural differences in conspiracy endorsement, we should ask the same questions in all contexts. Even then, however, the problem remains that these often do not have the same *meaning* in each cultural context. Conspiracy theories about the Smolensk plane crash (and death of the president Lech Kaczyński) revolve around an event often characterized as a national trauma and deeply embedded in the Polish discourse even years later (Bilewicz et al., 2019), but they may bear a very different connotation in other contexts. Likewise, 9-11 is a cultural icon deeply embedded in the US culture, but arguably less so in other countries. Many of the best-known conspiracy theories are in fact US-centric (e.g., the orchestrated killing of JFK, the staged landing of the Apollo mission, the attacks on September 11th, 2001 as an inside job, and more recently the QAnon cult). It is unclear whether they bear the same relevance in contexts where these are just tales from a far-away country. Thus, even superficially identical questions may not bear the same meaning to respondents.

Circumventing this problem, researchers can move away from concrete conspiracy theories to a more general mindset of conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder 2014), the tendency to suspect conspiracies behind important events. Returning to the study by van Prooijen and Song (2021), it must be noted that US-based and Chinese participants did indeed not differ at all in their general conspiracy mentality (although the paper failed to provide measurement invariance information for this scale). Other research that did ensure measurement invariant of their conspiracy mentality scale reported higher values of conspiracy mentality in Turkey compared to US and UK with Ireland, which again scored slightly higher than Germany (Bruder et al., 2013). As interesting as such differences may

be, they are purely descriptive and convey little information about the reasons for such differences.

Toward Theoretically Informed Hypotheses

To move beyond description requires a solid theory about what causes potentially observable differences between respondents from different cultures. I could have the (here completely arbitrary) theory that some regional factor (e.g., predominance of wheat farming over rice farming) led to evolvment of certain cultural worldviews and values (e.g., greater emphasis on independence and individuality) that would then evoke more conspiracy endorsement as a means to show off one's uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). If this theory was true, I would not only expect more conspiracy endorsement in samples with more independent (vs. interdependent) self-construal, but I would also expect within-culture difference in self-construal, need for uniqueness and conspiracy endorsement to be correlated positively. Thus, the ecological correlation (more independent cultures show more conspiracy endorsement on average) should align with the individual level correlations (within a culture, more independent individuals show greater endorsement of conspiracy beliefs). If this is not the case, interpreting the country level correlations results in ecological fallacies. Correlating average country-level conspiracy mentality with another average country-level variable can suggest (spurious) correlations that do not reflect actual correlations at the individual level. As only one hypothetical example, conspiracy mentality may be particularly pronounced in countries whose population is on average left leaning (ecological correlation), but this is driven by the fact that people on the right wing more strongly endorse conspiracy beliefs, in particularly when they are excluded from government (Imhoff et al., 2021). Obviously, the issue of ecological fallacies is not specific to the domain of conspiracy beliefs, but a more general problem of confusing or equating ecological correlations with actual individual-level correlations. Next, I will propose the distinction between different kinds of country-level variables out of which one is immune to ecological fallacies.

Cultured Cognition vs. Socio-Economic Context

There are two kinds of variables one can gather on the country level. Whereas some variables are generic country-level descriptors (e.g., economic inequality, level of corruption) others are created by aggregating over respondents from that country/ culture (e.g., interdependence, power distance, tightness, income). The former ones tend to be more or less objective socio-economic indicators, whereas the latter ones are often psychological in the narrower sense and what I would refer to as "cultured cognition" (with the example of income mentioned as an exception). Cultured cognition refers to the mindset of people, regarding salient goals, and cultural expectations. Naturally, these mindsets will not be homogeneous within a given culture, but nevertheless there can be meaningful regional

differences in the extent to which certain aspects are salient. These differences then can be compared on a level of mean levels per country (e.g., Hofstede's cultural dimensions). As psychological variables can only be harvested by aggregating across individuals comparing countries on them can lead to ecological fallacies. For the generic country-level descriptors, the countries are the cases. Keeping in mind which variables need to be secured against ecological fallacies by additional (individual level) analyses and which do not may remove insecurities about investigating both country-level descriptors and cognitive cultural factors in combination, leading to bolder theorizing and hypothesis testing.

Dissecting country-level variable that either reflect more or less objective circumstances from those that reflect cultured cognitions, a generally salient situated cognition in this specific cultural context, might also bring us back to the two streams of evolutionary inspired explanation introduced in the beginning. Above, I had contrasted an error-based perspective (where the underlying motivation is to catch valid signals about the world) from need-based perspectives (where the underlying motivation is rooted in feelings of certainty and control the individual strives for). Although these two may sound similar, their focus is different.

The error-based perspective becomes particularly prominent when we compare respondents from objectively different social surroundings. Conspiracy beliefs may serve as (potentially biased but still accurate) detection of cues for suspicion. Humans have the capacity to conspire, and they frequently make use of this capacity. Conspiracy believers may thus be particularly sensitive to (more or less valid) cues (but see Meuer & Imhoff, 2021). The starting point here is the motivation to be right about the world, to "know" what is going on. This motivation cannot be met by a substitute.

This is different for the need-based perspective. The epistemic need for certainty can be fulfilled by any firm response, independent of its objective accuracy (e.g., rather than hanging in thin air without any explanation of why a certain tragedy happened, a conspiracy theory may point at a group of culprits and thus provide closure). In this perspective, conspiracy beliefs are thus much less about empirical hypotheses, but purely psychological, following from the inner working and motivations of the psyche. People endorse conspiracy belief to fulfill their needs for certainty and definite answers, because they allow them to feel in control of their life or lift their views of the self but also their group. The starting point here are needs to feel competent, in power and control – needs that could in principle be fulfilled by other means.

These two perspectives can guide cross-cultural research and cross-cultural research may indeed be unique in its capacity to speak to these two perspectives. Thinking about socio-economic variables, the error-based perspective might predict particularly strong endorsement of conspiracy theories in contexts where there are indeed more conspiracies, more corruption, less transparency. And indeed, there is some tentative support for the notion that conspiracy mentality is higher in countries that score low on the Economist's democracy index and the Transparency International corruption index (Imhoff et al., 2021; note though that the scale did not achieve metric invariance). From the need-based perspective, we would expect conspiracy beliefs to blossom in environments where people feel deprived of control over their own life. In the same dataset, under the same caveats, it

can also be observed that conspiracy mentality corresponds with greater economic inequality. Arguably, economic inequality increases the frequency of experiencing and fearing of not being able to achieve the outcomes one aims for in life, thus boosting feelings of control deprivation.

The same two perspectives can also be applied to variables of cultured cognition like power distance. Given the pivotal role power plays in the dynamic of conspiracy theories (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020a; Nera et al., 2021), it is not surprising that the few examples of cross-cultural research on conspiracy beliefs have looked at power distance. Power distance is commonly defined as the extent to which unequal power relations are accepted or prescribed and hierarchies are followed within a cultural context. Conspiracy theories typically claim to speak truth to power and challenge existing hierarchies (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020a). In fact, people scoring high on conspiracy mentality do not even accept epistemic power like expertise (Imhoff et al., 2018). If we think of culture as cognition and specifically see power distance as an internalized acceptance of hierarchies and power differences, then we would expect members of societies with high power distance to exhibit particularly low conspiracy beliefs. Antagonizing those in power by claiming sinister motives on their side seems to be quite the opposite of an internalized acceptance of power differences. If, however, we regard conspiracy beliefs as (potentially exaggerated) reactions to actual deficiencies in democracy and transparency, this introduces another possibility. Arguably, societies high in power distance hold their elites less accountable (as the hierarchy is relatively fixed) than democracies in which each institutional power is only granted temporarily. As such, elites in societies high in power distance might indeed engage in more autocratic and self-serving plots. To the extent that differences in conspiracy beliefs are valid indicators of such differences, we would expect an exactly opposite pattern to the one described above: we would expect particularly pronounced level of conspiracy beliefs in cultures with high power distance. And indeed, this is what the preliminary evidence (Adam-Trojan et al., 2021; van Prooijen & Song, 2021) seems to suggest: conspiracy beliefs are more pronounced in context with high power distance. This does not necessarily mean that all conspiracy allegations are valid suspicions about actual nepotism by those in power. At the same time, it provides a warning against interpreting any mean difference between two national contexts as culture in the meaning of how people see and perceive the world. Sometimes at least the factual socio-political and economic differences might provide a more parsimonious alternative to explain such differences.

Conclusions

Suspecting that a group of people or institution have made secret arrangement to their own benefit and at the expense of the public is a common and arguably universal phenomenon. One potential reason for this is that people indeed do conspire from time to time (and perceivers know this as they do as well; Douglas & Sutton, 2011). It is thus highly functional to suspect this from time to time. Another reason is that endorsing such beliefs – even

without strong evidence – grants at least the illusion of having certain knowledge about the world and thus being able to control it (e.g., by exposing the culprits to public shaming). Despite the ubiquity, it is a fascinating topic to explore regional and cultural differences in the readiness to engage in such conspiracy thinking and most of it is – currently – uncharted territory. Less than a handful of studies have systematically explored conspiracy beliefs in a cross-cultural perspective, a most of this research is – methodologically and theoretically speaking – still in its infancy. First associations have been explored with country-level indicators of the Hofstede dimensions (e.g., Adam-Trojan et al., 2021; van Prooijen & Song, 2021), but for other candidates like socio-economic variables or values the available evidence is sparse. Taking on the challenge of exploring it requires elaboration of measurement issues (equal appropriateness, measurement invariance), but may ultimately teach us not only about (descriptive) cultural differences. It may prove the key to better understand to what extent conspiracy can be legitimately characterized as irrational and paranoid (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018) and to what extent they are more or less rational reaction to social contexts that have deficiencies in transparency and democratic control. Using country-level indicators of either actual deficiencies in democracy and transparency or of circumstances that deprive people’s needs may serve as one lens to approach this issue in a theory-driven way.

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Biosketch

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Further Information

The Conspiracy Mentality Scale (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) in German and English language in the Appendix

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235974304_Speaking_Un-Truth_to_Power_Conspiracy_Mentality_as_A_Generalised_Political_Attitude

The short Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013) in 20 different languages (<https://mfr.de-1.osf.io/render?url=https://osf.io/vgsy8/?direct%26mode=render%26action=download%26mode=render>) as used in Imhoff et al. (2022).

The Conspiracy theory research database (<https://www.kent.ac.uk/school-of-psychology/downloads/crest-database.xlsx>) compiled by Karen Douglas gives a regularly updated overview over academic publications in this area.

Discussion Questions

1. What are advantages and disadvantages of concrete conspiracy beliefs vs. general conspiracy mentality in exploring cultural differences in conspiracy beliefs?
2. Why is it important to establish measurement invariance? Think about concrete examples that might undermine invariance and how they affect the interpretation of differences between samples.
3. Randomly select two countries that come to your mind and imagine that the values of conspiracy mentality were reliably higher in the first than the second. Think about what you know about these two countries and list potential reasons for this difference. Sort these reasons into the two kind of country-level variables discussed in the text.
4. Think about a claim that might sound like a conspiracy theory in one country but is likely an accurate description of the situation in another country.