CHAPTER I

Introduction

Creating Conspiracy Beliefs focuses on making sense of *how and why* some people respond to their fear of a threat by creating and, especially, accepting conspiracy stories. It also concerns why and how embrace of such beliefs is affected by people's interactions with others and with media content, both on- and offline.

The experience of anxiety (i.e., the feeling of imminent threat and/or uncertainty about the future, which involves cognitive feelings and may involve the bodily reactions associated with fear) is often diffuse (i.e., an anxious mood) and thus easy to misattribute to narratives of danger and hidden plots contained in communications from other people or media sources. The fear-inducing contents of messages can also produce an anxious mood as well as specific fears that can predispose people to believe in conspiracy theories.[1] Anxiety alone, however, does not account for beliefs such as the following, which was advanced in 2018 by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., nephew of President John F. Kennedy and son and namesake of the former New York senator assassinated during his presidential bid in 1968:

> The CDC has systematically [within its vaccine branch] ordered its scientists to destroy data, to manipulate data, to massage it, to dump it in garbage cans [if it uncovers] links between development diseases and vaccines. Do I think everyone at the CDC is corrupt? Of course not. There is a tiny handful of corrupt scientists and leaders. . .. The rest of the public health community is not part of any conspiracy, but it has [become part of] the orthodoxy. (Mills, 2018)

Explaining why some beliefs take hold requires that we account for the content of communications. In the case of the MMR (measles, mumps,

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[1] The term "anxiety" is used to refer to an anxious mood, a diffuse feeling that is thus easy to attribute to any object. "Fear" is an emotion with a specific object, and we use the term when we describe emotional contents contained in a communication (e.g., fear sentiments within a tweet).

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and rubella) vaccine beliefs, this environment involves the legitimation of the original assertion of an MMR vaccine–autism association by the *Lancet*, a major science journal. It also involves a more than 10-year delay by the journal in the retraction of that article as well as ongoing advocacy of the discredited claims by the senior author, Dr. Andrew Wakefield (Eggertson, 2010). It also involves the retransmission and amplification of Wakefield's claims on social media and among groups of parents whose children had been diagnosed with autism. It further involves a popular online video in which Wakefield asserted the existence of a cover-up of evidence by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the MMR vaccine was associated with an increased rate of autism in Black male children (YouTube, 2020).

This book addresses these questions: What are the specific communications that create such beliefs? How do close others and acquaintances foster them? Does exposure to media content about them interact with anxiety? Do such synergies cut across sociopolitical, health, or environmental theories? How can one integrate psychological and sociopolitical factors, which create a predisposition to these beliefs, into this landscape?

This book presents a theory of psychological and sociopolitical influences on conspiracy beliefs at a time when some of these beliefs are consequential and held by more than one in ten in the United States, a threshold that Aizen and Fishbein argued establishes that a belief is salient in a population (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). Among the COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs that exceeded that level in March 2020 was one that averred that the US government created the virus, which was accepted by 10 percent of a national sample (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). That belief was problematic because it called into question the integrity of the US government at a time in which public confidence was required to mount a national defense against the pandemic. At the same time, nearly one in five (19 percent) reported believing that some in the CDC were exaggerating the seriousness of the virus to undermine the Trump presidency, a conclusion with the potential to engender distrust in a US government agency tasked not only with protecting public health but also with communicating accurate information about ways to protect oneself and others (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020). Meanwhile in 2020, a widely circulated conspiracy theory linking 5G technology to the 2020 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic led to more than 100 attempts to burn down cell phone towers in the United Kingdom (Satariano & Alba, 2020).

The book begins with definitions and a presentation of our theoretical framework, followed by a detailed qualitative analysis of the origin of a conspiracy theory that both led to an attack on a Washington, DC, pizza parlor and is an expression of the deep state conspiracy theory. Then six chapters describe our studies and their results, along with a detailed review of the relevant past literature. The book concludes by advancing criteria for determining which theories to debunk and forecasting directions that future research might productively take.

Our conceptualization of conspiracy beliefs and their implications contributes to the interdisciplinary scholarship on conspiracy theories by doing the following:

(1) Drawing on survey and experimental data to place anxiety and social influence at the center of conspiracy beliefs.
(2) Explaining how the media, as a particular form of social influencer, confer seemingly irrational ideas with the plausibility and circulation necessary to spread in the population.
(3) Integrating and charting the pathways of previously identified psychological and political factors that can influence conspiracy beliefs by affecting (a) general anxiety (i.e., uncertainty, worry, and fear) and its precursors of belief defense, belief accuracy, and social integration motivation; (b) the theories' perceived plausibility; and (c) the theories' perceived unfalsifiability. The belief defense motivation is the set of needs and goals to preserve one's self-views and a coherent sense of the self and the world. The belief accuracy motivation involves relatively stable needs and goals that encourage individuals to form a realistic representation of the world. The social integration motivation entails needs and goals of social connection, trust, and status.
(4) Integrating data from four surveys on both various conspiracy beliefs and comparable accurate ones with similar content to act as controls. For conspiracy beliefs stating that undocumented immigrants decided the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election in the United States, or that there is a cover-up of the link between MMR and autism, the controls included accurate beliefs that, for example, some undocumented immigrants obtain other people's credentials to gain employment in the United States, and that the link between tobacco use and cancer was once covered up.
(5) Presenting Big Data social media analyses on the spread of conspiratorial and anxiety-inducing contents.

(6)   Formulating theoretical principles that allow readers to parse the
      material and theoretical assumptions.

1.1   Context of This Work

Past studies of conspiracy theories have often involved college students.
WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) is an
appropriate acronym when it comes to characterizing a sizable body of
the conspiracy literature as indexed by PsycInfo and summarized by the
scoping review in the Online Supplement. Of the first 50 entries summa-
rized in the Online Supplement, 28 percent included at least one sample of
college students. Thirty-two percent of those entries included a specialized
sample of, for example, patients or members of a given ethnic group,
8 percent participants from Mechanical Turk, 8 percent a convenience
sample, and 8 percent respondents from a sample intended to represent a
particular nation. All in all, from the review in the Online Supplement,
only 16 of the 287 studies included nationally representative samples, and
none of them had the same goals as our book. By contrast, we collected an
initial study on Mechanical Turk followed by online samples of the adult
American population that are nationally representative. We also included a
national probability-based sample surveyed by phone.

   Our research contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on
conspiracy theories by testing our hypotheses with large, general popu-
lation studies while also advancing the methodology used to reach
conclusions about our hypotheses. Our work makes two assumptions.
First, reaching conclusions about conspiracy beliefs requires distinguish-
ing a dynamic that operates for conspiracy beliefs in contrast to verifiable
beliefs of similar content. Second, reaching conclusions about conspiracy
beliefs requires a diversity of topics to maximize the generalizability of
the research.

   We developed our measures of beliefs and pretested them over several
surveys, leading to the ones we report in the book. In addition, we
included established measures of anxiety, media use, need for closure,
need for cognition, need to belong, political knowledge, political ideology,
and trust in government (see Appendix). We also measured recent finan-
cial loss, employment, income, and education, and included a battery of
demographic questions (see Appendix).

   Cross-Sectional Studies 1–3: We conducted three original cross-
sectional surveys reported in this book. Study 1 was conducted with a
convenience online panel (i.e., Mechanical Turk) and served to validate

measures and obtain preliminary data. Studies 2 and 3 included nationally representative samples drawn from Dynata online panels.

The research process began with our interdisciplinary team identifying a set of conspiracy theories centered around political and health issues:

(1) Barack Obama was not born in the United States; he faked his birth certificate to become president.
(2) Undocumented immigrants voting illegally in 2016 prevented the Trump–Pence ticket from winning the popular vote.
(3) The US government created the HIV epidemic by experimentally injecting the virus in people of African descent.
(4) The MMR vaccine causes autism, but this has been covered up by the US government.

The theories in the study were selected to represent different views and domains. In addition, the cross-sectional surveys measured accurate control events within similar political or health domains. For example, the HIV conspiracy theory was paired with the belief that the Tuskegee experiment was veridical. Matched controls are useful to distinguish the dynamic of misconceptions from the dynamic of correct understanding of events.[2]

Longitudinal Panel: In addition to the cross-sectional surveys, we conducted a panel survey with a probability sample of 1,000 US adults. We concentrated on Americans' beliefs in the notion that the "deep state," an alleged secret network of unelected government officials and intelligence officers, was conspiring against President Donald Trump. This study allowed us to further test our model with a conspiracy theory that biased interpretations of the political events unfolding at the time, including the impeachment trial of President Trump. The first wave of the survey was conducted in November 2019, the second in December 2019, and the third in February 2020. The surveys measured belief in the deep state theory, anxiety, and media use, along with demographics.

Experiment: We also conducted an experiment manipulating anxiety elicited by unrelated events to determine if manipulated fear induced greater agreement with conspiracy beliefs. This experiment was conducted with a nationally representative sample from Dynata and supplemented

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[2] When past research has used controls (e.g., Swami et al., 2010), they are typically used to show that conspiratorial tendencies lead to beliefs in conspiracies that do not exist and thus that participants could not have heard. In our case, the control beliefs are important to assess for differences in the processes leading to conspiracy beliefs and similar but accurate beliefs.

the correlational evidence with data that are best poised to address causality. The belief in question was the alleged involvement of 5G technology in creating the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Social Media Study: To examine the social media networks associated with conspiracy theories studied in the surveys, we first used Twitter's Full Archive API to identify messages that were in English and originated in the United States. The social media study included the five conspiracy theories investigated in the surveys in addition to the following theories:

(1)   Lizard aliens hybridized with humans now occupy positions of power.
(2)   The earth is flat, but an elaborate deception explains the popular belief that it is not.
(3)   "Chem" trails, which denote condensation ("con") trails from airplanes, are evidence of large-scale spraying with pesticides to control the population and modify the environment.
(4)   Agenda 21, a United Nations plan to control population growth, is, in effect, in violation of American sovereignty.

Tweets were selected on the basis of hashtags and keywords representing a particular conspiracy theory. For example, posts about Obama's birth certificate were obtained using #fakebirthcertificate, "obamafakebirthcertificate," #obamafakebirthcertificate, "fakeobama," #fakeobama. As a control set of tweets, we also obtained posts countering this conspiracy theory using "#birther." The same was done for the deep state conspiracy theory, which had both conspiracy tweets and control ones. Next, we recorded the account handles that authored each tweet (e.g., @CNN). With that in hand, we were able to determine whether the tweet came from a conservative media account handle, a liberal media account handle, or a mainstream media account handle. Finally, we analyzed the fear sentiments within the tweets, recorded the number of retweets, and, in some cases, compared the conspiratorial tweets with the non-conspiratorial ones.

1.2   International Contexts

These issues may be important outside the United States, too, because beliefs in conspiracy theories continue to spread all over the world in the twenty-first century (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013). Recent conspiracy theories have revolved around the 9/11 attacks, the death of Princess Diana, Osama bin Laden, and the scientific evidence of climate change (Bruder et al., 2013). According to Räikkä (2009), such

political conspiracy theories can be divided into global, local, and total conspiracy theories. A conspiracy theory is global when it aims at explaining international events or when the explanation it provides refers to international affairs. For instance, a conspiracy theory that explains John F. Kennedy's murder in reference to a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) plot, with connections to the Mafia and Cuba, is a global conspiracy theory because even if it explains a local event, it does so by using international factors (Räikkä, 2009). A conspiracy theory is local when the events and alleged causes occur within a country (Räikkä, 2009), For example, the theory that the Democratic Party was involved in fraud during the 2020 election is local. A conspiracy theory is total when it aims at explaining the course of world history or global politics by referring to a conspiracy or a series of conspiracies that have widespread implications for humanity as a whole (Räikkä, 2009). Total conspiracy theories claim that past or present events are the results of actions by powerful groups such as the Illuminati or the Templars, or that lizard aliens who arrived in unidentified flying objects (UFOs) decades ago control human affairs.

Conspiracy theories are neither American nor new (Mancosu, Vassallo, & Vezzoni, 2017). In Ortmann and Heathershaw's (2012) terminology, some of the world's oldest conspiracy theories are "total" and were born outside the United States. One of the most notorious conspiracy theories of all time, the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," was used to justify the Holocaust. It emerged in Russia and was most likely fabricated by an Okhrana officer using French sources trying to discredit the reform party by manipulating widespread anti-Semitic sentiments (Ortmann & Heathershaw, 2012). Or, as Karl Popper put it, the most influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideological narratives (Marxism and Nazism) were based on or incorporated a "conspiracy theory of society" (Mancosu et al., 2017, p. 328). Likewise, conspiracy theories are used today by populist leaders who want to mobilize latent anti-establishment biases and boost their own support (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017).

Conspiracy theories are prevalent in many countries around the world and, in some cases, present mainstream views of political and social life (Mancosu et al., 2017). Transnational COVID-19 conspiracy theories included ones alleging that the pandemic was a hoax concocted for various potential ends and that philanthropist Bill Gates had implanted microchips in vaccines. In turn, every pandemic provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories, from the Black Death in 1348 to the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009 (Smallman, 2018) to the more recent COVID-19

pandibemic (Detoc, Bruel, Frappe, Botelho-Nevers, & Gagneux-Brunon, 2020). In South Africa, the government's former embrace of HIV denialism as part of a conspiracy may have contributed to approximately 330,000 deaths, as people delayed or ignored preventive measures (Thresher-Andrews, 2013). Conspiracy theories are also prevalent among extremist groups from across the spectrum: religious, far-right and -left, eco, anarchic, and cult-based (Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

An important question is whether the model and research we present in this book apply to contexts outside the United States. We think the answer is yes. First, our review of research is systematic and includes more international research than it does research from the United States. The higher representation of international research is due to the fact that more research on conspiracy theories has been conducted in Europe, Australia, and Asia than in the United States. Second, even though the research we present was conducted with US inhabitants and US tweets, the theories that we studied include global and total theories in Räikkä's (2009) framework. The alleged cover-up of the effects of the MMR vaccine, the pernicious effects of 5G technology, and the alleged cover-up of the HIV virus being a CIA creation are all global. The theories about the Agenda 21 and Chemtrails conspiracies to control the world's population are also global. In Ortmann and Heathershaw's (2012) terminology, the theories about lizard people and flat earth are "total," and as such apply to many international contexts as well.

Granted, we worked with political theories that are unique to the United States. These involve Obama falsifying his birth certificate to become president, undocumented immigrants voting illegally, and the deep state undermining Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency. Of these, the deep state and QAnon notions have connections with lizard people (Winter, Kosner, & Wong, 2010). The ones that do not have connections with either global or total theories, such as the theory about Obama's birth certificate, are tied to racist and xenophobic attitudes that exist in virtually every country (see, for example, the case of "Brexit," Sloan, n.d.).

1.3   Brief Summary of Upcoming Chapters

Following this introduction and overview of our theoretical model in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 describes the consequences of conspiracy beliefs, including analyses of our own data on their effects on voting intentions, past vote, and policy support. Chapter 4 introduces our theoretical and

empirical analyses of the role of anxiety in conspiracy beliefs, and its relation to the belief defense motivation (e.g., need for closure), belief accuracy motivation (e.g., need for cognition), and social integration motivation (e.g., need to belong). Chapter 5 reviews classic works on sociopolitical variables, including the notion of paranoid political style, as well as education and political knowledge, disenfranchised and minority populations. Chapter 6 discusses the relation between media and anxiety, Chapter 7 covers social influences (e.g., norms and close others) on conspiracy beliefs, and Chapter 8 focuses on media influences, both independently and in combination with anxiety. Chapter 9 presents criteria for the selection of conspiracy theories worthy of debunking, discusses the likely applicability of our conclusions in international contexts, and outlines a future research agenda. More details appear below.

Chapter 2. A Framework for Understanding How Conspiracy Beliefs are Created. We outline the overarching framework through a figure and principles that integrate important prior contributions and advance new ones. The second chapter also presents a qualitative analysis of a conspiracy theory, including its informational sources and a concrete illustration of the theoretical concepts undergirding the book.

Chapter 3. The Consequences of Conspiracy Beliefs. In this chapter, we argue that the beliefs on which we focus raise real-world concern because of their implications for behavior and important political considerations. Among other factors, we examine data on the associations between conspiracy theories and voting intentions, past vote, as well as policy support.

Chapter 4. Anxiety, Psychological Motivations, and Conspiracy Beliefs. We review the psychology of anxiety, and literatures that shed light on the belief defense motivation (e.g., need for closure), the belief accuracy motivation (e.g., need for cognition), and the social integration motivation. In particular, we examine anxiety, personality traits, and cognitive styles connected to these motives in prior literatures and through our own data, including the experiment.

Chapter 5. Sociopolitical Factors and Conspiracy Beliefs. We review classic works that are relevant to conspiracy beliefs and address political variables, including the notion of paranoid political style in American politics, as well as political ideology, political knowledge, cynicism, and the points of view of ethnic minorities. We also discuss our survey data.

Chapter 6. The Relation between Media and Anxiety. We begin our analysis of media effects by reviewing the American media landscape, considering how media use influences affective responses, including anxiety.

In so doing, this chapter provides a foundation for understanding the affective influences of the media, and how these outlets may contribute to conspiracy beliefs through indirect impacts on anxiety.

Chapter 7. The Influence of Norms and Social Networks on Conspiracy Beliefs. We report our analyses of associations between conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy norms and interactions with other people. We also review the literature on the social networks on which conspiracy beliefs spread, and discuss our own data on the dissemination of tweets authored by media account handles (e.g., @NBC and @CNN) and with varying levels of fear language.

Chapter 8. Influences of Media and Anxiety in a Psychological and Sociopolitical Context. We review our empirical evidence for the premises of our framework through path analyses of cross-sectional data and longitudinal analyses of the deep state belief over the 2019–2020 impeachment trial. We then present our results on the sources of subjective plausibility of conspiracy beliefs and the role of perceived unfalsifiability.

Chapter 9. Conclusions. We draw conclusions and present criteria for the selection of conspiracy theories worthy of debunking. Specifically, we argue for the need to balance accessibility of the beliefs in memory, the risks they pose for those who believe them and society at large, and their relative weight within a larger system of beliefs associated with risky behaviors. We also describe possible ways of debunking the various conspiracy beliefs on which the book has focused.