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On "Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning" and Its Radicalization: Putting the Psychology of Conspiracy Beliefs in Its Context

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Abstract

Social psychology explains the endorsement of conspiracy theories by drawing both on trait-like concepts such as conspiracy mentality and on structural factors. While each perspective is indispensable, an integrative framework that synthesises psychological dynamics and structural predictors and embeds them in the social and political contexts in which such beliefs arise remains underdeveloped. In this paper, we propose an approach that conceptualizes conspiracy beliefs through its tension between what we coined "everyday conspiracist reasoning" and "vocal conspiracism." Everyday conspiracist reasoning describes interpretive frameworks embedded in everyday experiences within society, marked by deep mistrust and suspicion of hidden agendas. These frameworks offer a sense of psychological security in an increasingly unstable environment. However, when individuals face acute personal or societal crises, these everyday orientations may radicalize into vocal conspiracism, which is a more assertive, public, and all-encompassing belief in conspiracies. In these cases, conspiracy thinking can expand to shape an individual's entire worldview. Political responses to crises and regressive group dynamics partly determine whether this progression intensifies or recedes, with the latter potentially reinforcing conspiracist interpretations.

Keywords

conspiracy beliefs, conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, everyday conspiracist reasoning, vocal conspiracism, psychoanalytic social psychology, critical theory

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Conspiracy theories have come under increased public scrutiny in recent years due to their association with political extremism and paranoia. Social psychology has extensively examined the psychological underpinnings of conspiracy beliefs, focusing on predispositions such as the so-called "conspiracy mentality" on the one hand and on structural predictors on the other. While both approaches have merit and have advanced our understanding of conspiracy beliefs, more comprehensive perspectives that more fully incorporate the broader socio-political context and synthesize psychological forces and structural conditions within a single model remain underdeveloped.

Why was this study done and what did the researchers find?

Our goal was to understand how conspiracy beliefs emerge in specific social contexts and how they help individuals cope with a confusing and opaque social world that has grown more complex and threatening due to the rise of neoliberalism. We sought to conceptualize conspiracy beliefs not as the result of a predisposition, but as a socially situated mode of interpreting the world. This undertaking led us to critically reflect on findings from social psychology and to complement them with ideas from the sociology of knowledge and psychoanalytic social psychology. This approach allows us to place the social psychology of conspiracy beliefs in its proper context.

First, we developed a concept termed "everyday conspiracist reasoning." It describes a common-sense mode of interpreting the social world that is rooted in shared social experiences. As people experience mounting social anxieties and pressures due to the neoliberal erosion of the welfare state and the unleashing of market forces, they seek orientation and stability. Everyday conspiracist reasoning enables individuals to make sense of their distress and to communicate it to others. However, this mode of interpretation is infused with deep mistrust and suspicions of hidden agendas. From a psychological standpoint, everyday conspiracist reasoning helps keep anxieties in check and facilitates agency—albeit a fragile one.

Second, we argue that "second-order crises"—such as pandemics, inflation, geopolitical conflicts, or personal loss—pose serious threats to everyday interpretations and practices. When these crises fundamentally destabilize people's understanding of and orientation within the social world, they can trigger a radicalization of everyday conspiracist reasoning. This radicalization may lead to "vocal conspiracism," in which conspiracy beliefs become more comprehensive and generalized, overtaking individuals' perceptions of the world. Political actors can harness conspiracism and instrumentalize it for political ends without succumbing to "vocal conspiracism" themselves. Vocal conspiracism is paradoxical: while individuals believe that evil puppet masters control events and threaten their livelihood, from a psychoanalytic perspective, these perceptions are not simply detrimental. Rather, they serve as a means of psychological self-recuperation and an attempt to restore a sense of sovereignty and agency. Whether vocal conspiracism stabilizes or regresses into everyday conspiracist reasoning depends on the management of social and political crises.

What do these findings mean?
Our paper suggests that conspiracy beliefs are deeply rooted in common-sense interpretations of the social world and that they arise from shared experiences. We argue that it is essential to examine conspiracy beliefs within their specific social contexts in order to understand their function and emergence. Furthermore, we maintain that the intensity of conspiracy beliefs may fluctuate between more common and widespread forms—such as everyday conspiracist reasoning—and more radicalized forms, such as vocal conspiracism. These findings indicate that in times of acute social crisis, political actors should aim to provide stability rather than exacerbate paranoid politics, to prevent the radicalization of conspiracy beliefs.

Public scrutiny of conspiracy theories has persisted for quite some time. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought conspiracy beliefs into sharper focus, further fueled debates on the issue. This growing public scrutiny and awareness has sparked increased academic interest in the topic. While cultural studies, history, and political science have all examined conspiracy theories, psychology in particular has extensively investigated their functions and origins. In doing so, psychological research has significantly shaped public perceptions of conspiracy theories. Much of what the public understands about conspiracy beliefs derives from psychological research, giving this field substantial influence.

Psychologists have introduced various concepts to measure individuals' susceptibility to conspiracy theories, with "conspiracy mentality" being one of the most prominent (Bruder et al., 2013; Moscovici, 1987). These concepts generally assume that individuals adopt conspiracy beliefs due to a stable psychological disposition. While these approaches significantly contributed to our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying conspiracy beliefs, they rely on questionable "implicit ontologies" (O'Doherty et al., 2024). They tend to fall within the scope of a "deficit model" (Pierre, 2020, p. 618), reducing conspiracy beliefs to a problem of psychological constitution and neglecting the social, political, and cultural contexts in which such beliefs emerge (Butter & Knight, 2015; Koper, 2024; Parmigiani, 2021).

These approaches have been accompanied by research lately, that puts the social and economic environments in which conspiracy beliefs breed front and center. Researchers found that economic insecurities, experiences of precarity or, more generally, structural rather than individual-level factors precipitate conspiracy beliefs (Adam-Troian et al., 2023; Adamus et al., 2024) and that, in return, conspiracy beliefs fuel economic anxiety (Adamus et al., 2025). Furthermore, the stability of and inequality within a political system shapes the propensity to endorse conspiracy theories within a population (Alper, 2023; Alper & Imhoff, 2023), thus further corroborating the influence of social and political circumstances on conspiracy beliefs. However, these approaches set aside the psy-

chological dynamics that translate structural and political circumstances into conspiracy beliefs.

Our paper builds on these empirical findings by integrating them into a theoretical model, that equally accounts for the structural and social dynamics as well as the psychological mechanisms involved. For this end, we draw on perspectives from the cultural and social sciences. Scholars from the tradition of cultural theory treat conspiracy theories as deeply embedded in society and culture, to the extent that scholars proclaim a pervasive "culture of conspiracy" (Barkun, 2013; Fenster, 2008; Knight, 2000). As Aupers (2012) argues, conspiracy culture reflects a widespread distrust of institutions such as the state, multinational corporations, science, and the media, a sentiment that extends well beyond society's margins. Social scientists, on the other hand, have found that conspiracy theories are a means for sense-making in and navigating an ever more complex social reality (e.g., Boltanski, 2011; Kumkar, 2018; Vobruba, 2024a, 2024b). We hold that integrating these perspectives is critical for a comprehensive understanding of the *social* psychology of conspiracy beliefs. Such an interdisciplinary approach equally accounts for psychological and structural conditions, in that it examines how structural shifts and a pervasive conspiracy culture relates to people's lived experiences and everyday patterns of interpretation (Butter, 2020; Roscigno, 2024). In doing so, we aim to address what Michael Butter and Peter Knight (2015) termed the "great divide" between psychology and the social sciences, that remains pertinent.

In this paper, we propose one pathway for bridging this disciplinary divide from the vantage point of social psychology. We hold that the psychology of conspiracy beliefs must take into account the historical, cultural, and structural conditions in which such beliefs arise and place individuals' lived experiences within those contexts at the center of analysis. Achieving this requires researchers to complement psychological inquiry with social and cultural theory as well as findings from adjacent paradigms and fields of research. This interdisciplinary engagement enables a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved. Our approach aligns with the psychological humanities (Teo, 2017) and integrates psychoanalytic social psychology (Brunner et al., 2013; Durkin, 2014) with broader strands of social theory.

We begin by briefly reviewing recent findings from psychological research on conspiracy beliefs to identify potential points of connection with the social sciences. Drawing on social sciences and cultural studies, we then explore the social dynamics underlying what we term "everyday conspiracist reasoning"—the idea that ordinary interpretations of society often resemble conspiratorial thinking. We then proceed by arguing that everyday conspiracist reasoning is the breeding ground for more vocal and assertive forms of conspiracy beliefs, that are generally captured by concepts such as conspiracy mentality. Rather than viewing this shift as evidence of psychological deficit, we understand vocal conspiracism as a form of self-assertion amid rising uncertainty and crisis.

On the Social Psychology of Conspiracy Beliefs: A Short Review

Barkun defines conspiracy theories as publicly discredited bodies of knowledge centered around the idea that "nothing is as it seems," "everything is connected," and "nothing happens by accident" (Barkun, 2013, pp. 3-4). Douglas and Sutton (2023) emphasize that conspiracy theories rest on the notion that people collude in secret to political and selfish ends, and that they are oppositional and describe malevolent acts. These acts are of interest to the general public but are kept in secret.

From a social psychological perspective, conspiracy beliefs relate to three core psychological motives (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas & Sutton, 2023): epistemic, existential, and social. First, epistemic motives lead people to adopt conspiracy theories as interpretative frameworks during periods of crises and uncertainty. These narratives help reduce feelings of insecurity and provide a sense of orientation. Second, existential motives drive individuals to seek control and security, which conspiracy theories provide through simplified causal explanations for complex or contradictory events. Third, social motives come into play as conspiracy theories help individuals preserve a positive self-image and protect their in-group identity when they feel threatened by social upheavals and material crises.

In general, research of conspiracy beliefs moved away from conceptualizing them as individual deficits and towards recognizing the influence of social and individual suffering (Wagoner et al., 2026). However, implicit ontologies that put them within the frame of a "deficit model" (Pierre, 2020) remain.

Researchers typically assess the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories using psychometric scales such as the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013). High scores on these scales indicate a general predisposition to accept conspiracy theories, regardless of their specific content (see Frenken & Imhoff, 2021). This approach assumes that people who endorse conspiracy theories show indifference to inconsistencies within or between theories, such as simultaneously believing mutually exclusive claims (Wood et al., 2012) or entirely fictional narratives (Swami et al., 2011). However, recent empirical findings (van Prooijen et al., 2023) and theoretical accounts (Hagen, 2018) challenge this assumption. Still, influential strands of social psychological research posit that an underlying psychological need, is the main driver of belief in conspiracy theories. Due to their dedication to assess conspiracy mentality as a trait, these currents tend to neglect social and political conditions and thus foster an individualized understanding of the proneness towards conspiracy beliefs (Butter & Knight, 2015; Pierre, 2020).

However, psychological research of conspiracy beliefs is not confined to the assessment of trait like predispositions. In fact, there is a general trend that explicitly acknowledges structural and social drivers of such beliefs. Scholars found that conspiracy beliefs are not as arbitrary as the notion of a universal conspiracy mentality implies. Evidence

suggests that in some cases, publicly disapproved attitudes precede conspiracy beliefs. For instance, Sternisko et al. (2020) argue that conspiracy theories can "legitimize and enforce pre-existing beliefs and attitudes" (p. 3). Van Prooijen and Böhm (2024) found this during the COVID-19 pandemic: vaccine hesitancy often predated conspiracy beliefs about vaccines. In addition, scholars have found that the appeal of conspiracy theories depends on political affiliation and ideology (Šrol & Čavojová, 2025; van Prooijen, 2022). Wood and Gray (2019) note that "individual theories have specific contextual effects that change their relationship with ideology-relevant variables" (p. 165), meaning that conspiracy theories align with a person's worldview to gain traction. Thus, societal and political contexts significantly shape the content and intensity of conspiracy beliefs. As these contexts shift, so do the forms such beliefs take (van Prooijen & Song, 2021).

Furthermore, recent findings point to the influence of political and structural conditions on the prevalence and adoption of conspiracy theories. There is growing evidence that actual or experienced economic precarity (Adam-Troian et al., 2023; Adamus et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2020), social inequality (Salvador Casara et al., 2022), political stability, dissatisfaction with the political system, feelings of injustice (Alper, 2023; Alper & Imhoff, 2023; Wagner-Egger et al., 2022) and social change that appears threatening to social systems (Federico et al., 2018; van Prooijen, 2020) all engender conspiracy beliefs.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that conspiracy theories challenge the political status quo on a content level. While not all conspiracy theories are political per se, those primarily scrutinized in public inherently are. They target political actors and institutions, comment on political events, and articulate political demands. This political nature becomes particularly clear in ethnographic and interview-based research (Harambam, 2020; Jaiswal et al., 2019; van der Tak & Harambam, 2024). The common thread across conspiracy theories is the notion of a fundamentally corrupt political system. In this light, conspiracy theories represent "radical suspicions about the workings of societal institutions" (Harambam, 2020, p. 86).

In summary, there is a growing consensus among researchers that psychological needs shape conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy mentality is one, albeit a popular concept that understands these psychological drivers as a result of a stable disposition. Conspiracy mentality, however, is embedded in structural conditions that facilitate the adoption of conspiracy beliefs, because they frustrate certain psychological needs such as a sense of certainty and stability. Correspondingly, conspiracy theories and theorists scrutinize structural and political dislocations.

What happens psychologically when people experience growing anxieties and insecurities in light of structural change, however, in part remains a black box (Nera, 2024). We agree with Nera (2024), that there is a lack of empirical work and theorizing concerning how lived experiences of structural upheavals and crises translate into sense-making according to conspiracy theories. In other words: It remains undertheorized, how people develop a proneness to interpret social reality according to conspiracy theories, i.e.,

conspiracy mentality. We therefore propose to accompany existing empirical work with theoretical considerations from adjacent disciplines, that situate conspiracy beliefs in a broader socio-historical context. This allows for a more fine-grained analysis of how social and cultural environments shape individual experiences and interpretations. If conspiracy theories serve as tools to make sense of the world, it stands to reason, as Roscigno (2024) argues, that such narratives "would tend to correspond to individuals' social positions" (p. 13)—and experiences.

The Societal Origins of Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning

In this section, we develop a heuristic based on selected works from the social sciences, which we refer to as "everyday conspiracist reasoning". This framework enables us to reconstruct how conspiracy beliefs are embedded in people's lived experiences and how people use them to interpret and navigate social reality. As these modes of interpretation are widespread in society, they are neither implausible nor indicative of psychological deficiency. Additionally, this perspective emphasizes the material and socio-cultural conditions under which such forms of reasoning emerge.

Structural and Political Backgrounds of Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning

Psychological research has repeatedly identified stable predictors of conspiracy mentality, including existential threat to the self or in-group (van Prooijen, 2020), system threats linked to social change (Federico, 2022; Mao et al., 2021), and feelings of anomia and deprivation (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Bowes et al., 2023; Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Goertzel, 1994; Hornsey et al., 2023). Similarly, cultural scientists underscore the nexus between conspiracy beliefs and the ubiquity of "epistemological, ontological and existential insecurity" (Aupers, 2012, p. 31) in contemporary societies.

On a structural level, insecurities have surged substantially since the onset of the neoliberal phase of capitalism around the 1980s. This era of flexible capitalist reproduction (Sennett, 2000) dismantled much of the welfare state, which had served to buffer the masses from market dependency through social benefits. The neoliberal assault on the welfare state coincided with increasingly frequent cyclical crises of capitalism, which, rather than reducing dependency, made people more reliant on social spending (Harvey, 2007). During this transformation, stagnating profit rates, global market integration, and financialization converged with rising job insecurity and the spread of atypical and precarious employment (Nachtwey, 2018). These developments resulted in growing inequalities and imposed increased demands for flexibility, self-regulation and self-optimization to survive in a relentlessly competitive labor market. The social figure of the "entrepre-

neurial-self" (Bröckling, 2015) embodies this work culture and socialization model, which compels individuals to adapt continuously to rapidly changing labor market conditions.

While people gained autonomy through cutbacks in direct workplace supervision, they paid for it through increased pressures driven by a regime of self-optimization, enhancement and acceleration—pressures that have led to systemic overload and exhaustion (Ehrenberg, 2016). This neoliberal dispositive extends beyond the workplace and reshapes all parts of social life, producing a new form of subjectivity (Brown, 2015; Jimenez & Schmitt, 2024; Lazzarato, 2009; Teo, 2018). Fear of social decline now permeates society, spreading from disadvantaged groups to the middle and upper classes. Failure, status loss and redundancy have become widespread threats. Downward mobility has become more likely, and the absence of a strong safety net leaves people especially vulnerable to its consequences (Nachtwey, 2018).

Mounting insecurities, anxieties, feelings of powerlessness, and the failure to meet rising expectations culminate in what Zygmunt Bauman (2001) described as the defining disease of postmodernity: "das Unbehagen der Postmoderne" (p. 43). Postmodernity intensifies the contradiction between formal individual freedom and the structural subjugation to market forces, which Karl Marx (1867 / 1978, p. 899) famously termed "mute compulsion of economic relations". As people must perform as autonomous market actors while facing the consequences of systemic abandonment, "zones of aggrievement" (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025, p. 123) expand to include even those who once held privileged positions.

Within this neoliberal framework, people increasingly internalize responsibility for social outcomes. They no longer attribute social developments or personal misfortune to structural forces or power relations. Instead, they interpret success and failure as results of individual effort or shortcomings. Thus, structural contradictions appear as personal problems, precipitating psychological tensions that people direct toward themselves (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2025; Brown, 2015; Ehrenberg, 2016) or toward individual actors. In a "society of singularities" (Reckwitz, 2020), people are more likely to personalize social power, as the collective understanding of systemic structures erodes. This shift has significant consequences for social critique: the more the notion of a "society of individuals" (Elias, 2001) prevails, the more it obscures social dependencies and the complexities of collective dynamics, reinforcing the illusion of "governance through individuals".

These neoliberal transformations lie at the heart of contemporary existential threats and widespread insecurities. In the next section, we show how these contradictions are mirrored in people's experiences and everyday reasoning.

Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning as a Symptom of Postmodern Malaise

Anxieties and insecurities have become defining sentiments in neoliberal capitalism. They are ubiquitous, but do not affect people equally; social status significantly shapes

the impact of social turmoil, and it does not necessarily result in conspiracy beliefs. Roscigno (2024) for example found, that conspiracy theories also emerge among more affluent and well-educated social groups, that are considered less prone to such ideas. It follows, that while objective material conditions indeed influence the endorsement of conspiracy theories, people's subjective perceptions and interpretations of their social position also play a critical role. Understanding how conspiracy beliefs emerge requires considering how people collectively make sense of their lived experience.

A growing body of research, drawing broadly from the sociology of knowledge and Pierre Bourdieu's (1987) praxeological sociology, examines how worldviews and political consciousness emerge and how they are socially situated. These studies focus on "particular way[s] of 'understanding the world'" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 253) and how these understandings relate to everyday practice. This knowledge is often implicit, historically and culturally embedded, and grounded in what scholars call "conjunctive spaces of experience" (Bohnsack et al., 2010; Mannheim, 1982). Scholars widely recognize that knowledge is socially situated and embedded, and that people construct social reality through processes deeply rooted in lived experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). However, these social constructions remain constrained by institutional forces or, more generally, by the reality that actions based on inadequate interpretations of social structure yield consequences (Vobruba, 2024b, p. 294).

Shared social reality relies on common sense knowledge, that is, understanding that people "share with others in the normal, self-evident routines of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 37) and that require no further explanation. In a Bourdieuan account, common sense consists of "those things commonly known or even tacitly accepted within a collectivity" (Holton, 1997, p. 39) and includes implicit and explicit dimensions (ibid., p. 40). Beyond framing interpretations of the world, collective experiences also shape expectations, needs, and emotions (Reckwitz, 2002).

In her seminal work on middle-class citizens in Louisiana who sympathized with the Tea Party movement[1], sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild (2016) offers keen insights into how the "structural squeeze" (p. 165) translates into political views and self-perceptions. Through interviews and fieldwork, she uncovers a paradox: her participants often act against their material interests because they follow what she calls a "deep story" (p. 135)—a subjective, emotionally resonant narrative that shapes how they perceive and experience social reality. This "feels-as-if story" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 135) functions as a prism through which people make sense of their lives. Deep stories are not exclusive to the conservative right; rather, they represent a general principle whereby individuals construct reality from situated experience (see also Sawicka, 2024).

1) The Tea Party was a U.S. conservative political movement that emerged in 2007. It started as a grassroots movement, but gained significant influence on the Republican Party and the political landscape of the U.S. especially after the election of Barack Obama and in opposition to him and his policies.

The prototypical deep story Hochschild uncovers in these social milieus, and which Kumkar (2018) also identifies among Tea Party activists, is the metaphor of "waiting in line". According to this narrative, hardworking Americans wait patiently to receive the reward of their labor. However, elites allegedly allow immigrants and marginalized groups to "cut in line", undermining the moral economy of merit and national identity. Those who perceive themselves as deserving of state benefits and symbolic recognition find themselves displaced, while the "undeserving" seem to reap the rewards (Hochschild, 2016; Kumkar, 2018). These expectations—based on classed ideals of effort, restraint, and fairness— reflect what Bourdieu (1985) calls a "sense for one's own social position" (p. 18, our own translation) or what Rothmüller (2021) refers to as a "signature fantasy" (p. 36). These fantasies define what people perceive as attainable and legitimate, and they shape how middle-class groups understand their status and pursue their goals.

However, the structural squeeze and broader neoliberal transformation, as we have argued above, often block people from fulfilling these aspirations, regardless of their effort. This dissonance breeds resentment, anxiety and disappointment, as well as mistrust in political elites and the rise of paranoid political tendencies (Cramer, 2016; Giroux, 2021; Hochschild, 2016; Kumkar, 2018). Kumkar (2018) describes this condition as "disappointment without disillusionment" (p. 118): people hold on to their signature fantasies even when they fail, because those fantasies offer a fragile sense of orientation. The widening gap between expectation and reality affects economic well-being and undermines a sense of dignity. Hochschild (2016) calls this the "honor squeeze" (p. 215)—the sense of humiliation people feel when they perceive that elites have devalued their culture, values, and way of life.

In conclusion, middle-class orientations intertwine deeply with signature fantasies of the American Dream and perceptions of its collapse (see also Leeds, 2024). People increasingly believe that elites are denying them the fruits of their labor while marginalized groups receive unearned recognition. They also feel ignored, abandoned, or betrayed by political elites. Other research confirms that such interpretations are not exclusive to the middle class but are also common among working-class groups (see Dörre et al., 2018; Silva, 2021).

These frameworks correspond with a type of everyday reasoning that feels self-evident within conjunctive spaces of experience. For those who are embedded in these spaces, these narratives require no further explanation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Feelings of neglect, injustice, and betrayal—often intertwined with vague suspicions of elite deception—reflect "implicit[ly] shared knowledge that is intrinsically embedded in [the actors] immediate, everyday practice" (Przyborski & Slunecko, 2009, p. 141). We propose conceptualizing these interpretations as everyday conspiracist reasoning—a form of cognitive and emotional background noise that subtly informs how people perceive and feel the social world. Or put differently: The case of Tea Party activists shows how everyday orientations and interpretations of social reality are infused with notions of

conspiracy and feelings of distrust and contempt towards political 'elites'. While not yet full-blown conspiracy beliefs, these narratives and aversive "affective grooves" (Leeds, 2024, p. 109) signal an openness to such thinking because they structurally align with everyday interpretations.

This reasoning is rife with distrust and resentment, closely tied to everyday experience, toward governments, state institutions, transnational corporations, the media, and science. Rather than attributing one's own misery to systemic transformations, people often frame it as the result of elites misusing institutions for personal gain, thereby undermining vested claims to recognition. Initially, everyday conspiracist reasoning remains depoliticized and untethered to specific political movements. Yet, 'paranoid' political movements can mobilize it (Giroux, 2021; Neumann, 2017). Among Tea Party supporters, such reasoning has already become politicized and linked to explicit conspiracy narratives. Still, conspiracy thinking does not entirely reshape their worldview; it remains fragmented, influencing only certain aspects of social reality.

Outlines of Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning

In summary, five defining features characterize everyday conspiracist reasoning. First, it does not remain confined to the margins of society. Rather, it is a widely shared background noise of intuitive skepticism toward institutions of power. As Knight (2000) observes, assumptions of conspiracy "[…] form part of everyday patterns of thought. Conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone" (p. 3). This distrust derives from the conditions of postmodernity (Bauman, 2001) and the anxieties and disruptions produced by the neoliberal era.[2] Everyday conspiracist reasoning serves as cultural and interpretative repertoire that can be mobilized and instrumentalized by political actors, especially in times of upheaval (see Bergmann, 2025).

Second, everyday conspiracist reasoning depends on its social context. We can only understand its spread and appeal by analyzing the specific confines of shared spaces of experience. Only then can we properly understand its function for individuals as part of these shared experiences. This mode of reasoning offers a heuristic that reveals how lived experiences—and the disruptions they entail—translate into a worldview marked by distrust and implicit assumptions of ongoing conspiracies. While we propose that everyday conspiracist reasoning marks a pervasive mode of sense-making in neoliberal societies, its form can differ depending on the specific conjunctive spaces of experience it is undergirded by.

2) While neoliberal dispositives tend to permeate current societies and individuals, not all social phenomena can be deduced from neoliberalism alone.

Third, everyday conspiracist reasoning reflects the compounded impact of economic pressures and moral injuries. It emerges when people feel denied their culturally ingrained entitlement to a certain social status or perceive the devaluation of traditional lifestyles. These interpretations of social reality simultaneously express a form of social critique (Kumkar et al., 2026) or dissensus (Parmigiani, 2021). They function as an "ordinary sense of justice" that responds to the gap "between the social world as it is and as it should be in order to satisfy people's moral expectations" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 30).

Fourth, everyday conspiracist reasoning is underpinned by emotional attunement to social reality. Emotional reactions such as anger, despair, and resentment that arise from the dissonance between expectations and lived experience do not emerge in isolation. These responses are embedded in social contexts and reflect broader political and structural conditions rather than merely resulting from individual psychological conditions.

Fifth, everyday conspiracist reasoning is a specific mode of interpretation that helps individuals to navigate an increasingly complex and destabilized society. It is a practice of and collective repertoire of meaning-making (see Wagoner et al., 2026). Therefore, it provides a sense of agency and security, and thus functions as a coping mechanism in psychological terms. However, it fails to eliminate existential insecurities altogether (see Vobruba, 2024a).

We propose treating everyday conspiracist reasoning as the underlying structure that supports a more vocal and thus more visible form of conspiracism. Vocal conspiracism represents an intensified, generalized and closed expression of everyday interpretations of the social world.

Radicalization of Everyday Conspiracist Reasoning: The Proliferation of "Vocal Conspiracism"

Vocal conspiracism emerges as the amplified endpoint of the background noise, offering a clearer and more detailed picture of perceived conspiratorial powers at work. While everyday conspiracist reasoning remains embedded in routine orientations and practices and does not necessarily involve specific conspiracy theories, its radicalization transforms it into explicit convictions about concrete and extensive conspiracies that tend to dominate a person's worldview. Vocal conspiracism differs from its implicit foundation in two key ways. First, conspiracy practice (see Kumkar et al., 2026) begins to reshape everyday life as people engage more deeply with conspiracy theories, attempt to persuade others, form new alliances, and adopt alternative social behaviors. Second, conspiracy beliefs increasingly shape the inner psychological world of those who hold them, penetrating their emotional frameworks and their perceptions.

We propose interpreting the shift from everyday conspiracist reasoning to vocal conspiracism in psychological terms. As previously discussed, pragmatic orientations allow individuals to manage social reality and cope with existential insecurities and feelings of powerlessness. However, this form of sense-making ultimately proves inadequate: When the "normal course of life" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 32) erodes due to social dislocations, discontents, anxieties and individual distress that have been kept in check, become more salient and lead to increased psychological strain. When individuals lose certainty and the capacity to successfully navigate everyday life in a practical as much as in an emotional sense, anxieties and insecurities tend to mount, threatening to overwhelm people. Persistent hardships in contemporary societies thus constantly challenge stabilizing modes of orientation. As social crises intensify and these modes become more fragile or ineffective, individuals become increasingly likely to adapt their interpretative frameworks, paving the way for vocal conspiracism. This process is two dimensional: On the level of interpretative frameworks that allow for practical orientation within an increasingly hostile environment, people draw on and activate everyday conspiracist reasoning as a shared cultural resource. People tend to make sense of reality through conspiracy theories because they are already structurally embedded in everyday interpretations, i.e., everyday conspiracist reasoning. However, when familiar and proven orientations fail at providing stability, conspiracy theories fill the interpretative gap. As a consequence, conspiracy beliefs become more comprehensive and dominant. This process is undergirded and compounded by a radicalizing affective dynamic: Destabilization of the 'normal course of life' triggers exuberant (neurotic) anxieties and insecurities, that require a remedy. Radicalization refers to an increasingly acute affective psychological dynamic, that fails to be kept in check by routine means and thus depends on coping mechanisms such as splitting and projection, that in turn render social reality even more ominous and threatening.

In analyzing this shift, that can happen at once or gradually over time, we turn to psychoanalytic social psychology in the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory. In the following sections, we specifically build on works examining authoritarian mass movements (Brunner, 2016, 2025). This theoretical lens enables us to delineate the radicalization process underlying everyday conspiracist reasoning. We argue that vocal forms of conspiracism represent efforts to restore a sense of psychological sovereignty in response to the breakdown of everyday orientations and the disintegration of a 'normal course of life'.

Vocal Conspiracism and Anxiety

We identify two main drivers that radicalize everyday conspiracist reasoning. First, although this mode of reasoning provides orientation in an increasingly opaque social world, it ultimately fails to eliminate existential insecurities (Liekefett et al., 2023; Vobruba, 2024a). For instance, while the "waiting in line" metaphor may offer temporary

orientation within a troubling social reality, the structural and political forces driving inequality, what Hochschild (2016) dubbed the "structural squeeze" (p. 165), continue unchecked. Hopes and expectations remain unfulfilled, while disappointment, anger, powerlessness, and shame intensify, reinforcing a destructive emotional cycle (see Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Individuals who conform to dominant social norms, especially those who internalize the "signature fantasy", receive no compensatory rewards for their sacrifices.[3] Consequently, emotions once kept in check begin to overflow in destructive ways (Pfaller, 2022).

Second, crises and social upheavals act as catalysts (Federico, 2022; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), transforming diffuse, tacit mistrust into vocal and all-encompassing conspiracy beliefs. This transformation becomes especially likely when disruptions threaten people's identities, orientations and livelihoods, thereby destabilizing everyday life (Vobruba, 2024a, p. 98). It also occurs when the hidden fragility of the social world, normally masked by routine, suddenly becomes visible (Klimasch, 2021, p. 77).

As we have argued, everyday conspiracist reasoning functions as a practical means of orientation within an unstable society and as a coping mechanism for the social anxieties that instability produces. As long as people can maintain a sense of normalcy, this reasoning helps keep existential fears in check. However, in moments of acute personal or collective crisis, such as job loss, the end of a relationship, bereavement, pandemics, inflation, or geopolitical conflict, this stabilizing function breaks down. These second-order crises are "objective power[s] depriving a subject of part of his normal sovereignty" (Habermas, 1973, p. 643) and thus amplifying material threats like unemployment and financial insecurity as well as moral injuries. These aggravated strains are compounded by reawaked neurotic anxieties that individuals had previously suppressed.

Psychoanalysis distinguishes neurotic anxieties from real ones by identifying the former as rooted not in external dangers but in unconscious psychological conflicts (Freud, 1935). These conflicts, shaped by socialization conditions such as class, gender, and race, take form through individual life trajectories and coalesce into what Mühlhoff (2019) calls "affective dispositions" (p. 119). These dispositions—repositories of affective traces from past relations and experiences—condition how people react to present-day events. When individuals perceive that "normality" is falling apart, these past emotional injuries resurface. During major social crises, i.e., second-order crises, real external threats and unconscious inner conflicts converge. The orientation and coping strategies that once managed insecurity and provided a sense of certainty collapse, exposing underlying fragilities and triggering real and neurotic anxieties.

These affective responses relate to real threats but often exceed a rational response. They evoke deep existential fears rooted in personal histories. Understanding the se-

3) We might also understand this as the decline of symbolic efficiency (Hughes, 2024): Grand narratives, such as the American Dream, and the Symbolic Order erode and leave gaps for conspiracy beliefs to fill.

verity of these emotional responses requires attention to both sides of this dynamic. Neumann (2017) explains that "persecutory anxiety" arises when "external dangers which threaten a man meet the inner anxiety and are thus frequently experienced as even more dangerous than they really are. At the same time, these same external dangers intensify the inner anxiety" (p. 615).

Therefore, subjective experiences of crises depend on one's objective social position and on how current events revive earlier traumas and anxieties. This interplay between past and present, real and neurotic anxiety, generates "painful tension[s]" (Neumann, 2017, p. 15) that demand a remedy. We propose interpreting the radicalization of everyday conspiracist reasoning into vocal conspiracism as an attempt to restore psychological sovereignty and regain a sense of orientation (Knasmüller et al., 2023; van der Tak & Harambam, 2024). Paradoxically, individuals achieve this by conjuring images of evil and persecutory powers that resemble paranoia, however, not in a pathological sense. Clinical paranoia centers on the individual believing that they are a personal target of external forces, whereas political paranoia, as Hofstadter (1965) observes, directs that belief toward broader collectives: "a nation, a culture, or a way of life" (p. 4).

Restoration of Sovereignty by Means of Vocal Conspiracism

From the perspective of psychoanalytic social psychology, the process of restoring sovereignty and agency in response to external and inner crises involves a fundamental contradiction. People regain control over their emotions through defense mechanisms such as splitting and projection. They alleviate inner tensions by displacing and projection of unwanted feelings such as anxiety, powerlessness, aggression, hate or envy onto imagined conspirators. These external targets in effect represent and embody the disavowed affects, allowing individuals to attack and manage them symbolically. In effect, people wage a kind of proxy war against the very powerlessness and underlying social conditions they struggle to acknowledge (see Brunner, 2016).

This form of defiance through vocal conspiracism has an invigorating quality: although conspiracy theorists feel overwhelmed with anxieties, they do not remain passive. Instead, they actively resist perceived threats by building communities, organizing protests, creating and sharing online content, gathering information, or by trying to "wake up sheeples" in their social circles (van der Tak & Harambam, 2024). As Neumann (2017) suggests, "anxiety can have a cathartic effect; man can be strengthened inwardly when he has successfully avoided a danger or when he has prevailed against it" (p. 616). By projecting intolerable feelings and rejected aspects of the self onto external enemies, individuals distort their perception of reality. Yet, this distorted view helps them regain orientation, if only temporarily. As Chaudhary (2022) puts it, the "subject masters an original unease, and [...] [it] aids in orienting oneself in the world, however temporarily" (p. 111).

These patterns of perception function in a paranoid mode, not pathological but structural, and thus help restore everyday orientation within a hostile, unstable world (Brunner, 2016; Pohl, 2003). This contradictory dynamic resembles Freud's account of psychosis, where delusional formations serve not as pure pathology but as "an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction" (Freud, 1911, p. 70). Although vocal conspiracism conjures a world rife with harm and deceit, it still provides a structure that enables individuals to "once more live in it" (Freud, 1911, p. 70). Paradoxically, it is the invocation of impending doom that compensates for and alleviates persecutory anxieties triggered by immediate crises (see also Hessel, 2020) and reawakened affective dispositions.

Through what Freud (1921) called "crooked cure" (p. 141), individuals avoid being overwhelmed by anxiety and burdening conflicts. Rather than confronting the psychological and social roots of their distress, they externalize and discard their fears, mastering them phantasmatically. We propose understanding crooked cure as a way to reinstate disrupted everyday orientations without directly challenging the social order. Vocal conspiracism helps to mend a broken social reality: In treating the social world as a chimera that covers up a true, hidden reality, it allows people to hang on to a notion of reality that seems manageable (Kumkar, 2018). People can retain a clear sense of orientation and normalcy, because they deny a hostile reality that constantly threatens their livelihood and identity. This process does not reflect pathology but constitutes a form of self-recuperation (Chaudhary, 2022, p. 106), which succeeds only when embedded in virtual or real collectives (Brunner, 2016; Pohl, 2000; Simmel, 1946). Community formation under the banner of being "awakened"—as a self-proclaimed political avant-garde against looming conspiracies—empowers individuals by drawing on the collective. Within these groups, individuals experience a subjective sense of aggrandizement and empowerment (see also Leithäuser, 1988). Adorno (1997) referred to this process as collective narcissism. Empirical studies support this association by showing that collective narcissism, defined by exaggerated in-group esteem and perception of external threat, correlates strongly with conspiracy beliefs (see Golec de Zavala et al., 2022).

We view the protests against the "new normal" (see Manuti et al., 2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of this dynamic. As people recognized that the virus and related public health measures would profoundly alter daily life, the term "new normal" quickly became a contested symbol of transformation. Protesters interpreted this term not as an adaptive necessity but as evidence of hidden elite agendas, accusing political and economic powers of exploiting the crisis to implement a hostile takeover under the guise of the "Great Reset" (see Christensen & Au, 2023; Vieten, 2020).

In response to the perceived encroachment of a threatening new reality, protesters invoked a nostalgic vision of pre-pandemic normality. Although this earlier condition was never free of conflict or inequality, many perceived it as a stable foundation for everyday orientation. Restoration of sovereignty in this context reflects a desire for re-normalization: an urge to resist the normalization of social and affective emergency.

Protesters strived to restore a romanticized pre-pandemic condition that never existed in the first place.

In this light, conspiracy beliefs express a longing for a "lost paradise" (Buchmayr & Krouwel, 2025, p. 14)—not a return to an actual past, but a return to the sense of orientation, stability, and agency that people associate with that imagined time.

Stabilization of Vocal Conspiracism

While many scholars conceive of conspiracy mentality as the result of a stable psychological disposition, our discussion takes a different direction. We acknowledge that vocal conspiracism can intensify and stabilize into a closed worldview that interprets all social subsystems through the lens of hidden conspiracies. However, we emphasize that such stabilization is not inevitable. When such trajectories occur, we can speak of conspiracy mentality in an emphatic sense, and it becomes important to monitor these stabilization processes as they appear. Political mobilization and action play a crucial role in this respect. The more political actors replace rational crisis management with rhetoric that stokes neurotic, persecutory anxieties, the more likely vocal conspiracism will stabilize (Neumann, 2017).

However, different trajectories are possible: When immediate threats and distress recede because societies mitigate crises or because individuals and communities develop ways to manage real and neurotic anxieties, the social and psychological pressures that drive people toward conspiracist responses begin to fade (see Brunner, 2025). As a result, people often return to familiar modes of reasoning and orientation. Conspiratorial suspicions may persist, continuing to shape how people interpret the social world and their place within it, but they become less dominant. Their presence recedes to the level of the background noise, what we call everyday conspiracist reasoning.

British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (2002) described the oscillations between psychological states—some marked by splitting and projection and others by tolerance for ambivalence and anxiety—as shifts between the paranoid–schizoid and depressive positions. Drawing on this, Webb and Rosenbaum (2023) propose that people commonly fluctuate between these positions when they experience psychological threat or distress. As they note, "there can be times when we long to abandon the complexities inherent to critical reflection and, instead, retreat into the simplicity of the binary worldview" (p. 70). Yet this longing does not preclude the return to more deliberative coping strategies once social reality is re-stabilized.

The radicalization of everyday conspiracist reasoning depends on the stability of social conditions and the micro-level of social systems, and the group dynamics surrounding vocal conspiracism. As people become more involved in conspiracy theory milieus, they often grow increasingly dependent on and loyal to these communities, sometimes at the expense of relationships outside these groups. Group dependencies activate dynamics that bind the individual's psychological bond to the group. The desire to belong to

the "enlightened" inner circle may produce fears of exclusion or rejection, especially when members consider straying from the group's ideological path. Feelings of guilt and shame, especially stemming from aggressive behavior, can also prevent individuals from withdrawing. These emotional burdens, alongside the affective benefits of group belonging, often compel individuals to resort to defense mechanisms like splitting and projection to protect the collective identity and their place within it (see Freud, 1921; Neumann, 2017).

Such group dynamics facilitate radicalization and perpetuate conspiracy worldviews. To leave the group would mean confronting the very emotional burdens these mechanisms help suppress, making the emotional and psychological incentives to uphold shared beliefs even stronger (Brunner, 2016, 2025).

Conclusion

The heuristic of everyday conspiracist reasoning helps explain how structural change and the uncertainties it brings generate perceptions of society and politics that become infused with notions of conspiracies. In this form, conspiracist reasoning appears relatively common and often normalized within shared contexts of experience. However, we argue that when severe crises threaten everyday life, no matter how unstable that life may already be, more vocal forms of conspiracism occur, posing the risk of overtaking individuals' entire worldview. Our theoretical model in part reflects Sutton and Douglas' (2022) "Rabbit Hole Syndrome" model, they developed to trace a psychological dynamic that starts when people inadvertently get drawn to conspiracy theories. According to this model, conspiracy beliefs initially remain compartmentalized but serve as a gateway for more comprehensive and entrenched conspiracy worldviews. Like the authors we advocate for perspectives that account for the dynamic development or radicalization of conspiracy beliefs (Sutton & Douglas, 2022, p. 3), that transcend variable and trait centered conceptualizations of conspiracism. We hold, that the heuristic of everyday conspiracist reasoning complements this account, as it emphasizes and delineates how socio-historical conditions determine why and how notions of conspiracy become viable patterns of interpretation: Why notions of large-scale conspiracies resonate with peoples' experience in the first place. Also, it emphasizes the emotional dynamics undergirding questions of cognition or perceptions of social reality. In conclusion, people and social milieu centered research designs might thus hold the key for a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy beliefs.

Such accounts have merit because they allow to synthesize dispositional and structural approaches and to embed them into dynamic processes, that account for multiple outcomes and trajectories. From this perspective, conspiracy mentality must be understood as a latent potential and shared cultural repertoire, that arises from everyday conspiracist

reasoning, where people regularly evoke images of conspiracies and puppet masters. In its fully developed form, this mentality manifests in vocal conspiracism, a worldview that becomes increasingly universal and all-encompassing. Group dynamics help drive this transformation, intensifying conspiracist interpretations until they solidify into a closed and entrenched worldview characterized by heightened paranoia.

Thus, conspiracy mentality does not constitute conspiracy beliefs. Instead, it is the result of social dynamics, making it an effect of unfolding processes rather than a static psychological variable. This perspective explains why conspiracy mentality can fluctuate across time, as was the case in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Decker et al., 2024, p. 82). While studies that focus on psychological dispositions or affinities more broadly remain relevant, we suggest using measurement instrument as a diagnostic tool that captures socio-psychological dynamics at specific moments rather than treating it as a "stable" psychological disposition.

Future research should complement quantitative studies on the characteristics and prevalence of conspiracy mentality with qualitative approaches that emphasize its situational emergence. Researchers should investigate the specific social contexts that shape everyday conspiracist reasoning—its political orientations, accusations, specific contents and general worldviews—as well as how they are tied to lived experience. Such studies can reveal whether individuals endorse certain conspiracy theories and how central those beliefs are to their daily lives and broader relationships with the world. As we have developed the concept of everyday conspiracist reasoning in a Western, industrialized context, future research should focus on other cultural environments. This could help to advance cross-cultural research on conspiracy beliefs.

Although some researchers have begun this work through interviews (e.g., Jaiswal et al., 2019; Kalkstein & Dilling, 2024; Knasmüller et al., 2023; Pahuus et al., 2024) and ethnographic methods (e.g., Harambam, 2020; Parmigiani, 2021; van der Tak & Harambam, 2024), the field still lacks systematic and comprehensive investigations. It is indispensable that such approaches account for the emergence of everyday conspiracist reasoning in different social and cultural contexts. Examining the temporal dimension and stability of vocal conspiracism (or conspiracy mentality) requires longitudinal designs that include interviews at multiple time points.

Lastly, while our approach frames conspiracy beliefs as coping mechanisms shaped by insecurity and powerlessness (van der Tak & Harambam, 2024), future research should also consider other motivating factors. These include the satisfaction of uncovering "underlying truths" and the thrill of transgressing social norms (Scacco & Di Gianfrancesco, 2022). Researchers must remain open to these alternative perspectives when exploring the complexity of conspiracy beliefs.

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