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SOEP-IS 2013 – Research Proposal "Conspiracy Mentality"

Peter Haffke

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SOEP-IS 2013 – Research Proposal

"Conspiracy Mentality"

**Module Title in SOEP Documentation: Conspiracy
Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)**

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SOEP INNOVATION SAMPLE - RESEARCH PROPOSAL - CONSPIRACY MENTALITY -

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“Other centuries have only dabbled in conspiracy like amateurs. It is our [the 20th] century which has established conspiracy as a system of thought and a method of action.”(Moscovici, 1987, p. 153)

Introduction. Conspiracy theories provide alternative explanations for important world events and have rapidly gained ground in public discourse throughout the past century. Most Germans are likely to be familiar with “classical” conspiracy theories, such as cover-ups of alien contacts (Harrison & Thomas, 1997), the assassination of John F. Kennedy by government agencies (McHoskey, 1995) or secret plots surrounding the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007; Swami, Chamorro Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). Although conspiracy beliefs can be relatively inconsequential, they also play a major role in armed conflict (e.g., government sources in Syria claiming that the insurgents are foreign agents) and discrimination of specific groups (e.g., the infamous “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a fraudulent document purportedly describing a plan for Jewish world domination that was used as a propaganda tool in Nazi Germany).

The main focus of research into beliefs in conspiracy theories has been on the endorsement of specific theories. For example, African American and Latino communities in the US are particularly likely to endorse conspiracy theories claiming that HIV was spread to extinguish specific ethnic groups (Ross, Essien, & Torres, 2006). Beliefs in such specific theories seem to be triggered mainly by situational factors such as being disadvantaged in society. However, there is increasing evidence for the existence of stable individual differences in people’s propensity to believe in conspiracy theories and the effect of such differences on both attitudes and behavior. If a person believes in one conspiracy theory, he or she will also be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2010). This tendency even extends to beliefs in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories and to beliefs in fully fictitious

theories. Those who believe Princess Diana faked her own death are also more likely to believe that she was murdered (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012); those who believe in established “real-world conspiracy theories” (e.g., John F. Kennedy as a victim of an organized conspiracy) are more likely to believe that there was a conspiracy behind the success of the Red Bull energy drink—a conspiracy theory solely developed for a social psychological study (Swami et al., 2011).

This has led some researchers to propose that the endorsement of specific conspiracy theories is strongly driven by individual differences in an underlying tendency to adopt such beliefs, that is, a general conspiracy mentality (Imhoff & Bruder, 2012). This term was originally phrased by Moscovici (1987) and describes the general propensity to subscribe to theories blaming a conspiracy for important societal phenomena.

Individual differences in conspiracy mentality have important consequences as they predict prejudice against powerful societal groups. Consequences of this may either be intentions to engage in political action designed to undermine the perceived conspiracy (Imhoff & Bruder, 2012) or—if the conspiracy is perceived to be overpowering—political disengagement (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995). Further, conspiracy beliefs are powerful predictors of critical health behaviors such as vaccination uptake (Kata, 2010) and adherence to medication regimens (Bogart, Wagner, Galvan, & Banks, 2010).

However, conspiracy beliefs are—up until today—underinvestigated in Germany. Thus, little is known about the distribution of conspiracy beliefs at the national level beyond studying non-representative student samples. This state of affairs also limits the generalizability of present findings concerning the links between conspiracy mentality and other psychological constructs to the broader population (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

In order to fill this gap with the help of the SOEP-IS, we present a 5-item scale—the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)—designed to assess the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories.

Materials and procedure. To date, there is no published scale assessing conspiracy mentality, although some efforts have been made to develop such a scale (e.g., Brotherton, French, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2012). Compared to these scales, our Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire comes with distinct advantages regarding its suitability for panel surveys: Besides being very short, the CMQ is also available in three languages (German, English, Turkish; see Appendix for full English and German item wording) and its measurement equivalence across these language versions has recently been established (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripannah, & Imhoff, 2012). Having established measurement

equivalence allows for the future integration of the scale in comparable international panel studies or surveys. In addition, the CMQ has been used to test cross-cultural differences in a large international sample ($N = 7,766$) and both its convergent and discriminant validity have been tested in four studies. Furthermore, the CMQ has proven to be the strongest predictor for beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, even when controlling for a broad range of other individual differences measures (Bruder et al., 2012).

The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire can be used as online or paper-and-pencil version, as well as in interviews. Its processing time is—on average—ninety seconds and should not exceed a total of three minutes. Before answering the CMQ questions, participants receive a very broad and non-judgmental definition of the term *conspiracy theory*. Subsequently, participants indicate how likely they think that each of five statements is true (e.g., "I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about"). The statements are rated on 11-point scales ranging from 0 (0% - *certainly not*) to 11 (100% - *certain*). Each point is additionally labeled with percentage points in steps of 10%.

Research goals and links to SOEP core constructs. In our prior research (Bruder et al., 2012) we have established meaningful associations with personality measures (e.g., Big Five dimensions, schizotypy), generalized political attitudes (e.g., social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism), and further individual differences (e.g., paranormal beliefs, lack of socio-political control). Others have found relationships of the CMQ with paranoid ideation and schizotypy (e.g., Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011).

Our main research questions for the SOEP-IS are driven by the fact, that to date there is no longitudinal evidence for the causal triggers, consequences, and the stability of conspiracy mentality. This is the unique benefit that we would gain from inclusion in the SOEP-IS. It would allow us (in a longitudinal framework) to gain initial insight into the interplay between conspiracy mentality and other psychological, economic, and sociological variables at the person, household, and subgroup level over time. Our data show an association between conspiracy mentality and low socio-political control. This raises a host of questions such as: Is low socio-economic status related to conspiracy mentality? Do immigrants and other disadvantages groups show higher levels of conspiracy beliefs? Do job insecurity and the threat of status loss interact with conspiracy mentality in a way of promoting its development? The first two questions can already be addressed in the first wave of the survey; the last question can only be inferred via a longitudinal design. Therefore, we would be grateful for the reassessment of conspiracy mentality on a yearly basis within the SOEP-IS.

Since conspiracy mentality can be conceptualized as a generalized political attitude (Imhoff & Bruder, 2012), we are also highly interested in the associations with the SOEP main topic "(8) Attitudes, values and personality", in particular its subgroup "(8.1) Political orientation". A high propensity to believe in conspiracy theories has already been linked to more extreme political attitudes, both left- and right-wing. In the context of the SOEP-IS, this module can provide a more fine-grained understanding of how conspiracy mentality affects electoral decisions, political attitudes, political worries, and demands on the government. For example, are those high in conspiracy mentality more likely to vote for less prominent, alternative parties (e.g., Piratenpartei)?

The interest for the present research proposal is not limited to psychologists with an interest in conspiracy beliefs. Some exemplary research questions that may be addressed by researches of other disciplines, such as sociologists, political scientists or economists, are: Can conspiracy mentality predict performance in trust games (i.e., the stronger the conspiracy mentality, the lower the amount of money that is traded)? Is conspiracy mentality related to insurance purchases (choices of private health insurance, private pension plans, etc.)? Are low levels of conspiracy mentality related to increased citizens' involvement? Do high levels of conspiracy mentality even undermine social cohesion and, ultimately, social capital? Are those high in conspiracy mentality less likely to go to medical check-ups or take other measures (e.g., vaccinations) to prevent long-term adverse health effects? Ultimately, does conspiracy mentality predict life expectancy?

It is clear that the SOEP-IS's longitudinal structure provides unique opportunities to address these questions. In particular, it allows for the analysis of causal hypotheses between conspiracy mentality and other variables.

Coda. In Germany, conspiracy beliefs may not be as integrated into our culture as in the Middle East (Pipes, 1998), and the conspiracy community may not be as strong as in the US. Nevertheless, conspiracy theories may also be gaining ground in German national discourse. This is not least because many events are either extremely complex (e.g., the Euro crisis) or indeed involve an element of hidden action by powerful individuals (such as the affairs surrounding former president, Christian Wulff, or former prime minister of Baden-Württemberg, Stefan Mappus). It may be a matter of time before specific conspiracy theories gain ground in providing alternative sets of explanations for such national events in Germany. By assessing conspiracy mentality at this point in time and over time, we would be able to scientifically escort this development.

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Appendix

English Version

I think that...

... many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.

... politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.

... government agencies closely monitor all citizens.

... events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.

... there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.

0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
certainly not	extremely unlikely	very unlikely	unlikely	somewhat unlikely	undecided	somewhat likely	likely	very likely	extremely likely	certain

German Version

Ich denke, ...

... es geschehen viele sehr wichtige Dinge in der Welt, über die die Öffentlichkeit nie informiert wird.

... Politiker geben uns normalerweise keine Auskunft über die wahren Motive ihrer Entscheidungen.

... Regierungsbehörden überwachen alle Bürger genau.

... Ereignisse, die auf den ersten Blick nicht miteinander in Verbindung zu stehen scheinen, sind oft das Ergebnis geheimer Aktivitäten.

... es gibt geheime Organisationen, die großen Einfluss auf politische Entscheidungen haben.

0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
sicher nicht	äußerst un- wahrscheinlich	sehr unwahr- scheinlich	unwahr- scheinlich	eher unwahr- scheinlich	unent- schieden	eher wahr- scheinlich	wahr- scheinlich	sehr wahr- scheinlich	äußerst wahrscheinlich	sicher