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# PSYCHOLOGICAL REPORTS

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PLACING CONSPIRATORIAL MOTIVES IN CONTEXT: THE ROLE  
OF PREDISPOSITIONS AND THREAT, A COMMENT ON BOST AND  
PRUNIER (2013)<sup>1</sup>

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Recent polls show that most Americans believe in one conspiracy theory or another (e.g., Cassino & Jenkins, 2013). In response to this, scholars from across disciplines have made useful additions to understanding why people believe in conspiracy theories (Fine, Campion-Vincent, & Heath, 2005; Hartman & Newmark, 2012; Swami, 2012; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012; Bost & Prunier, 2013; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2013; Mulligan & Habel, 2013; Natrass, 2013; Nyhan, Reifler, & Ubel, 2013; Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Guthmann, & Carbon, 2013; Sapountzis & Condon, 2013; Stieger, Gumhalter, Tran, Voracek, & Swami, 2013; Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stieger, & Voracek, 2013; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Oliver & Wood, 2014a, 2014b). Despite the recent interest, there remains much debate about why people subscribe to conspiratorial beliefs, particularly in the face of disconfirming evidence.

Both historically and more recently, much of the discussion of conspiratorial beliefs has focused on the conspiracy *theorists* rather than on the conspiracy *theories*: their individual psychological characteristics such as paranoia, anxiety, and psychopathologies (Allport & Postman, 1947; Anthony, 1973; Goertzel, 1994; Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Freeman, 2007; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013), their political orientations (Hofstadter, 1964; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009; Berinsky, 2010; Barreto, Cooper, Gonzalez, Parker, & Towler, 2012; Berlet, 2012), and their social standing and status (Waters, 1997; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, & Kilburn, 1999; Simmons & Parsons, 2005; Avery, 2006; Mays, Coles, & Cochran, 2012). Preston Bost and Stephen Prunier's "Rationality in Conspiracy Beliefs: The Role of Perceived Motive" attempts to widen the inquiry into conspiratorial beliefs to account for the content of the proffered conspiracy theory. Specifically, Bost and Prunier (2013) demonstrated that certain aspects of a conspiracy theory—in this case, information suggesting a perceived motive on the part of a potential conspirator—can lead people to see a conspiracy un-

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derlying events. In this way, conspiratorial beliefs are a rational response to information.

Beyond broadening our view of conspiratorial beliefs, Bost and Prunier's (2013) findings provide value in that they can be applied outside of their study. Consider two examples: first, fifty years after Kennedy's assassination, polls show that between 60 and 80 percent of Americans subscribe to some form of conspiratorial explanation for the assassination (CBS, 2009). There are several likely reasons why these Kennedy conspiracy theories remain so prevalent (Sabato, 2013), but one likely explanation lies in the information environment. Even fifty years later, hundreds of movies, books, and television shows continue to provide "evidence" of a conspiracy behind the assassination, and much of this "evidence" is intertwined with various motives for assassinating the president. Kennedy conspiracy theories then become a rational response to the information environment. Second, a recent set of repeated field experiments (Einstein & Glick, 2013a, 2013b) shows that when the information environment becomes more suggestive of conspiratorial machinations, belief in specific conspiracy theories is increased. Specifically, participants were more likely to believe during the height of the IRS, Benghazi, Journalist wire-tapping, and NSA scandals that the Obama administration manipulated Bureau of Labor Statistics data for electoral gain, than they were before these scandals broke. The media environment in early 2013 suggested that the Obama administration had much to gain (reelection), and that was the motive behind many of these scandals.

Given the broad applicability of Bost and Prunier's argument, it is worth considering three factors affecting the conditionality of these effects outside of the laboratory: predispositions towards conspiratorial logic, similarity to political beliefs, and perceived threat.

First, if information drives belief in a conspiracy theory (in this case, motive) then this information will be more likely to be accepted by those who are predisposed towards conspiratorial logic. This argument follows from traditional conceptions of public opinion and attitude formation (Zaller, 1992, 1996; Converse, 2006). Psychologists have recently identified a unique predisposition that makes people more or less likely to believe in conspiratorial explanations (Swami, Coles, Stieger, Pietschnig, Furnham, Rehim, *et al.*, 2011; Wood, *et al.*, 2012; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2013). Those highly predisposed to conspiratorial thinking will be more likely to believe individual conspiracy theories when presented; those less predisposed will be more likely to reject information suggesting a conspiracy. This predisposition is an attitude, separate from emotional conditions such as paranoia or anxiety. So, information matters, but the effect of information will depend

on people's willingness to more generally accept conspiratorial explanations.

Second, the information identified as driving belief in a conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted by people when it comports with their political (and other) predispositions (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007). For example, Republicans are more likely to believe a conspiracy theory if a Democrat (as opposed to a fellow Republican) is impugned as the conspirator, and *mutatis mutandis*, a Democrat is more likely to believe a conspiracy theory if a Republican is impugned (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Belief patterns in contemporary conspiracy theories demonstrate this: polls show that the percent of Republicans believing the Birther theory (that Barack Obama was born outside of the United States and is hiding that fact) is comparable to the percentage of Democrats believing the Truther theory, that George W. Bush was in some way responsible for the 9/11 attacks (Nyhan, 2009). Other works also show that those with free market ideologies are more likely to believe in climate science conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013), and those who believe in new age science are more likely to believe in Da Vinci Code theories (Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011). Free marketeers would not want to support the collectivist policies needed to combat global climate change, and new age mystics tend to accept the alternative histories that typically comprise Mary Magdalene conspiracy theories.

Third, the information identified as driving belief in a conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted when there is potential threat posed by supposed conspirators. For example, someone concerned that Republicans might be conspiring against them is more likely to perceive the conspiracy when the Republicans are actually in power (as opposed to when they are in the governing minority) and therefore have the means to carry out the plot (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). In this sense, when people see themselves as being at the bottom of a power asymmetry when compared to the conspiring group, they are more likely to accept conspiratorial explanations (Stempel, *et al.*, 2007).

Bost and Prunier (2013) provided important findings that put information and rationality back into the conspiracy theory debate. Their findings should spark further research that (1) seeks to better specify the conditions under which information detailing motive drives conspiratorial beliefs, and (2) places the role of information in driving conspiratorial beliefs into a broader context accounting for underlying political and conspiratorial predispositions.

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