

Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law-related morality

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Abstract

This study analyses the effects of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremist intentions. More specifically, we investigate whether the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism depends upon individual characteristics such as varying levels of self-efficacy, self-control, and law-relevant morality. Variable interactions examine where conspiracy beliefs exert strong effects on violent extremist intentions. The analysis is based on a German nationally representative survey ($N = 1502$). To our knowledge, it is the first and only nationally representative survey carried out in violent extremism research.

Our results confirm that a stronger conspiracy mentality leads to increased violent extremist intentions. However, this relationship is contingent on several individual differences. The effects are much stronger for individuals exhibiting lower self-control, holding a weaker law-relevant morality, and scoring higher in self-efficacy. Conversely, when stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower. Such individual features thus constitute interactive protective factors for violent extremism. These results have important implications for practice in the area of violent extremism risk assessment and management. Conceptually,

the results demonstrate the need to further elaborate the conditional effects of certain risk as well as protective factors for violent extremism.

Keywords

Conspiracy beliefs, violent extremism, conspiracy mentality, self-control, self-efficacy, legal cynicism

1. Introduction

A series of recent right-wing terrorist attacks have occurred in Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway. Each perpetrator's manifesto referenced conspiracy theories such as the great replacement theory or white genocide (Emberland, 2020; Soufan Center, 2019). The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) report on 52 lone offender terrorists showed 46% discussed or consumed information about conspiracy theories (Richards, Molinaro, Wyman, & Craun, 2019). Additionally, in a recent intelligence bulletin, the FBI (2019) stated that fringe conspiracy theories play a crucial role within domestic terrorism. Widespread and easily assessible fringe political conspiracy theories may drive those with extremist attitudes towards conducting extremist violence (FBI, 2019). Interviews with and analyses of propaganda outputs by jihadists and neo-Nazis have further highlighted the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking within extremist groups (Amarasingam, 2019; Durham, 2001, Fekete, 2011; Pitcavage, 2001; Pollard, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2005; Winter, 2014). These incidents point to a potential functional role of conspiracy theories within violent extremism thus necessitating a systematic analysis of the relationship.

On an intuitive level, extremist and conspiracy beliefs have much in common. Both proliferated greatly in the very recent past. Both greatly benefited from the internet and social media's rise which created a stark increase of easily accessible and manipulated information as well as opportunities to engage with co-believers (Guhl, Ebner, & Rau, 2019). Extremist groups propagate conspiracy theories on online forums and once individuals are entrenched within such communities, they tend to become more polarised and adopt more extreme beliefs and attitudes (Douglas et al., 2019; Metaxas & Finn, 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Research highlights the important function of alternative media platforms in fostering polarised online communities where conspiracy theories may facilitate and catalyse violent extremism (Bessi et al., 2015). Furthermore, both extremism and conspiracy theories are underpinned by a deep distrust of the existing political infrastructure, sometimes for overlapping reasons, sometimes not (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Kim & Cao, 2016; Kutiyanski, Krouwel, & Van Prooijen,

2020). Some research additionally suggests both may be strongly associated with highly structured thinking styles (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015).

Whereas a previous study has tested the relationship between extreme political ideologies and conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen et al., 2015), no empirical study has yet tested the conditional effects of individuals' tendency to hold conspiracy beliefs on their readiness to engage in violent extremism. This paper addresses conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions in a number of unique ways. It draws upon the first nationally representative survey on violent extremist intentions and conspiracy beliefs ($N = 1502$). The data collection occurred in Germany, which has witnessed several terrorist attacks, where some of the attackers held strong conspiracy beliefs, rendering it a highly relevant research context (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2019; Bundesministerium des Innern, 2019; Kuzmany, 2020). Our analysis examines the relationship between the following concepts: conspiracy beliefs, self-control, self-efficacy, legal cynicism and violent extremist intentions.

Our results confirm a direct effect of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremism, whereby stronger conspiracy mentalities lead to increased violent extremist intentions. However, this relationship is contingent on several individual differences. The effects are much stronger for individuals exhibiting lower self-control, holding a weaker law-relevant morality, and scoring higher in self-efficacy. Conversely, when stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower. Such individual features thus constitute interactive protective factors for violent extremism. Hence, depending on their individual characteristics, people with conspiracy beliefs vary widely in their behavioural intentions towards violent extremism.

2. Background

Research shows a tendency for those holding opposing extreme political beliefs to endorse similar conspiracy theories (Bartlett & Miller 2010; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Belief in extreme ideologies and conspiracy theories may therefore be rooted in a similar underlying psychology (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). Understanding this underlying psychology is necessary for explaining how extremist attitudes and belief in conspiracy theories are interrelated and how their interaction functions. The following sections provide an overview of these underlying processes. We organise the sections across psychological and conditional effects.

2.1. Psychological factors

2.1.1 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Mentality

Conspiracy theories explain the ultimate causes of distressing and complex political or social events with reference to secret plots conducted by malevolent groups, which can either represent powerful (e.g., politicians, scientists) or socially marginalised groups (e.g., Jews, Muslims) (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020). A multitude of new conspiracy theories emerged across Western societies in the 21st century relating to: 9/11 (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010), climate change (Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Leiserowitz, 2006), the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Princess Diana (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012; Douglas & Sutton, 2008), flat Earth, chemtrails and anti-vaccine beliefs, QAnon, 5G networks and many more (Cairns, 2014; Garwood, 2008; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; Kata, 2010; Satariano & Alba, 2020). Research links conspiracy beliefs to threat perceptions, prejudice and negative attitudes against powerful or socially marginalised outgroups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley et al., 2020; Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015; Swami, 2012). Those consequences may result in intentions to engage in political action (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Imhoff, Dieterle, & Lamberty, 2019) or conversely, it may cause feelings of alienation and thus lead to political and social disengagement (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b).

More specifically, while conspiracy beliefs have been associated with stronger feelings of powerlessness, less political efficacy and less willingness to change the status quo with conventional and unconventional political action (Ardèvol-Abreu, Gil de Zúñiga, & Gámez 2020; for a similar study on the effects of system confidence and nonnormative action see Cichocka, Górska, Jost, Sutton, & Bilewicz, 2018), they have also been linked to higher intentions to engage in non-normative violent political action (Imhoff et al., 2019). It is important to note that general beliefs in conspiracy theories are widely prevalent within the general population (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Rees & Lamberty, 2019; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). However, it is unknown to what extent the endorsement of such conspiracies may prompt individuals to adopt extremist attitudes and to engage in extremist violence.

Bruder et al. (2013, p. 2) assert conspiracy theory beliefs are largely determined by a general propensity towards conspiracy thinking, a so-called conspiracy mentality. This renders people who believe in one conspiracy theory to also believe in other conspiracy theories, even if these theories are contradictory (Goertzel, 1994; Wood et al., 2012). Thus, the most reliable predictor for conspiracy thinking is belief in another conspiracy theory, suggesting an underlying belief system which induces a conspiracy mentality (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Swami et al., 2010; 2011; 2013).

Goertzel (1994) notes that each belief in a conspiracy theory reinforces other conspiracy beliefs and renders them more receptive to subsequent conspiracy thinking. Thus, a conspiracy mentality may explain why individuals significantly differ in the number of conspiracy theories which they endorse (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016; Oliver & Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson, 2016).

2.1.2. Existential and epistemic needs

Van Prooijen et al. (2015) note that conspiracy beliefs constitute a monological belief system (also see Goertzel, 1994, p. 741; Swami et al., 2011). Despite vast differences within these conspiracy theories, they tend to share similar underlying psychological mechanisms such as fundamental sense-making processes about distressing and threatening societal events in order to provide explanations of these complex issues (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger, & Delouvé, 2020; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Depicted as such, the literature highlights a multitude of psychological factors, which render individuals more likely to espouse conspiracy beliefs. Some of these factors constitute epistemic needs, which induce individuals to adopt conspiracy beliefs in order to achieve a clear-structured understanding of the world (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017).

Low levels of trust (Goertzel, 1994), perceived powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Pratt, 2003, Zarefsky, 1984), feelings of anomia and an associated lack of control (Goertzel, 1994; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), feelings of uncertainty (Van Prooijen, 2016; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), and existential anxiety (Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011) have been further linked to conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, studies have shown that conspiracy beliefs are associated with low socio-political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Bruder et al., 2013; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). Research suggests that individuals are susceptible to conspiratorial thinking when existential needs, such as feeling safe and in control of one's environment, are threatened (Douglas, Cichocka, & Sutton, 2020). Thus, the endorsement of conspiracy theories may act as a coping mechanism in order to deal with existential problems, which provides a straightforward explanatory framework and ultimately allows them to regain a sense of control and certainty over distressing life events (Franks, Bangerter, & Bauer, 2013; Douglas et al., 2019).

Similar to conspiracy beliefs, which are fundamentally rooted in sense-making processes (Van Prooijen, 2011), extremist beliefs also aim to structure the world in a clear-cut manner and intend to reduce feelings of uncertainty (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Research highlights extremist

beliefs may compensate for personal uncertainty by offering prescriptive and action-relevant guidance as well as clearly defined values and morals (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). By engaging in these mechanisms, extremist beliefs tend to be further reinforced (Hogg, Meehan, & Farqueharson, 2010). This might explain why so many extremist groups hold conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy theories may fulfil basic needs which many extremists have been shown to strive for, such as the ability to provide certainty and cognitive closure (Hogg et al., 2013; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) and overcome issues related to perceived powerlessness and feelings of anomia (Boehnke, Hagan, & Merkens, 1998; Pauwels, Ljubic, De Buck, 2018).

2.1.3. The functional role of conspiracy theories within extremism

Empirical research on the relationship of conspiracy beliefs and political extremism is scarce (for exception see Imhoff et al., 2019; Krouwel, Kutiyiski, Van Prooijen, Martinsson, & Markstedt, 2017; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Bartlett and Miller (2010) are among the very few researchers to have analysed the role of conspiracy beliefs within extremist groups. Their study examined the literature, ideology and propaganda of over 50 extremist groups from Europe and the United States across the political spectrum and they particularly focused on those that have engaged in violence. They argue that the endorsement of conspiracy theories within extremist groups feeds back into their ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes. Within extremist groups, conspiracy theories are used to increase threat perceptions and ingroup identification and thereby intensify extremist beliefs. Such processes potentially exacerbate ingroup/ outgroup distinctions, such as a providing an ‘us vs them’ rhetoric, which may lead to group polarisation, group think and in the most extreme cases to the dehumanisation of the enemy.

By providing a unifying narrative of a malicious enemy, conspiracy theories hold extremist groups together and push them in a more extreme and in some cases into a violent direction (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). In other words, conspiracy beliefs may catalyse and reinforce extremist attitudes and behaviour. Correspondingly, conspiracy theories are often used by extremists to fuel their ideology and provide justification for the use of violence. An important component of extremist propaganda is to facilitate the shift towards violent acts. By acting as a ‘rhetorical device’ conspiracy theories aim to justify and legitimise the use of violence (Bartlett & Miller, 2010, p. 5). That is, by framing extreme narratives which portray that the group one strongly identifies with is under attack, violence appears to be a necessary means to defend that group (Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

Empirical studies demonstrate that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with increased violent intentions more generally. Uscinski and Parent's (2014) US nationally representative survey results highlight that those who hold stronger conspiracy beliefs are more likely to show acceptance towards violence in order to express disagreement with the government compared to those individuals who hold weaker conspiracy beliefs. These findings appear to be of particular relevance as they point to the link between individuals' propensity to believe in conspiracy theories and their willingness to engage in violent action. Whereas conspiracy theories do not constitute proximate factors of individuals' violent extremist propensities, they can be thought of as 'radicalizing multipliers', which contribute and strengthen extremist ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes within groups prompting an increased acceptance of and willingness to use violent means (Bartlett & Miller, 2010, p. 4).

2.2. Conditional effects

Based on the aforementioned underlying psychological mechanisms, we expect that conspiracy mentality will be positively related to violent extremist intentions. But we hypothesise that this effect is stronger for individuals with certain characteristics. These are: self-efficacy, self-control and legal cynicism. Below we elaborate upon their relationship with violent extremism.

2.2.1. Self-Efficacy

Within social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 1999), Bandura denotes self-efficacy beliefs as "the foundation of human agency" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Through their effect on behavioural intentions, self-efficacy beliefs constitute proximate direct and indirect predictors of human behaviour. Self-efficacy refers to the belief that one can successfully perform an action or produce an effect to achieve certain outcomes, based on perceptions that individuals hold about their own capabilities. These cognitive evaluation processes of one's own abilities influence the engagement in corresponding behaviours (Bandura, 1977; 1990; 1997). This line of research shares great similarity with Ajzen's (1985; 1991) theory of planned behaviour, which argues that high levels of self-efficacy strengthen intentions to perform a certain behaviour as well as enhance commitment and perseverance towards goals (Ajzen, 2002).

Meta-analyses reveal that efficacy beliefs exert strong effects on human functioning (Holden 1991; Holden, Moncher, Schinke, & Barker, 1990; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Generally, high self-efficacy has been linked to mental and

physical well-being, high self-esteem, resilience as well as perseverance in the face of obstacles and failures. Conversely, low efficacy has been attributed to weak commitment towards goals and avoidance of challenging tasks, which are rooted in individuals' beliefs that they do not have control over those situations (for overviews see Bandura, 1997; Schwarzer, 1992).

Previous empirical evidence indicates that self-efficacy in relation to conventional pursuits is associated with positive outcomes, including recovery from illness (Schwarzer, Boehmer, Luszczynska, Mohamed, & Knoll, 2005), good school and academic performances (Bong, Cho, Ahn, & Kim, 2012; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Talsma, Schüz, Schwarzer, & Norris, 2018) and healthy life-style changes (Kreikuson, Gellert, Lippke, & Schwarzer, 2011; Parschau et al., 2013). Yet, individuals might develop self-efficacy in relation to nonconventional pursuits, including violent and illegal behaviour but this assumption remains largely unexplored. However, an exception includes research on childhood aggression. Results highlight that self-efficacy in performing aggression (e.g., the belief that it would be “easy” to shove other kids out of the way) is positively related to aggressive behaviour in children (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Ludwig & Pittman, 1999; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986).

Another exception is a study conducted by Brezina and Topalli's (2012) on Nebraskan prison inmates, which reveals that many offenders maintain a strong sense of criminal efficacy despite past arrests, convictions and incarceration. They further highlight that criminal self-efficacy tends to reduce their intentions to desist from crime. These findings lend support to the idea that efficacy beliefs do not necessarily lead to prosocial and conventional outcomes but may facilitate antisocial, illegal and even violent behaviours. While it is established that self-efficacy beliefs constitute important elements in understanding human agency, to date, little empiricism investigates the relationship between self-efficacy and violent extremism (for longer theoretical discussion see Schlegel, 2019, for anecdotal observations see Gill, Marchment, Corner, & Bouhana, 2020).

2.2.2. Self-Control Theory

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that self-control is key in explaining criminal propensity development. More recently, research extended this link to violent extremism (Pauwels et al., 2018; Schils & Pauwels, 2016) Social control theory attributes great significance to early developmental processes, such as internalised controls acquired through childhood (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Siegel & McCormick, 2010). Numerous empirical studies found a significant relationship between lower levels of self-control and an increased risk of

delinquency as well as self-reported political violence (Hirtenlehner, Pauwels, & Mesko, 2015; Ribeaud & Eisner, 2006; Wikström & Svensson, 2010; Wikström & Treiber, 2007).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) originally conceptualised six dimensions of self-control: immediate gratification, preference for simple tasks, risk-taking behaviour, volatile temper, impulsiveness, and self-centredness. More recent studies analysing criminal behaviour and political violence apply the self-control scale developed by Grasmick and colleagues (1993) which shares important aspects with Gottfredson and Hirschi's concept (1990). These studies mainly focus on the aspects of risk-taking, impulsivity and thrill-seeking. Recent studies also analyse self-control as either a conditional or mediating effect, which aim to explain when or how varying levels of self-control affect the relationships between morality as well as exposure to criminogenic settings and offending (Hirtenlehner, Pauwels, & Mesko, 2015; Mobarake, Juhari, Yaccob, & Esmaeili, 2014; Svensson, Pauwels, & Weerman, 2010).

Other recent studies examined the interactive effects of self-control and various other constructs, for instance exposure to extremist peers and varying levels of morality on self-reported political violence (Pauwels & Hardyns, 2018). These findings suggest that similar mechanisms may be involved in individual-level processes of susceptibility to extremism. Poor ability to execute self-control was found to be significantly correlated with exposure to extremist settings and self-reported violent extremist behaviour, irrespective of the ideology in place (De Waele & Pauwels, 2014; Perry, Wikström, & Roman, 2018; Schils & Pauwels, 2016). Similarly, several studies established the effects of thrill-seeking in the explanation of right-wing extremism (Bjørge, 1997; Borum, 2007; Horgan, 2004). These findings suggest that the receptivity to extremist ideologies is associated with poor self-regulation (Bhui et al., 2019; Bouhana, 2019).

2.2.3. Legal Cynicism

Legal cynicism is a mechanism leading to the disengagement from internal obligations to comply with legal rules and social norms (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Individuals who engage in such processes deny the bindingness and legitimacy of the law and justify behaviours incompatible with those norms and rules. Legal cynicism has been found to emerge due to perceptions of persistent injustices, relative deprivation and resulting feelings of anomia. Confronted with those strains, individuals may develop a cynicism towards the law, which can serve as a justification for criminal behaviour or 'legal neutralization' (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Nivette, Eisner, Malti, & Ribeaud, 2015).

Legal neutralisation processes intend to delegitimise legal sanctions against criminal conduct. Within criminology such mechanisms, including neutralisation processes and cognitive distortions, are widely accepted constructs for explaining the use and justification of violence (Ribeaud & Eisner, 2010; Sykes & Matza, 1957). In particular, moral and legal neutralisation are the most commonly identified mechanisms (Bandura, 1999; Nivette et al., 2015; Fritsche, 2005; Reisig, Scott, Wolfe, & Holtfreter, 2011; Ribeaud & Eisner, 2015).

Research further documents a significant association between legal cynicism and the support for violence to advance political and ideological aims (Hagan, Kaiser, & Hanson, 2016; Nivette, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2017). Additionally, multiple studies reveal that individuals who support or engage in violent extremism and commit terrorist acts, disengage from legal, moral and religious norms to justify the use of violence against civilians. These psychological processes help to overcome restraints to use violence against civilians by offering internal moral justifications (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006; LaFree & Ackerman, 2009; Slotman & Tillie, 2006). Individuals who consider breaking the law as justifiable hold an increased susceptibility to involvement in violent extremism. These findings are not surprising as many extremist actions are criminal in nature (Bouhana, 2019, p. 13). Indeed, a significant number of individuals who committed terrorist offences have previously been involved in criminal activities (Basra & Neumann, 2016; Van der Veer, 2018). The same susceptibility seems to be a driver for both types of criminal behaviour (Bouhana, 2019, p.13).

While research has addressed the potential negative outcomes resulting from conspiracy beliefs, such as increased outgroup prejudice, political disengagement or environmental inaction (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), far less attention has been attributed to whether conspiracy beliefs may lead individuals to engage in unlawful behaviours. Several studies have confirmed that conspiracy beliefs are associated with cynicism and strong distrust towards state institutions (Einstein & Glick, 2015; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Swami et al., 2011). Hence, this may prompt individuals to disengage from legal rules and social norms, rendering them more likely to engage in unlawful behaviour. Jolley et al. (2019) investigated whether belief in conspiracy theories are related to unlawful behaviour. Their results highlight that conspiracy belief is related to intentions to engage in and past behaviour of everyday crimes. These findings support the idea that people's beliefs that others, especially authorities, are conspiring could potentially change individuals' perceptions of social norms surrounding immoral behaviour by increasing legal cynicism, which in turn may lead to criminal behaviour (Jolley, Douglas, Leite, & Schrader, 2019).

3. Method

3.1. Sample

We conducted a cross-sectional and nationally representative survey study of the German population. The total sample included 1502 respondents with a mean age of 55 ranging from 19 to 95 ($SDa = 16.93$). 49.3% were female. Respondents had a fairly high level of education with 55% indicating that they completed the ‘Abitur’ or an equivalent, which is the highest level of school education in Germany.

Data for the survey was collected by Ipsos Germany and Trend Test GmbH via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). This method was considered the best method to realise a representative survey study. The main fieldwork took place from March 22nd to May 27th, 2019. The target population comprised all German-speaking persons aged 18 years and older, living in private households with at least one landline telephone or at least one mobile-phone line in Germany. A representative sample was achieved through a systematic and controlled approach of a multi-stratified probability sample (Random-Digit-Dialing) in the dual-frame mode (landline telephone- households and mobile phone users), based on the current ADM (Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute) sample design for telephone surveys.

Individuals participated on a voluntary basis and were not incentivised. Debriefing was provided at the survey’s completion. The average interview duration was 31 minutes. For the fieldwork, 108 interviewers were deployed. Interviewers completed between 1 and 133 interviews. All were trained interviewers with experience in social research studies. Additionally, all interviewers pass a professional training system before they begin with real interviews. They further receive ongoing training and development through seminars. A pre-test of 30 interviews was conducted before the main fieldwork in order to test the questionnaire design, the clarity of questions and answer options, the questionnaire length, and the willingness to participate. The pretest interviews were conducted on February 12th and from February 25th through to February 27th, 2019. Contacts were recruited under realistic fieldwork conditions.

3.2. Measures

Unless otherwise mentioned, the measures reported below were assessed on 7-point Likert-scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

3.2.1 *Violent Extremism*

We apply a violent extremism scale devoid of any specific set of values (e.g. particular religious, political or social beliefs). For our analysis *violent extremism* was assessed with a proxy measure, the Radicalism Intention Scale (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). We use the term *violent extremism* to refer to individuals' willingness to engage in illegal and violent actions on behalf of a group, with whom the individual previously identified most with. This group could be a political, ethnic, religious, social or another group. The measure was examined with four items from the Radicalism Intention Scale. Initially, participants were asked to think about the group or organisation with whom they identified most strongly with. Afterwards, they were asked to what extent they agree to the following statements: "*I would continue to support an organisation that fights for my group's political and legal rights even if the organization sometimes breaks the law*", "*I would continue to support this organisation even if the organisation sometimes resorts to violence*" "*I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent*" and "*I would attack police forces if I saw them beating members of my group*" ($\alpha = .76$). We combined the items of the Radical Intentions Scale and created an average score for every individual whereby higher values indicate stronger intentions to engage in extremist violence.

3.2.2. *Conspiracy mentality*

The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) is a short 5-item measure developed by Bruder et al. (2013) to assess differences in the tendency to engage in generic conspiracy thinking within and across cultures. Example items are: "*I think there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*" and "*I think many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about*" ($\alpha = .84$). This measure was chosen in order to overcome limitations in regard to the contextual nature of previous conspiratorial beliefs scales which were bound to specific geographical and temporal contexts.

3.2.3. *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy was assessed with the short version of the General Self-Efficacy (GSE-6) Scale developed by Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1995). The generalised measure of self-efficacy refers to personal capabilities to effectively handle a variety of challenging situations and life

stressors. This concept of general self-efficacy draws upon different domains of human functioning in which individuals' self-efficacy evaluations matter. This line of research suggests that general self-efficacy can explain various human intentions and behaviours when the context is less specific (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005). This scale is a reliable and proven instrument, which has been validated in different cultural contexts as well as in clinical and non-clinical samples (Romppel et al., 2013). The scale is composed of six items such as: *"If someone opposes me, I can find means and ways to get what I want"* or *"It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals"* ($\alpha = .84$).

3.2.4. Self-control

Participants' ability to exercise self-control was measured with seven statements such as: *"When I am really angry, other people better stay away from me"* or *"Sometimes I find it exciting to do things that may be dangerous"* ($\alpha = .71$). The scale is a modified version of the self-control scale developed by Grasmick et al. (1993), which taps into the concepts of thrill-seeking, impulsivity and risk-taking. Responses were coded so that high scores on the scale indicate a low capacity for self-control.

3.2.5. Legal cynicism

Law-related morality is operationalised using four items adapted from Sampson and Bartusch's (1998) legal cynicism scale. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with statements such as: *"Sometimes it's necessary to ignore rules and laws and to do what you want"* and *"Laws were made to be broken"* ($\alpha = .71$). An average score for all items was computed. Answer were coded so that high values represent high levels of legal cynicism or put differently, a low law-related morality.

3.3. Conditional analysis

This study investigates the relationship of conspiracy mentality and violent extremist intentions and examines if and how this relationship is dependent on several individual differences. In other words, we hypothesis that individual characteristics, such as self-efficacy, self-control and law-relevant morality will modify the effects of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremism. Depending on their capability to execute self-control as well as their levels of self-efficacy and law-related morality, individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs may vary widely in their susceptibility to violent extremism. More specifically, we examine whether those individual

characteristics may act as risk or protective factors for the effects of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremist intentions. In order to conduct our analysis, we have tested several moderations.

3.3.1. Self-efficacy

While Bandura's original concept of self-efficacy has been mainly applied to task-specific situations, our measure of self-efficacy denotes it at a more general level of human agency as proposed by Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1995). In this line of research, general self-efficacy captures individuals' perceived agency in a variety of challenging encounters as well as beliefs in their own capability to change their situation and act upon certain stressors affecting their lives, in comparison to specific self-efficacy, which is a task-specific measure. Previous research shows that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to engage in more challenging tasks, expend more effort to achieve their pursuits and persevere longer in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 2001; Scholz, Doña, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002). In contrast, individuals who doubt their capabilities are more likely to avoid challenging tasks and situations. Those people tend to show lower aspirations and weaker commitment to the goals they pursue (Bandura, 1994).

The rationale for including self-efficacy as a moderator is based on the assumption that engagement in violent extremism constitutes a risky and challenging endeavour and therefore, necessitates self-efficacy beliefs (Gill et al., 2020). If individuals are not certain they have the capability to achieve their aims, they will most likely not exhibit strong violent extremist intentions and subsequently will not engage in violent extremist behaviour. Self-efficacy may constitute a major part in translating perceived strains into violent extremist intentions (Gill, 2015).

Our analysis examines whether efficacy beliefs will modify the relationship between conspiracy mentality and violent extremism. In other words, we aim to investigate if for certain people with varying levels of self-efficacy, conspiracy beliefs have a stronger or weaker effect on violent extremist intentions. We expect that individuals who experience certain risk factors, such as conspiracy beliefs, those with a high sense of self-efficacy may feel more capable of taking action in order to redress those grievances and subsequently will exhibit a stronger willingness to engage in violent extremism.

3.3.2. Self-control

A weak capability to execute self-control has been linked to self-reported violent extremist behaviour (Perry et al., 2018; Schils & Pauwels, 2016). We hypothesise that the effects of

conspiracy beliefs on violent extremism are contingent on individuals' capacity for self-regulation. We expect that for people with low self-control, the effects of conspiracy beliefs on extremist intentions will be stronger. Conversely, we expect that a high capability to exercise self-control might protect against the influences of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremist intentions.

3.3.3. Law-related morality

Previous research has shown that legal cynicism strongly correlates with violent behaviour and that higher levels of legal cynicism increase individuals' extremist attitudes (Nivette, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2017; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005). We therefore expect that the relationship between individuals' conspiracy mentality and their readiness to engage in violent extremism is dependent on varying levels of legal cynicism. More specifically, we hypothesise that higher levels of legal cynicism will amplify the effects of conspiracy beliefs on extremist intentions.

3.4. Analytical procedure

We estimated our model in the software programme R using the packages 'jtools' (Long, 2020a), 'interactions' (Long, 2020b) and 'sandwich' (Zeileis, Lumley, Berger, & Graham, 2019). We created scales in order to measure our constructs. We calculated robust standard errors using the function 'summ' (Long, 2020a) in order to apply a heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimator and to handle the violation of the normality assumption for our dependent variable (Zeileis et al., 2019). In addition, we applied a mean centering technique to all our continuous independent variables in order to yield interpretable coefficients (Aiken & West, 1991; Hayes, 2018). Probing and plotting of the interaction models were conducted in R with the function 'probe_interaction', which combines the functions 'sim_slopes' and 'interaction_plot' (Long, 2020b). We included gender and age as statistical control variables in all our models.

4. Results

We report all parameters as standardised estimates with a significance level $<.05$ and we estimate all main and interaction effects.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations of all constructs in this study.

Notes: Pearson correlation coefficients are reported.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The bivariate correlations between all main constructs used in this study are significant, except for the correlation between self-efficacy and violent extremist intentions ($r = .04, p > .05$). The strongest correlate for violent extremism is legal cynicism, which indicates a moderate association ($r = .27, p < .001$). The bivariate relationship between violent extremism and self-control ($r = .26, p < .001$) is also moderate. Despite showing a significant association, conspiracy mentality ($r = .13, p < .001$) and violent extremism are weakly correlated. Overall, the strongest correlation is found between legal cynicism and self-control ($r = .41, p < .001$). Notably, legal cynicism and conspiracy mentality also share a moderate association ($r = .39, p < .001$). Lastly, the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and self-control ($r = .22, p < .001$) is stronger compared to the association between conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy ($r = .14, p < .001$).

The results from our regression analysis confirm that conspiracy mentality is positively

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Violent extremism	1.60	1.02	1						
2 Conspiracy mentality	4.33	1.44	.13***	1					
3 Self-efficacy	5.20	1.02	.04	.14***	1				
4 Self-control	3.15	1.10	.26***	.22***	.15***	1			
5 Legal cynicism	2.55	1.23	.27***	.39***	.11***	.41***	1		
6 Age	55	16.93	-.15***	.01	-.06*	-.18***	-.01	1	
7 Gender (1 = male)	.50	.50	-.09***	-.02	-.13***	-.10***	-.15***	.07**	1

related to violent extremist intentions ($\beta = .13, p < .001$; table 2, model 1). This implies that individuals who hold stronger conspiracy beliefs exhibit a higher readiness to engage in violent extremism. The following sections report the conditional analyses results.

Table 2

Regression analysis with interaction terms predicting violent extremist intentions.

Predictors	Violent extremist intentions			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)
Conspiracy mentality	.13*** (.026)	.13*** (.025)	.09*** (.025)	.05 (.028)
Self-efficacy		.00 (.024)		
Conspiracy mentality × self-efficacy		.06* (.025)		
Self-control			.20*** (.028)	
Conspiracy mentality × self-control			.11*** (.029)	
Legal cynicism				.24*** (.031)
Conspiracy mentality × legal cynicism				.06* (.028)
Age	-.16*** (.027)	-.16*** (.027)	-.12*** (.027)	-.16*** (.027)
Gender (1 = male)	.17*** (.052)	.16*** (.052)	.13** (.05)	.10 (.051)
R^2	.05***	.06***	.10***	.10***

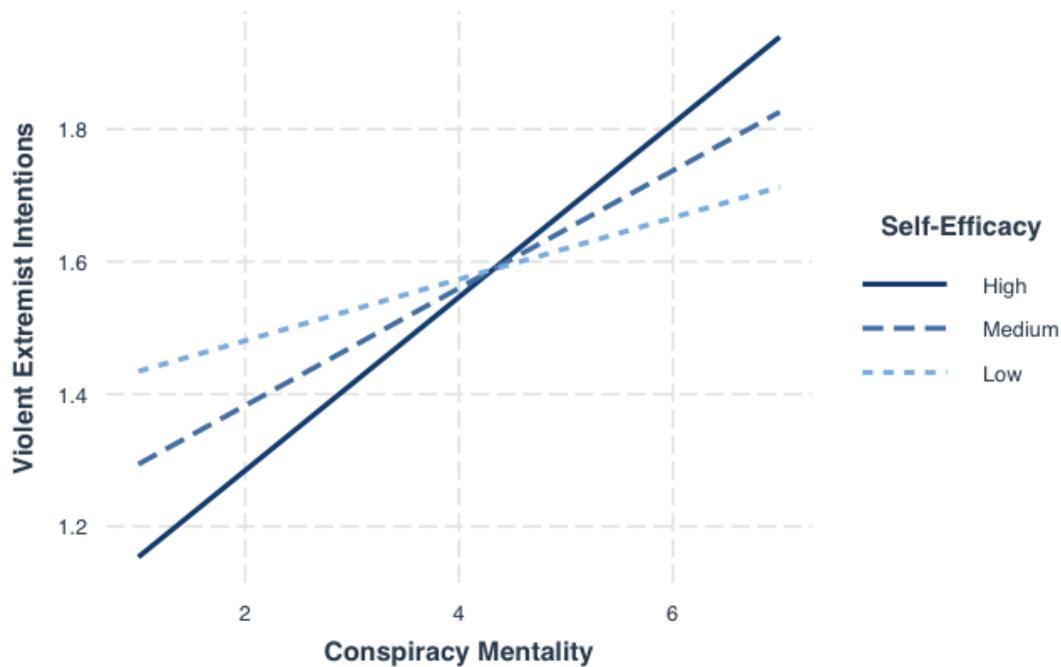
Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Standardised regression coefficients are given. Robust standard errors are reported.

4.1. Self-efficacy

In line with our predictions, self-efficacy moderated the effect of conspiracy mentality on violent extremist intentions ($\beta = .06$, $p < .05$; table 2, model 2). To illustrate the significant interaction of conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy, we computed simple slopes (figure 1). The plotted values of the predictor represent one standard deviation above, at the mean and one standard deviation below the mean using the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991). The simple slopes (fig. 1) show that when self-efficacy is high, conspiracy beliefs have strong positive effects on violent extremism ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$). These effects are attenuated when

self-efficacy is average ($\beta = .09, p < .001$) and become non-significant for low levels of self-efficacy ($\beta = .05, p > .05$).

Fig. 1. Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-efficacy in predicting violent extremist intentions.



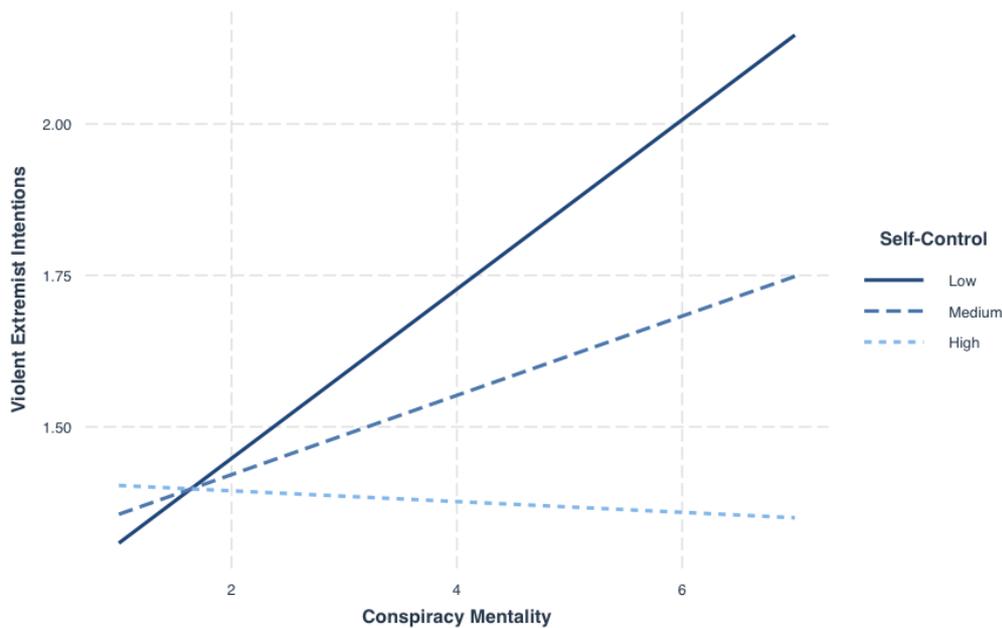
Notes: Plotted values are β -values of the slopes at 1 SD above the mean (high), the mean (medium) and 1 SD below the mean (low).

4.2. Self-control

We calculated the main effects of conspiracy mentality and self-control, as well as their interaction. Our results confirm that the effects of conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism are conditional on individuals' levels of self-control. The interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-control proved to be significant in predicting violent extremist intentions ($\beta = .11, p < .001$; table 2, model 3). We conducted a simple slope analysis to explore the significant interaction of conspiracy beliefs and self-control (fig. 2). We computed the simple slopes for the effects of high (-1 SD), average (mean) and low (+1 SD) self-control. To reiterate, responses were coded so that high scores on the scale indicate a low capacity for self-control. As shown by figure 2, self-control strongly increased the effects of conspiracy beliefs on

violent extremism among those scoring low in self-control ($\beta = .14, p < .001$) and also for those with average levels of self-control ($\beta = .07, p < .001$). For those high in self-control, the relationship was negative, however this effect did not reach statistical significance ($\beta = -.01, p > .05$).

Fig. 2. Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-control in predicting violent extremist intentions.

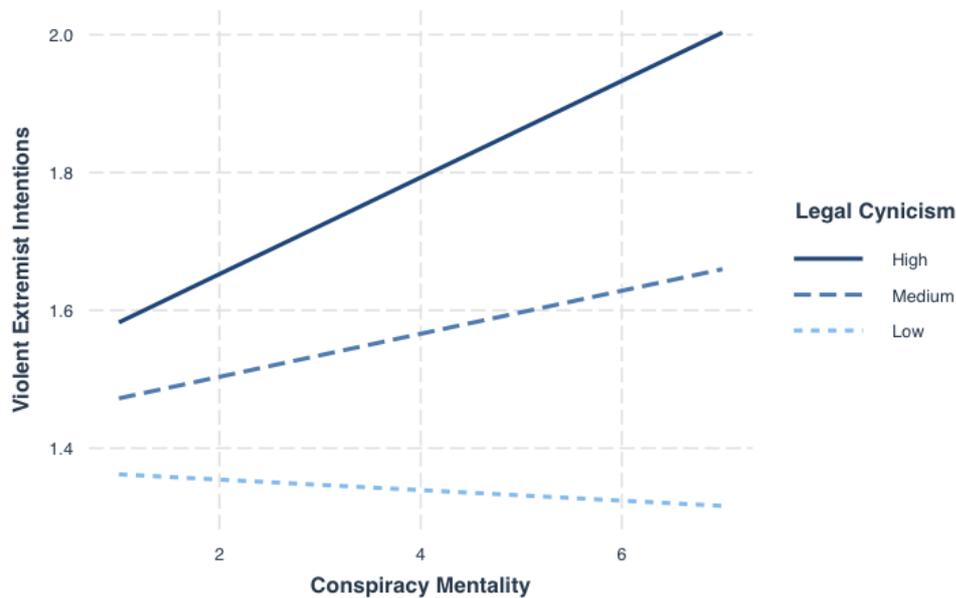


Notes: Plotted values are β -values of the slopes at 1 SD above the mean (low), the mean (medium) and 1 SD below the mean (high).

4.3. Legal cynicism

Evidence was found for the moderating effects of legal cynicism on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions. Conspiracy beliefs showed a significant interaction with legal cynicism ($\beta = .06, p < .05$; table 2, model 4). The simple slope analysis (fig. 3) for legal cynicism indicated that conspiracy beliefs were positively related to violent extremism for those high in legal cynicism (+1 SD; $\beta = .07, p < .05$) but negatively associated with those scoring low in legal cynicism, however this effect is not significant (-1 SD; $\beta = -.01, p > .05$). For those with average levels of legal cynicism simple slopes indicated a positive but non-significant effect (mean; $\beta = .03, p > .05$).

Fig. 3. Interaction between conspiracy mentality and legal cynicism in predicting violent extremist intentions.



Note: Plotted values are β -values of the slopes at 1 SD above the mean (high), the mean (medium) and 1 SD below the mean (low).

5. Discussion

5.1. Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism

The nexus between conspiracy theories and extremism is not a new phenomenon, yet, the extent to which these conspiracy theories have been prevalent within recent terrorist attacks is stark. Relatedly, research is increasingly pointing to the crucial role of conspiracy theories in advancing the agendas of extremist groups, such as white supremacist groups (Soufan Center, 2019). Our results are in line with these findings. Our study demonstrates that people who hold a conspiracy mentality, which is characterised by a mindset or general propensity to endorse conspiracy theories, show stronger intentions to engage in violent extremism. These findings suggest that perceiving the world as ruled by malevolent and illegitimate forces may be driving extremist violence as it provides justification to use illegal means and normative political engagement seems futile (Imhoff et al., 2019).

To our knowledge, this study is the first nationally representative study to test the effects of conspiracy mentality on individuals' intentions to engage in violent extremism and to examine how this relationship is contingent on several individual differences. Our results reveal that individuals with varying levels of self-efficacy, self-control as well as legal cynicism are differentially vulnerable to the effects of conspiracy beliefs.

Our first conditional analysis examined how varying levels of perceived self-efficacy may change the effect of conspiratorial thinking on individuals' violent extremist intentions. Self-efficacy is a fundamental component of human agency and influences individuals' judgements of being capable to act upon different types of motivation, aims or stressors affecting their lives (Bandura, 1997). Numerous studies have found that self-efficacy is associated with various positive outcomes, including academic success, mental and physical well-being as well as recovery from injury and illness (Schwarzer et al., 2005; Talsma et al., 2018). These studies support the idea that self-efficacy is linked to normative as well as prosocial intentions and behaviours and thus, based on this line of research, high self-efficacy may be expected to constitute a protective factor for the endorsement of and engagement in violent extremist behaviour.

However, our findings suggest a more complicated picture. Notably, the simple slopes show an intersection for low, mean and high levels of self-efficacy. People scoring high in self-efficacy indicate fewer extremist intentions when conspiracy beliefs are low compared to those with average and low self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with the argument that high self-efficacy is associated with normative intentions (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2006). However, for individuals with high self-efficacy the slope increases at a higher rate, which eventually leads to the overlap of slopes. Therefore, our results suggest that those individuals scoring highly in both conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy beliefs may feel more capable of taking violent action in order to their redress grievances. When self-efficacy is interacting with conspiracy beliefs violent extremism becomes more likely. These findings suggest that stronger beliefs in one's own capabilities are not necessarily linked to positive outcomes, but they entail the potential to significantly increase non-normative and violent behaviour for individuals who hold certain risk factors for violent extremism, such as conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, caution is required in regard to countering violent extremism (CVE) intervention programs which promote self-efficacy in order to make individuals more resilient. More specifically, CVE approaches should aim to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy in relation to prosocial and normative intentions and subsequent behaviours. While working towards building a greater capacity of self-efficacy, they need to simultaneously tackle those underlying

grievances as otherwise individuals might use their newly gained self-efficacy beliefs to act upon those strains.

Our second conditional analysis revealed that conspiracy beliefs affect violent extremist intentions particularly when individuals have low self-control. Conversely, when the ability to exercise self-control is well developed, having conspiracy beliefs is less influential upon violent extremist intentions. Hence, we argue that for individuals with a conspiracy mentality, low self-control presents a risk-factor, whereby a weaker capacity for self-control leads to higher extremist intentions. Importantly, the combined effect of low self-control and high conspiracy thinking results in more extremist intentions. That is, individuals with low self-control and who hold conspiracy beliefs are more susceptible to violent extremism than those with high self-control. By contrast, when conspiracy theory belief is high, the co-occurrence of high self-control mitigates its impact upon violent extremism. In this sense, self-control can be defined as an “interactive protective factor” (Ttofi, Farrington, Piquero, & DeLisi, 2016) or “buffering protective factor” (Hall, Simon, Lee, & Mercy, 2012). Such forms of protective factors should be emphasised in preventive measures focused upon ‘at risk’ populations (e.g. selective strategies) (Hall et al., 2012). In this case, strategies focused upon self-control in conspiracy believing communities should dampen the risk of escalation to violence.

Our third conditional analysis confirms an interaction between conspiracy beliefs and legal cynicism in the prediction of violent extremism. Conspiracy beliefs affect extremist intentions when law-related morality is low. Conversely, high levels of law-related morality may act as an interactive protective factor against the willingness to engage in violent extremist behaviour, despite holding strong conspiracy beliefs. As with self-control, selective strategies focused upon increased law-related morality within conspiracy belief communities should dampen the risk of future violence.

Our results should encourage further research into the protective factors for violent extremism (Lösel, King, Bender, & Jugl, 2018). In particular, we reiterate Rutter’s (1987) position of emphasising the interactional nature of risk and protective factors. It is in such adverse circumstances (e.g. the experience of risk factors) where the true value of protective factors becomes apparent and this has a multitude of insights for how we should design interventions focused on countering violent extremism. The wealth of research on conspiracy theories clearly shows that simply debunking a theory is insufficient. This resembles programs solely focused upon counter-narratives within CVE campaigns. Instead, interventions should additionally focus upon a range of psychological, attitudinal and cognitive factors which led

the conspiracy theory/violent extremist ideology to take hold in the first place. Successfully debunking a theory or an ideology without addressing these vulnerabilities will likely only lead to the adoption of a different conspiratorial world view which addresses the individual's same psychological needs outlined in the theory section above.

Our study comes with some limitations. While this is the first nationally representative survey examining violent extremist intentions, our sample does not consist of individuals who have actually engaged, to the best of our knowledge, in violent extremism. Assessing actual violent extremist behaviour is a very challenging task to undertake in general population samples. This is due to issues with ethics approvals and misreporting of survey answers, particularly social desirability bias presents a great challenge to any survey study measuring sensitive items. To attenuate these issues, we have measured behavioural intentions rather than individuals' actual behaviours. Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1985; 1991) posits that intentions constitute the immediate antecedents of behaviour and therefore, reveal people's readiness to perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 2012). The theory of planned behaviour corroborates the idea that intentions account for a substantial proportion of variance in actual behaviour, and thus are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behaviour. Stronger intentions to engage in a certain behaviour make it much more likely that people will actually perform that behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Correspondingly, several meta-analyses confirm strong intention-behaviour correlations (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Notani, 1998; Randall & Wolff, 1994).

This is in line with previous research in social psychology which has found that behavioural intentions can serve as a useful proxy for understanding and predicting corresponding behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; Webb & Sheeran, 2006) and that collective action intentions are strongly related to actual participation (De Weerd & Klandermans, 1999). Relatedly, we have utilised a generalised measure of self-efficacy, which does not consider any task-specific efficacy beliefs. Nevertheless, we argue that general self-efficacy is related to individuals' confidence in their capabilities to take action when they face obstacles or encounter challenging situations (Bandura, 1990). We do acknowledge that future research would benefit from including a measure which operationalises self-efficacy in a situation-specific manner. Another limitation of the present study is the cross-sectional data, which does not allow for causal inferences. Future studies should consider experimental and longitudinal designs as such data is required to establish causation.

6. Conclusion

We stress that it is insufficient to solely analyse the independent effects of various risk factors for violent extremism. Instead, we suggest that most studies analysing drivers of violent extremism should incorporate the conditional and contextual nature of those factors into their analysis. In fact, these individual differences may explain why certain individuals engage in violence while others, holding for instance similar conspiracy beliefs, do not. Therefore, placing a larger focus on these conditional effects may facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the social cognitive and neuropsychological mechanisms underlying radicalisation processes, which might help explain why certain people with extremist attitudes rather than others will end up engaging in violent behaviour. As Schlegel (2019) previously has pointed out, varying levels of self-efficacy may be a crucial factor in determining how likely it is that certain individuals will eventually engage in extremist violence. Similarly, our results show that for individuals with a conspiracy mentality, individual differences have strong effects on their violent extremist intentions. These conditional risk and protective factors are important in understanding the link between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism and may have important implications for violent extremism risk assessment and management. Hence, future studies should test for further contextual and situational influences on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and violent extremism.

Additionally, we strongly encourage future research to incorporate more research on the underlying cognitive and neuropsychological mechanisms, which are suspected to link conspiracy mentalities to susceptibility to extremism. This necessitates further testing of individual differences in implicit cognition and information processing styles. Validated cognitive tasks that assess cognitive flexibility as well as scales which measure analytical thinking and open-minded thinking styles should be applied to test for these differences. Experimental research reveals that interventions which stimulate analytical thinking attenuate conspiratory beliefs (Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham, 2014). Interventions to enhance analytical and critical thinking skills should increasingly be implemented in schools as especially young adolescents seem to be most vulnerable to peer and extremist influences.

Importantly, those cognitive factors, such as critical thinking skills and cognitive flexibility may effectively reduce conspiracy beliefs and thereby, could potentially act as protective factors for developing extremist propensities. The way we are consuming knowledge off- and online is affecting our capacity for ‘deep processing’ skills: inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection. Additionally, it is vital to equip young people with

sufficient digital literacy in order to detect false and ‘counter knowledge’ online. Whereas government agencies and tech companies have to do their part in countering and detecting false information and conspiracy theories, civil society must also play a proactive role in confronting the lies and myths of conspiracy theories.

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