

Associations between adverse childhood experiences and conspiracy endorsement – the mediating role of epistemic trust and personality functioning: A representative study during the COVID-19 pandemic

H. Kampling^a, D. Riedl^b, N. Hettich^c, A. Lampe^d, T. Nolte^e, S. Zara^f, M. Ernst^c, E. Brähler^g, C. Sachser^h, J.M. Fegert^h, S. Gingelmaierⁱ, P. Fonagy^j, L. Krakau^c, J. Kuse^k

^aDepartment of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy – Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany

^bLudwig Boltzmann Institute for Rehabilitation Research, Vienna & Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy, Psychosomatics and Medical Psychology, Medical University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Vienna, Austria

^cDepartment of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

^dLudwig Boltzmann Institute for Rehabilitation Research – Vienna & VAMED Rehabilitation Center – Schruns, Vienna, Austria

^eAnna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London & Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging, Institute of Neurology, UCL, London, London, United Kingdom

^fDepartment of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany

^gDepartment of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center of the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz & Integrated Research and Treatment Center for Adiposity Diseases, Behavioral Medicine Research Unit, University Medical Center Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany

^hDepartment of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry/Psychotherapy, Ulm University, Ulm, Germany

ⁱPsychology and Diagnostics for Emotional and Social Development for the Emotionally Impaired, University of Education Ludwigsburg, Ludwigsburg, Germany

^jAnna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London, London, United Kingdom

^kDepartment of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Justus Liebig University Giessen & Department for Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, Medical Center of the Philipps University Marburg, Giessen, Germany

Aim

Conspiracy endorsement has gained much attention in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it constitutes a major public health challenge that is associated with reduced adherence to preventative measures. However, little is known about the developmental backdrops and personality characteristics that render an individual prone to conspiracy endorsement. There is a growing body of evidence implying a detrimental role of adverse

childhood experiences (ACEs) – a highly prevalent burden – in the development of epistemic trust and personality functioning. This study aimed to investigate the association between ACEs and conspiracy endorsement as well as the mediating role of epistemic trust and personality functioning.

Methods

Analyses are based on cross-sectional representative data of the German population collected during the COVID-19 pandemic ($N = 2501$). Structural equation modelling (SEM) with personality functioning (OPD-SQS) and epistemic trust (ETMCQ) as mediators of the association between ACEs and conspiracy endorsement were conducted.

Results

In total, 20.4% ($n = 508$) of all participants endorsed conspiracies. There was a significant association between ACEs and conspiracy endorsement ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$; explained variance 6%). The variance of conspiracy endorsement increased to 19% after adding epistemic trust and personality functioning as mediators ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a partial mediation and direct prediction from these mediators. Fit indices demonstrated a good model fit.

Conclusions

Evidence on the far-reaching and detrimental effects of early childhood adversities are further increased by demonstrating an association between ACEs and conspiracy endorsement. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms by including epistemic trust and personality functioning.