

## **Adverse childhood experiences and conspiracy endorsement in times of the COVID-19-pandemic: the mediating role of epistemic trust and personality functioning**

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**Research aims and objectives:** This study aimed to investigate the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and conspiracy endorsement in a representative population based sample. We hypothesized that more impairments in personality functioning and lower epistemic trust would mediate this association.

**Theoretical background:** 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 ACEs – a highly prevalent worldwide burden – in the development of epistemic trust and personality functioning, both candidate mechanisms to enhance our understanding of how ACEs might impact psychological outcomes in adulthood.

**Method adopted:** Analyses are based on cross-sectional representative data of the German population collected during the COVID-19 pandemic (N=2,501). Structural equation modelling (SEM) with personality functioning (OPD-SQS) and epistemic trust (ETMCQ) as mediators of the association between ACEs and conspiracy endorsement (conspiracy mentality, specific conspiracy beliefs, COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs) were conducted.

**Results obtained or expected:** 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 explained 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.

**Intended audience:** Academic and practitioner.

