

The scientific report

Project: Attitudes on vaccine against COVID-19 and trust in authorities: the role of the Quest for personal significance, Need for cognitive closure, and Conspiracy beliefs

In this project we wanted to study the relationships between the quest for personal significance, need for cognitive closure, conspiracy beliefs, narcissism, and the attitudes towards war in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as the attitudes on vaccines.

Several authors suggested that conspiracy beliefs represent an optimal form of ideological narrative to fulfil the inherent human need to restore a sense of importance, aiding individuals in defending their self-esteem. This reasoning aligns with theoretical insights into the concepts of quest for significance (QFS) and narcissism. We expected that people with stronger QFS will be more attached to conspiracy beliefs, especially if they have narcissism orientation. Thus, we hypothesised that the relationships between the QFS and the attitudes towards conflicts and vaccines may be mediated by conspiracy beliefs, and moderated by high levels of narcissism.

Our research team is composed by scholars living in Italy and Georgia: Ankica Kotic and Francesca Valeria Frisari (Dipartimento di Psicologia dello Sviluppo e Socializzazione, Sapienza - University of Rome, Italy), and Nino Javakhishvili and Ana Makashvili (D. Uznadze Institute of Psychology, Ilia State University, Georgia) who visited the University of Rome in January - February 2024.

We conducted an online survey “Attitudes toward Current World Issues” in Georgia (N = 914) and in Italy (N = 1082; data collection is still in progress) through a questionnaire encompassing several scales: the Quest for Significance Scale (QFS), Need for Cognitive Closure (NfC), Personal Need for Structure (PNS), the Narcissism Scale (specifically the criticism sub-scale), Political Cynicism (PC), the Generic Conspiracy Beliefs scale (GCB), the Conspiracy Beliefs about Vaccination scale, Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), Social dominance Orientation (SDO), the scale of the Attitudes towards conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and the scale of the attitudes towards vaccines.

Our preliminary analyses confirmed what expected that the relationship between the QfS and the vaccine conspiracy beliefs was mediated by the generic conspiracy beliefs. We have also checked other moderation and mediation models. For example, the relationship between the QfS and the attitudes towards the conflicts in Ukraine was mediated again by the generic conspiracy beliefs. We found a negative indirect effect of QfS, mediated by GCB, for the support to Ukraine (vs. Russia). Furthermore, in Georgian sample emerged that five factors of conspiracy beliefs mediate the link between SDO and support for Russia to a different extent. The personal wellbeing, malevolent global conspiracies and extraterrestrial cover-up yielded the full mediation effect, government malfeasance produced a partial mediation effect, while the control of information was not a significant mediator.

The relevance of our research work is twofold. On one hand, it offers a new theoretical perspective about the connection of conspiracy theories with some of fundamental human needs: QFS (ego defense), and narcissism, and about the effects of the conspiracy beliefs on the attitudes towards different issues. In addition, it offers an opportunity to expand our collaboration with other colleagues in other European countries (for the moment in the UK, Serbia, Hungary, Germany and Poland). With this set of data, we will have a large cross-cultural dataset.

As part of the dissemination, we have sent two abstracts for the EASP Small group meeting on the consequences of conspiracy theories, 28th and 29th June 2024, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. Furthermore, some of the findings will be presented at the EASP general meeting in 2026. We plan to prepare at least two manuscripts for publication in international peer reviewed journals of social psychology.