

The Effect of Collective Narcissism, Populism and Trust of Older Adults on Conspiracy Mentality: Evidence from Poland

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Abstract: *The article examines the impact of collective narcissism, trust and populism on conspiracy mentality among citizens aged 65 and older in Poland. Understanding their behaviours and attitudes is crucial for at least two reasons. First, demographic shifts are leading to a growing proportion of seniors in European societies. Second, as life expectancy increases, older adults remain socially and politically active for longer. This article presents findings from two waves of a longitudinal study (N=379). Our model confirms that collective narcissism and populism drive generic conspiracist beliefs, while interpersonal and institutional trust have no significant effect.*

Keywords: *collective narcissism, trust, populism, conspiracy mentality, older adults*

Introduction

Research on conspiracy mentality has witnessed a remarkable rise in popularity over the recent years. It is increasingly recognized that belief in conspiracy theories is part of human psychology (Brotherton 2015). Scholars investigate factors that make an individual susceptible to conspiracies, noting that conspiracy explanations tend to emerge particularly after large-scale distressing events, such as terrorist attacks, economic crises or epidemics (van Prooijen & Douglas 2017). However, it is not only external circumstances that create space for conspiracy theories to spread. Studies firmly rooted in the literature also emphasize specific individual traits (e.g. cognitive, motivational, psychopathological) that increase susceptibility to conspiracy messages.

The presented article contributes to the discussion on the determinants of conspiracy mentality by focusing on a specific social group – the oldest citizens. The interest in this group stems, on the one hand, from forecasts regarding aging societies (United Nations 2019). These demographic changes bring about significant economic, social, psychological and even political transformations that governments and entire societies will need to address. On the other hand, the oldest citizens are interesting due to the increasing conservatism of views that come with age, which appears to be a natural consequence of the aging process. Many studies support that the characteristics and status achieved with age reinforce views and attitudes grounded in conservative values. Psychological age-related changes include a growing preference for order, greater uncertainty avoidance and an enhanced capacity to remember emotionally laden stimuli (Dennis et al. 2008; Jost et al. 2007; St. Jacques, Dolcos & Cabeza 2010). These features seem to correspond with traits that make an individual more open to conspiracy theories.

Nevertheless, the meta-analyses confirm a robust negative association between age and conspiracy endorsement (Goreis & Voracek 2019; Bordeleau & Stockemer 2024). One possible explanation is that the life experience of older citizens makes them more resilient to conspiratorial narratives. Enders et al. (2024) also argue that younger individuals, having less political influence and fewer financial resources than older people, may be more inclined to embrace conspiracy theories that blame ‘sinister forces’ for social inequality. It therefore becomes interesting to know what factors increase the susceptibility of older people to generic conspiracy ideation.

In our study, we propose a new perspective for examining the conspiracy mentality, understood as a general predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories. Unlike most prior research, we focus on the oldest citizens, whose societal importance is increasing due to extended active lifestyles and demographic shifts leading to population aging. Drawing on earlier findings, we assume that collective narcissism is a dominant driver of conspiracy mentality (e.g. Golec de Zavala, Bierwaczek & Ciesielski 2022), while various forms of trust – particularly institutional trust – are likely to mitigate this effect. Additionally, our model incorporates populism, which we expect to be positively associated with belief in conspiracy theories (Cargnino 2021; Eberl, Huber & Greussing 2022; Pilch et al. 2023).

Collective narcissism and its consequences

Social identity, rooted in belonging to and identifying with a group, is an integral part of our existence. It posits emotional involvement with one’s own group and a tendency to favour its members over outgroups (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Social identity can take two forms: secure attachment, which is resistant to threats and

fosters positive relationships with other groups, and a narcissistic form, which may lead to a range of consequences that are harmful to intergroup relations.

In recent years, collective narcissism (also called group narcissism) has become the subject of numerous studies. Findings consistently demonstrate that it entails an exaggerated belief in the uniqueness and greatness of an ingroup combined with a conviction that others fail to recognise its value sufficiently (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). This attitude is characterized by both superiority and entitlement. Superiority refers to the belief that one's group is not only unique but also better than others, making self-evaluation dependent on constant comparison with outgroups. Entitlement reflects the demand for confirmation of the superiority of one's group over another, which stems from compensating unsatisfied needs (Bertin et al. 2022). Collective narcissism can be observed among national, ethnic, religious, political and ideological groups (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka & Bilewicz 2013). In our research, we focus specifically on national narcissism – the belief in the greatness of one's own nation with the expectation of external recognition.

Collective narcissism reliably predicts hypersensitivity to criticism of the ingroup and a tendency to interpret ambiguous statements or situations as a threat to the idealised image of one's group, with a simultaneous desire for revenge (Cichocka 2016). Cross-national studies support this finding. For example, in Turkey, collective narcissism was linked to *schadenfreude* over the economic crisis in Europe, stemming from feelings of humiliation due to the prolonged wait for accession to the European Union (Golec de Zavala et al. 2016).

Importantly, group narcissism anticipates prejudice better than other forms of ingroup identification. Research has demonstrated this effect in relation to attitudes toward Ukrainians, Mexicans, Jews, Arabs, refugees and the LGBT+ community (Golec de Zavala 2024: 105–127). Cross-cultural analyses further show that collective narcissism correlates with hostility toward others, whereas positive identification without a narcissistic component is associated with greater tolerance. Studies conducted in Poland confirm this distinction: individuals with strong, positive national identify perceive less social distance toward minorities, whereas those with a high level of national narcissism report greater distance (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka & Iskra-Golec 2013).

National narcissism is also a significant predictor of support for populist parties and politicians (Cisłak et al. 2020; Federico & Golec de Zavala 2018; Lantos & Forgas 2021). Populism operates through a mechanism similar to that of collective narcissism, constructing a dichotomous division into antagonistic groups: the 'evil', corrupt and amoral elites versus the 'decent' people (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Furthermore, national narcissism is linked to a negative attitude toward democracy. Research following the 2020 U.S. presidential election found that national narcissists were more likely to believe that Donald Trump should remain in power despite losing the democratic election. They

also expressed support for the storming of the Capitol and portrayed those involved in the attack as individuals standing against injustice (Keenan & Golec de Zavala 2021).

The effect of collective narcissism, populism and trust on conspiracy mentality

Research consistently shows that collective narcissism strongly predicts both generic conspiratorial thinking and belief in specific conspiracy theories, whether directed at out-groups or particular events (Golec de Zavala, Bierwaczek & Ciesielski 2022). Collective narcissism is linked to beliefs in various conspiracy theories, including those about immigrants in France (Bertin et al. 2022), an alleged anti-Polish conspiracy of western countries (Cichocka et al. 2016), a Jewish conspiracy (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka 2012; Kofta, Soral & Bilewicz 2020) and a conspiracy about EU activities (Bertin et al. 2024). It also predicted support for and the spread of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Sternisko et al. 2023). In Poland, national narcissism (collective narcissism regarding one's own nation) fostered belief in conspiracy theories attributing responsibility for high-profile events, such as the Smolensk disaster, to foreign actors (Cichocka et al. 2016; Soral et al. 2018).

National narcissism has been shown to predict not only endorsement of specific conspiracy theories but also a more general conspiracy mindset (Federico & Golec de Zavala 2018). In this sense, it reflects a broader tendency to interpret social reality through a Manichean lens that divides the world into 'us' versus a sinister 'them', even within one's own nation. This strong link between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs may thus help explain the success of political movements that employ conspiratorial rhetoric, portraying themselves as defenders of the 'real people' against malevolent national elites and frequently accusing political opponents of plotting conspiracy (Bergmann 2018).

Trust is another key factor in shaping susceptibility to conspiracy theories. It constitutes the foundation of a well-functioning social system and a driver of economic growth (e.g. Putnam 2000; Rothstein & Stolle 2008). Its absence fosters dissatisfaction with democracy and reinforces the perception that political elites fail to represent citizens' interests (Zmerli et al. 2007). Indeed, distrust not only contributes to democratic backsliding but also strengthens the belief in conspiracy theories. Hollander (2018), for example, found that partisan identification combined with low interpersonal trust was associated with belief in four widely circulated conspiracies in the United States. Other studies also confirm that individuals with a lower level of trust in other people are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories (e.g. Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013; Green & Douglas 2018; Leman & Cinnirella 2013). Thus, social trust can serve

as a safeguard against disinformation (Gundersen et al. 2024), effectively limiting the spread of unverified information and conspiracy theories.

Research also supports the link between low institutional trust and endorsement of conspiracy theories, including those about COVID-19 (Šrol, Čavojová & Ballová Mikušková 2022), political events and global warming (van der Linden et al. 2021). Furthermore, distrust in the institution fuels generic conspiracy ideation in both young and stable democracies (Stoyanov & Douglas 2022).

Populism also plays an important role in shaping belief in conspiracies. Conspiracy theories function in a similar way to populist narratives. They are becoming attractive to some citizens because they offer simple, though unrealistic, explanations for complex social phenomena and perceived threats. Research conducted in EU countries confirms a strong association between populist attitudes and a general conspiracy mindset (van Prooijen 2022). Other studies further demonstrate that populist attitudes shape the belief in specific conspiracy theories, such as those concerning the COVID-19 pandemic (Guan & Yang 2020; Stecula & Pickup 2021).

Methods

The research was conducted using the CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) method within a longitudinal design on a randomly selected sample of older adults. A nationwide sample of people aged at least 65 was drawn from the PESEL register¹ (N=2082). We sent two letters by post inviting them to participate in the study. The first letter outlined the study's objectives, research procedure and all relevant ethics information. It also included the project manager's telephone number and e-mail address, encouraging recipients to get in touch in case of categorical refusal or to clarify any questions related to the study. Following this initial contact, 587 people declined to participate. The second letter was subsequently sent to those who had not opted out. It introduced the interviewer by name, surname and photo, along with a telephone number to facilitate contact. After this stage, 189 further individuals refused to participate. The interviewers then approached the remaining individuals directly at the addresses provided, making up to three attempts to secure consent for an interview. The first wave of the study took place between 15 November and 30 December 2022, while the second occurred immediately after the 2023 parliamentary elections, between 22 October and 30 November 2023.

The final sample of respondents who participated in both waves of the study consisted of 379 individuals (success rate=18.2%), including 234 women (61.7%). The average age of the respondents was 72.55 (SD=6.22). The sample

1 PESEL is the national identification number used in Poland.

was relatively diverse in terms of education: primary and lower – 10.6%, vocational – 21.9%, secondary – 36.2%, higher – 31.4%. The study participants reported regular engagement in religious practices, such as attending Mass (including via radio, television or the Internet). Specifically, 41.1% attended once a week, while 15.4% participated more than once a week. The subjective financial status, determined on a five-point scale (1 = 'I live very modestly'; 5 = 'I live very well'), was assessed at an average level ($M = 3.25$; $SD = 0.88$). Regarding electoral preferences, the sample was largely dominated by supporters of the Civic Coalition (138 people, 36.4%) and Law and Justice (107 people, 28.2%).

We included the following variables in our study:

(1) Trust measured in three dimensions:

- *Interpersonal trust* assessed using three statements (*Most people are good and kind; Most people are honest; Most people are trustworthy*) with answers on a seven-point scale (1 = *definitely not*, 7 = *definitely yes*). These items are often used in the measurement of trust, defined as the expectation that people are generally good and trustworthy (Rotter 1980).
- *Institutional trust* – a 9-item index including trust in following institutions: politicians in the parliament, local politicians, the police, the courts, the army, the healthcare, the Catholic church, EU institutions and NATO.
- *Attitude toward democracy* measured using three statements (*Life in Poland today is better than when I entered adulthood; Democracy has problems, but it is a better system of government than any other; I am generally satisfied with the functioning of Polish state*) with answers on a five-point scale (1 = *definitely not*, 5 = *definitely yes*).

(2) *National narcissism* measured by the 5-item Collective Narcissism Scale (*The Polish nation deserves special treatment; Not many people seem to fully understand the importance of the Polish nation; It really makes me angry when others criticize the Polish nation; If the Polish nation had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place; I will never be satisfied until the Polish nation gets the recognition it deserves*) with answers on a six-point scale (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009).

(3) *Populism* assessed using a 4-item index based on populist attitudes scale (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove 2014) with answers on a five-point scale: *The politicians need to follow the will of the people; The people, not politicians, should make the most important decisions; I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a professional politician; The political differences between elites and the people are greater than the differences among citizens*.

(4) *Conspiracy mentality* measured using a 3-item index based on the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (*A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest; Groups of scientists manipulate,*

fabricate or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public; The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics) with answers on a five-point scale (Brotherton, French & Pickering 2013) in the Polish version (Siwiak, Szpitalak & Polczyk 2019).

Additionally, to explore the potential impact of political preferences on the general conspiracy mindset, we compared the values of the examined variables among supporters of Poland's two major political parties – the Civic Coalition and Law and Justice.

Results

The study participants exhibited a high level of interpersonal trust and a strong commitment to democracy, while their trust in institutions remained relatively low. Furthermore, they scored above average in national narcissism and populism. To identify potential relationships between the variables, we start with computing Pearson correlation coefficients. Conspiracy mentality was positively correlated with national narcissism and populism. Additionally, national narcissism was positively associated with populism and, interestingly, with institutional trust, while showing a negative correlation with attitudes toward democracy.

Table 1: Means, SDs and correlations between variables using in the study

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interpersonal trust	4.57	1.37	—					
2. Institutional trust	3.19	.62	.143**	—				
3. Attitude towards democracy	4.50	.46	-.003	.005	—			
4. National collective narcissism	3.89	1.28	-.052	.228***	-.240***	—		
5. Populism	4.00	.71	.037	-.043	-.012	.318***	—	
6. Conspiracy mentality	3.89	.86	.033	.018	.043	.242***	.190***	—

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

Source: Authors

To diagnose the factors affecting conspiracy mentality, we conducted a multiple regression analysis. The overall model was significant [$R^2_{adj.} = .073$, $F(5, 372) = 6.896$, $p < .001$]. We found that the significant predictors of belief in conspiracy theories included national collective narcissism, populism and attitude towards democracy. As we assumed, national narcissism best explains conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .242$, $p < .001$). Moreover, populism also determined generic belief in conspiracy theories ($\beta = .112$, $p = .036$). Interestingly, in our study, attitude toward democracy was positively associated with conspiracy mentality ($\beta = .102$, $p = .048$). This means that individuals who rated democracy better were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Neither interpersonal trust nor institutional trust reached statistical significance in the model.

Table 2: Factors predicting conspiracy mentality among older adults in Poland (multiple linear regression)

Variable	B	95% CI	$\beta\beta$	t	p
(Constant)	1.898	[.802, 2.993]		3.406	< .001
Interpersonal trust	.030	[-.032, .092]	.047	.940	.348
Institutional trust	-.052	[-.194, .090]	-.038	-.724	.469
Attitude toward democracy	.190	[.002, .378]	.102	1.986	.048
National narcissism	.162	[.088, .237]	.242	4.288	< .001
Populism	.134	[.009, .260]	.112	2.103	.036

Source: Authors

Afterward, we decided to investigate the potential moderating effect of national collective narcissism and populism on the relation between interpersonal and institutional trust and conspiracy mentality. National narcissism implies not getting enough recognition from the world and some kind of exclusion from the groups of interest (at least in the Polish political context). Populism, on the other hand, assumes distance between elites and ordinary people. In conspiracy mentality, we usually have both of those beliefs. Thus, we thought that the relation between trust and conspiracy mentality could emerge under conditions of high collective narcissism and high populism. We performed a series of moderation analyses based on hierarchical regression analysis with an interaction variable. The independent variables were mean-centred by subtracting the arithmetic mean from the variable’s value. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Moderation analysis

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Interpersonal trust	.009	[-.054, .072]	.015	.286	.775
Populism	.246	[.125, .368]	.205	3.980	< .001
Interpersonal trust * Populism	.069	[-.016, .153]	.083	1.598	.111
Institutional trust	.034	[-.104, .171]	.025	.483	.629
Populism	.230	[.110, .350]	.191	3.774	< .001
Institutional trust * Populism	.039	[-.165, .243]	.019	.372	.710
Interpersonal trust	.026	[-.036, .088]	.042	.834	.405
National narcissism	.165	[.099, .231]	.245	4.892	< .001
Interpersonal trust * National narcissism	.023	[-.026, .072]	.046	.915	.361
Institutional trust	-.060	[-.200, .079]	-.044	-.850	.396
National narcissism	.162	[.094, .231]	.242	4.692	< .001
Institutional trust * National narcissism	-.085	[-.188, .017]	-.083	-1.638	.102

Source: Authors

We found that neither national collective narcissism nor populism had a moderating effect on the examined relationship. Including the moderator in the regression models increased the explained variance by no more than 0.7%. The moderation effects were nonsignificant ($p > .05$).

To explain a weak relationship between trust and conspiracy mentality, we also compared the mean values of the study variables across the electorates of the two main Polish parties – Law and Justice (PiS) and the Civic Coalition (KO). Interestingly, we found no significant difference in conspiracy mentality among the oldest citizens. This observation contradicts the other studies that suggest the Law and Justice voters are more likely to believe in the Smolensk conspiracy (Marmola & Olszanecka-Marmola 2024) and '89 Round Table conspiracy (Kofta & Soral 2019). Therefore, we can assume that while they endorse the specific conspiracy theories directed against their group, they do not differ in generic conspiracist ideation. Among the Law and Justice voters, the belief in specific conspiracy theories may be additionally reinforced by a higher level of national narcissism than in other groups.

We identified intriguing patterns regarding trust. While PiS and KO voters exhibited similar levels of interpersonal trust, they showed significant differences in the institutional trust. Interestingly, KO voters had a more favourable attitudes toward democracy, whereas PiS voters placed greater trust in institutions. This suggests that the former relied more on systemic mechanisms, while the latter’s trust stemmed from a positive view of the PiS government, which shaped Polish politics from 2015 to 2023.

Table 4: Partisan differences in trust, collective narcissism, populism and conspiracy mentality

Variable	Voters of Law and Justice (N = 107)		Voters of Civic Coalition (N = 138)		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Interpersonal trust	4.48	1.46	4.53	1.24	-.279	n.s.	-.037
Institutional trust	3.37	.53	3.16	.59	2.896	.004	.373
Attitude towards democracy	4.31	.42	4.71	.36	-7.760	< .001	-1.018
National narcissism	4.77	.89	3.30	1.26	10.648	< .001	1.317
Populism	4.12	.68	3.96	.71	1.800	n.s.	.232
Conspiracy mentality	3.95	.84	3.89	.89	.542	n.s.	.070

Source: Authors

Discussion

In our study, we sought to address a gap in the research by identifying the factors that shape the conspiracy mindset among citizens aged 65 and older. Recent studies indicate that the oldest Poles are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories compared to younger age groups (Czech & Ścigaj 2023), which makes this phenomenon particularly intriguing. In a rapidly changing world, one might expect older individuals to feel more disoriented and, therefore, more inclined to rely on stereotypes and simplifying cognitive strategies, such as conspiracy narratives. Gligorić et al. (2021) argue that conspiracy theories often function as a compensatory control mechanism in response to complex and ambiguous situations that generate uncertainty. At the same time, older adults are less likely to use the Internet and social media, which play a critical role in disseminating misinformation and reinforcing conspiracy beliefs (Stano 2020).

Our findings largely align with existing research on conspiracy theories. We confirm that the conspiratorial thinking of the oldest voters is driven by the same factors as in the general population. Consistent with previous studies, collective narcissism emerged as the strongest predictor of a general conspiracy mindset, with this effect further amplified by populism. Although we hypoth-

esised that trust – both interpersonal and institutional – would moderate the tendency to engage in conspiracies, our results did not support this assumption. It is worth emphasising, however, that while most studies generally showed negative relationships between conspiracy beliefs and trust, in several cases these associations were statistically insignificant (e.g. Vitriol & Marsh 2018; Kim & Kim 2021).

Several explanations may account for the absence of a link between trust and conspiracy beliefs in our study. First, this may reflect the characteristics of our sample, which exhibited relatively high interpersonal trust. This is also consistent with the results of other studies indicating that older adults are more likely than younger individuals to perceive others as trustworthy (Poulin & Haase 2015), potentially due to accumulated social experiences, enhanced emotional regulation and cultural shifts over time. Second, as we point out, patterns of institutional trust among older Polish adults appear to be inconsistent. Notably, we observed no correlation between trust in democracy and trust in institutions, which may stem from some voters associating institutions not with their enduring functions but with the actions of the politicians currently in power. These factors may explain the weaker relationship between trust and conspiracy mentality observed in our study. Further research is needed to determine whether this lack of association reflects a stable characteristic of older populations or a result of situational factors.

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