

## **Blind errors or strategies? Disentangling the role of cognitive biases in conspiracy beliefs**

### **Abstract:**

Over the past two decades, conspiracy beliefs (CBs) have garnered attention among academic researchers, resulting in the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field. Among the different drivers of conspiracism, scholars have focused on cognitive biases (i.e., systematic deviations from normative accounts of rationality) which are associated with higher levels of CBs (e.g., Dagnall et al., 2017). Much of the debate has revolved around the source of such errors, with two main accounts: a meta-cognitive explanation that postulates that believers may lack cognitive skills to reflect on their own reasoning errors, thus failing to update their beliefs (e.g., Swami et al., 2014); and a strategic account, according to which cognitive errors are actually employed more or less unconsciously as cognitive strategies to protect one's beliefs (e.g., Miller et al., 2016), in line with motivated reasoning (e.g., Bénabou & Tirole, 2016). These two theories heavily differ in terms of how much deliberation goes into the process of belief formation and updating. In fact, the meta-cognitive account implies that people automatically over-ride intuitive processes of thinking without any self-correcting feedback, while the strategic account implies that people excessively deliberate on selected pieces of information. In this research, we aim to disentangle the role of cognitive biases in CBs by employing different debiasing techniques borrowed from behavioral economics aimed at increasing deliberation (System 2 thinking), such as priming rationality (e.g., Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), awareness raising (e.g., Aczel et al., 2015) and counter-explanation (Anderson, 1982), to check their effects on CBs; if the meta-cognitive account holds, then by increasing deliberation we may expect lowered levels of CBs. This research may yield significant theoretical insights into the epistemology of CBs, but it may also provide useful guidance for policies to tackle this phenomenon without relying on straightforward debunking, which has been shown to suffer from backfire effects and to increase polarization of attitudes on sensitive topics (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

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