

# Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality



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A series of recent right-wing terrorist attacks occurred in Hanau, Halle, Christchurch, El Paso, Pittsburgh and Poway. Each perpetrator's manifesto referenced conspiracies such as the great replacement theory or white genocide. Additionally, interviews with and analyses of propaganda outputs by jihadists and neo-Nazis have further highlighted the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking within extremist groups. These incidents point to a potential functional role of conspiracy theories for violent extremism.

## Theory

Belief in extreme ideologies and conspiracy theories are thought to be rooted in a similar underlying psychology. More specifically, the endorsement of conspiracy theories within extremist groups feeds back into extremist ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes. Within extremist groups, conspiracy theories are used to increase threat perceptions and ingroup identification and thereby intensify extremist beliefs. Such processes potentially exacerbate ingroup/ outgroup distinctions, such as a providing an 'us vs them' rhetoric, which may lead to group polarization, group think and in the most extreme cases to the dehumanizing of the enemy. By providing a unifying narrative of a malicious enemy, conspiracy theories hold extremist groups together and push them in a more extreme and in some cases into a violent direction. In other words, conspiracy beliefs may catalyze and reinforce extremist attitudes and behavior. Correspondingly, conspiracy theories are often used by extremists to fuel their ideology and provide justification for the use of violence. An important component of extremist propaganda is to facilitate the shift towards violent acts. By acting as a 'rhetorical device' conspiracy theories aim to justify and legitimize the use of violence. That is, by framing extreme narratives which portray that the group one strongly identifies with is under attack, violence appears to be a necessary means to defend that group.

## Method

The analysis is based on a German nationally representative survey ( $N = 1502$ ). Data for the survey was collected via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). A representative sample was achieved through a systematic and controlled approach of

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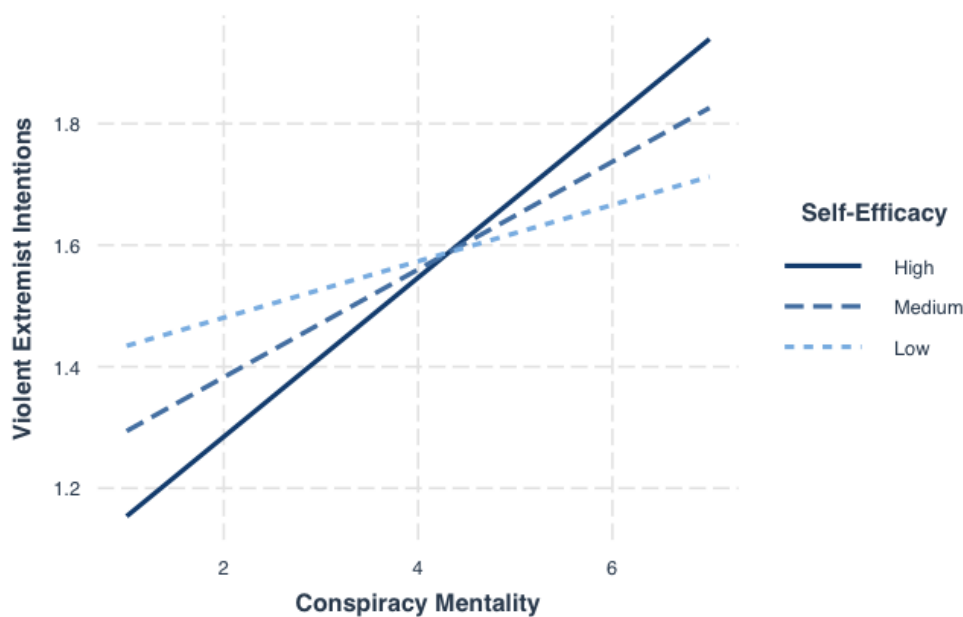
a multi-stratified probability sample (Random-Digit-Dialing) in the dual-frame mode (landline telephone- households and mobile phone users).

## Findings

Our results confirm that a stronger conspiracy mentality leads to increased violent extremist intentions. However, this relationship is contingent on several individual differences. The effects are much stronger for individuals exhibiting lower self-control, holding weaker law-relevant morality, and scoring higher in self-efficacy. Conversely, when stronger conspiracy beliefs are held in combination with high self-control and a strong law-relevant morality, violent extremist intentions are lower.

Our first analysis (Fig 1.) shows that when self-efficacy is high, conspiracy beliefs have strong positive effects on violent extremism. These effects are attenuated when self-efficacy is average and even lower when self-efficacy is low. Therefore, our results suggest that those individuals scoring highly in both conspiracy beliefs and self-efficacy beliefs may feel more capable of taking violent action in order to redress grievances.

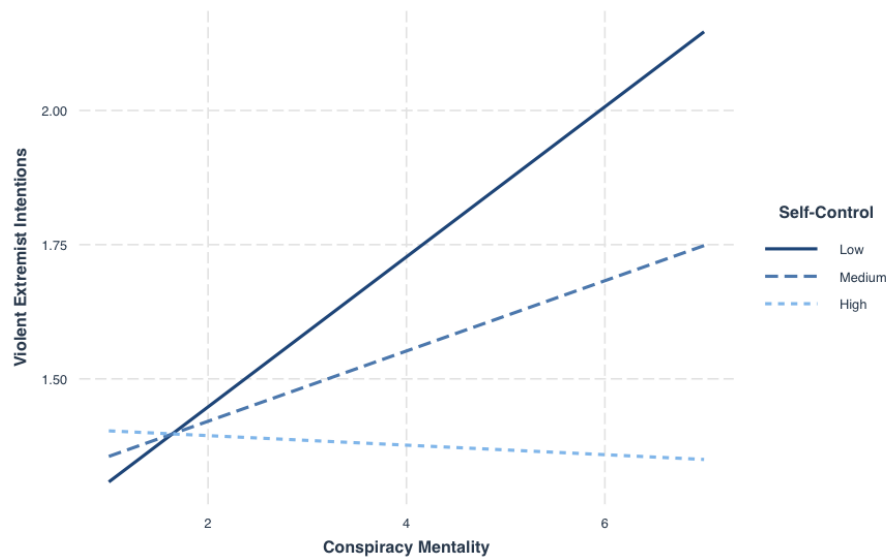
**Fig. 1.** Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-efficacy in predicting violent extremist intentions.



Our second analysis (Fig 2.) reveals that conspiracy beliefs affect violent extremist intentions particularly when individuals have low self-control. Conversely, when the ability to exercise self-control is well developed, having conspiracy beliefs is less influential upon violent extremist intentions. Hence, for individuals with a conspiracy mentality, low self-control presents a risk-factor, whereby a weaker capacity for self-control leads to higher extremist intentions. By contrast, when conspiracy theory belief is high, the co-occurrence of high self-control mitigates its impact upon violent

extremism. In this sense, self-control can be defined as an “interactive protective factor” or “buffering protective factor”.

**Fig. 2.** Interaction between conspiracy mentality and self-control in predicting violent extremist intentions.



The third analysis (Fig 3.) highlights that conspiracy beliefs affect extremist intentions when law-related morality is low. However, high levels of law-related morality may act as an interactive protective factor against the willingness to engage in violent extremist behavior, despite holding strong conspiracy beliefs.

**Fig. 3.** Interaction between conspiracy mentality and legal cynicism in predicting violent extremist intentions.

