



‘They will not control us’: Ingroup positivity and belief in intergroup conspiracies

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This research examined the role of different forms of positive regard for the ingroup in predicting beliefs in intergroup conspiracies. Collective narcissism reflects a belief in ingroup greatness contingent on others’ recognition. We hypothesized that collective narcissism should be especially likely to foster outgroup conspiracy beliefs. Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, on the other hand, should predict a weaker tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. In Study 1, the endorsement of conspiratorial explanations of outgroup actions was positively predicted by collective narcissism but negatively by non-narcissistic ingroup positivity. Study 2 showed that the opposite effects of collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity on conspiracy beliefs were mediated via differential perceptions of threat. Study 3 manipulated whether conspiracy theories implicated ingroup or outgroup members. Collective narcissism predicted belief in outgroup conspiracies but not in ingroup conspiracies, while non-narcissistic ingroup positivity predicted lower conspiracy beliefs, regardless of them being ascribed to the ingroup or the outgroup.

They will not force us

They will stop degrading us

They will not control us

We will be victorious

Muse ‘Uprising’

In mainstream superhero movies, the evil-doer, conspiring to destroy the world, is often a demonic, disturbed individual. In real life, people seem to more often imagine evil groups rather than evil individuals behind major conspiracies. What we hear is: ‘they are watching us’, ‘they are controlling us’, and ‘they are conspiring against us’. Indeed, one of the defining features of a conspiracy is a belief in secret and malevolent actions of *multiple*

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actors (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Kofta & Sędek, 2005; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Thus, ‘most conspiracy beliefs can be framed in terms of beliefs about how a powerful and evil *outgroup* meets in secret, designing a plot that is harmful to one’s *ingroup*’ (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014, pp. 238–239; emphasis added). To put it more broadly, conspiracy beliefs often presume an intergroup dimension.

Studies on conspiracy mentality have identified an array of personal characteristics that are linked to belief in conspiracy theories. A conviction that others are secretly conspiring against us can serve as an external explanation for one’s disadvantaged societal position or limited influence over his or her life. Indeed, research has demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are associated with feelings of relative deprivation (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013), lack of personal control and powerlessness (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), uncertainty (Whitson, Galinsky, & Kay, 2015), low self-esteem (Abalakina-Paap *et al.*, 1999; Swami *et al.*, 2011), and a lack of understanding of the sociopolitical reality (Abalakina-Paap *et al.*, 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami *et al.*, 2011). Overall, conspiracy theories are linked to individual perceptions of a difficult and confusing reality.

Given that conspiracy beliefs often assume actions of an outgroup, it is reasonable to suspect that such beliefs should be linked to not only individual, but also group-level factors that determine intergroup attitudes. One robust determinant of intergroup relations is positive ingroup identification (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Leach *et al.*, 2008). It shapes how the ingroup members act towards other members of their group as well as how they interact with members of other groups. Yet, little research has considered the relationship between positive ingroup identification and the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). The current research sought to fill in this gap by examining the role various forms of positive regard for the ingroup may play in predicting conspiracy beliefs.

We propose that just as conspiracy beliefs seem to be related to the needs to manage feelings of individual powerlessness and uncertainty, adopting a belief that others are conspiring against the ingroup might be related to the need to manage an undermined ingroup image. Preliminary evidence suggests that this indeed may be the case. Conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent among members of societally disadvantaged groups (Abalakina-Paap *et al.*, 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Goertzel, 1994). For example, in a study conducted by Crocker *et al.* (1999), Black Americans were more likely to believe in US government conspiracies against Blacks than White Americans. This is probably not surprising given that disadvantaged groups often have objective reasons to believe that powerful groups act against them. As history has shown, convictions about outgroup conspiracies sometimes turn out to be valid. However, conspiracy theories often exaggerate the evil intentions and effectiveness of the conspiring enemy (Kramer & Messick, 1998; Kramer & Schaffer, 2014). Exaggerated or not, among Blacks beliefs in the conspiracy theories were linked to higher racial self-esteem (although this effect was marginally significant; Crocker *et al.*, 1999). Simmons and Parsons (2005) further demonstrated that such beliefs were associated with feelings of group (rather than individual) deprivation. Beliefs about outgroup conspiracies have also been linked to victimhood-based social identity. For example, in a study conducted in Poland, Bilewicz *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that a conviction that in the past Poles have been victimized more than other nations was positively correlated with the endorsement

of the conspiracy stereotype of Jews: The belief that Jews are a deceptive enemy who secretly conspires to overpower other groups (Kofta & Sędek, 2005). These results suggest that conspiratorial explanations of intergroup interactions may thrive when the ingroup is seen as particularly disadvantaged or vulnerable (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014).

Such vulnerability of positive ingroup identity is captured by the concept of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009). Collective narcissism is a form of ingroup positivity that reflects a belief in the ingroup's greatness associated with a conviction that others do not appreciate the ingroup enough. Collective narcissism is associated with defensive intergroup hostility and sensitivity to threats to the ingroup's image. Research demonstrates that collective narcissism predicts hostile responses to criticism or lack of special recognition, which serve to punish the offending outgroup and restore the ingroup's image (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013). According to collective narcissistic logic, there is rarely anything wrong with the ingroup and any criticism aims to undermine and threaten ingroup's image which needs to be protected. In a similar vein, a belief that other groups are conspiring against the ingroup could serve as an external explanation for why the ingroup does not always succeed as it should, and does not always receive the outcomes or recognition it deserves. In fact, perceiving the ingroup as a victim of vicious external attacks serves to glorify the ingroup in its unprecedented martyrdom (Skarżyńska, Przybyła, & Wójcik, 2012). In such cases, the evil intentions of others are likely to be exaggerated to match and validate the greatness of the suffering ingroup.

As a form of positive ingroup regard contingent on external validation, collective narcissism is linked to increased sensitivity to signs of threats to the ingroup's image from outgroups. Even ambiguous intergroup situations are perceived as threatening and past intergroup wrongdoings are rarely forgiven or forgotten (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009). Rumination over past intergroup interactions and hypervigilance in processing information about outgroup intentions have important consequences for interpreting intergroup behaviour: They can foster perceptions of outgroup actions as specifically directed at ingroup members, and as malevolent in their intentions (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014). These processes can also overall foster convictions about outgroup conspiracies, and they can be exacerbated by perceptions of threat (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014).

In a similar vein, previous research has demonstrated that feelings of threat can foster beliefs in intergroup conspiracies. For example, in a study conducted by Kofta, Sedek, and Slawuta (2011), threatening the ingroup image by reminders of past crimes increased the endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of outgroups. Similarly, research conducted in Indonesia demonstrated that intergroup threat amplifies the positive effects of chronic (as well as temporarily salient) Muslim identification on conspiracy beliefs about Westerners instigating terrorism in Indonesia (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2013). Because collective narcissism is a robust predictor of intergroup threat sensitivity, there are reasons to expect that collective narcissism should predict belief in the conspiratorial intentions of outgroup members.

Initial evidence suggests that collective narcissism is linked to the conspiracy mentality. In a study conducted in Poland, national collective narcissism predicted endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of Jews, which further predicted general anti-Semitism (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). In the present research, we examined whether collective narcissism is a robust predictor of conspiracies beliefs outside of the specific context of the Polish–Jewish relations. We expect that collective narcissism

should be related to the endorsement of beliefs about the conspiratorial actions of outgroups. However, there are many conspiracy theories that focus on the actions of some representatives of the ingroup. For instance, country officials are often accused of hiding uncomfortable facts from the society. Notable examples of such conspiracy theories include beliefs about involvement of the US government in the 9/11 attack or the English Royal Family in the death of Princes Diana (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). Hence, in addition we hypothesized that although collective narcissism might overall motivate seeing conspiracies almost anywhere, the concern with ingroup image and a need to believe in its greatness would suppress the endorsement of conspiracies that might point to actions of the ingroup.

Nevertheless, we do not assume that positive regard for the ingroup always breeds intergroup paranoia and conspiracy beliefs. Just as not all individuals with high self-esteem are narcissists, not all high identifiers develop narcissistic attachment to the ingroup. In fact, it is possible to nurture a secure, non-narcissistic form of ingroup positivity (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity can be captured by covarying out the variance associated with collective narcissism from measures of ingroup positivity, which encompass satisfaction with ingroup membership, emotional attachment to other ingroup members, and importance of the ingroup to the self (such a combination of factors reflects a group-level self-investment [Leach *et al.*, 2008] and is considered the core of ingroup identification; Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013; Tajfel, 1978). Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity presumes a more objective (rather than grandiose) and secure (rather than defensive and dependent) perception of the ingroup. Research shows that such positive yet secure regard for the ingroup predicts greater tolerance of outgroups (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Because non-narcissistic ingroup positivity is not contingent on external recognition, it is less likely to predict preoccupation with intergroup threats or the necessity to validate the ingroup's greatness. We then expect non-narcissistic ingroup positivity to predict less preoccupation with conspiracy theories, regardless of these theories' attribution of conspiratorial actions to the ingroup or the outgroup.

Overview of the current research

The aim of this research was to examine the role of different types of ingroup positivity in inspiring conspiracy beliefs in the intergroup context. Specifically, we propose that the link between ingroup positivity and belief in intergroup conspiracies will depend on the type of positivity. We hypothesize that collective narcissism will predict outgroup (but not ingroup) conspiracy beliefs. Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, on the other hand, should predict a lower likelihood of endorsing conspiracy theories, regardless of these conspiracies being ascribed to ingroup or outgroup members. We validate our predictions in three studies, conducted in two different cultural and political contexts: Poland (Studies 1 and 2) and the United States (Study 3). In all studies, we measured collective narcissism with the Collective Narcissism Scale (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009). To examine the robustness of the expected effect, in each study we used different operationalizations of ingroup positivity: Collective self-esteem measured with Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992 scale used with respect to the ingroup (Study 1), ingroup identification measured with Cameron's, 2004 scale (Study 2), and the group-level self-investment component of social identification measured with Leach *et al.*'s, 2008 scale (Study 3). All of these scales capture ingroup positivity conceptualized as the emotional investment of the self in the group which combines feeling like a group member, satisfaction with the ingroup

membership, and solidarity and connection to other members of the ingroup (Cameron, 2004; Postmes *et al.*, 2013; Tajfel, 1978).

In Study 1, we examined whether the likelihood of endorsing conspiratorial explanations for the lack of ingroup recognition is positively predicted by collective narcissism but negatively by non-narcissistic ingroup positivity. In Study 2, we examined whether collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity have opposite effects on beliefs in outgroup conspiracies, even when accounting for generalized prejudice towards the outgroup. We also tested whether these effects are mediated by perceptions of threat. Finally, in Study 3 we again measured collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, and implemented an experimental design to compare their effects on beliefs about conspiracies implicating outgroup versus ingroup members.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we sought to establish the basic relationships between collective narcissism, ingroup positivity, and the endorsement of conspiratorial explanations for intergroup events. We used data from a larger study conducted in Poland in the context of commemorations of the fall of the Communist regime in the Eastern Europe. Poles tend to take pride in the role they played in the fall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe (Lewicka, 2014). The events that led to the system change began with the Solidarity movement, which became active in Poland in the 1980s and eventually led to the (partially) free elections of 4 June 1989. For many Poles, it is this Election Day that marks the fall of the Communist regime. Nevertheless, for many other people the later Fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 became the symbol of the end of the Communism.

We hypothesized that collective narcissism would predict perceiving the fact that Berlin Wall is a more renowned symbol of the fall of Communism than the Polish free elections (or the Round Table negotiations that led to them) as a result of conspiratorial actions of other nations. Moreover, in line with previous research (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013), we predicted that when collective narcissism is accounted for, we would be able to observe the effects of non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, which should predict more positive responses to the situation. In other words, we hypothesized that, when allowed to covary, collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity will have opposite effects on conspiracy beliefs: Collective narcissism would predict increased conspiracy beliefs, while non-narcissistic ingroup positivity would predict decreased conspiracy beliefs.

Method

Participants

Study 1 was conducted among 97 Polish students. We excluded data from one participant who reported her nationality as Ukrainian. The final sample included 96 participants of Polish nationality. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 1.99$).¹ There were 16 male and 80 female participants.

¹ Unless stated otherwise, across all studies the pattern of results of the regression analyses remains the same when we include demographics as covariates (age and gender in Studies 1 and 2; age, gender, education, and ethnicity in Study 3).

Procedure

Participants were asked to fill out measures of collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009) and ingroup positivity (operationalized as collective self-esteem; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) with respect to the national ingroup. All participants were exposed to a text discussing the alleged lack of acknowledgement for Polish achievements in the context of the fall of Communism (for full text, see Supporting information). Afterwards, participants were asked about various explanations of this situation, which included questions about a possible anti-Polish conspiracy. Participants were asked to rate how probable it is that lack of recognition of Poles is a result of an international conspiracy aimed to undermine Polish achievements.²

Measures

Collective narcissism was measured with the 9-item version of the national Collective Narcissism Scale (e.g., 'Not many people seem to fully understand the importance of the Polish nation'), with a scale from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 6 = *definitely agree* (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009), $\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.84$.

Collective self-esteem. Ingroup positivity was measured with the Collective Self-Esteem Scale administered in relation to the national ingroup (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Participants were asked to respond to 16 items capturing ingroup membership (e.g., 'I am a worthy member of the Polish nation'), private collective self-esteem (e.g., 'I often regret that I belong to the Polish nation', reverse-coded), public collective self-esteem (e.g., 'Overall, the Polish nation is considered good by others'), and importance of ingroup identity (e.g., 'Overall, being Polish has very little to do with how I feel about myself', reverse-coded) on a scale from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 7 = *definitely agree*, $\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.89$.

Beliefs in anti-Polish conspiracy was measured with four items: 'The state of affairs discussed in the text is a consequence of a conspiracy aimed at undermining our input in the fight for democracy', 'Western countries conspire against Polish people and intentionally falsify the history', 'Such perceptions of history are a result of purposeful actions that aim to support Germany's dominant position', and 'The state of affairs discussed in the text is a result of malignant anti-Polish propaganda'. Participants were asked to indicate their response on a scale from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 7 = *definitely agree*, $\alpha = .86$, $M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.47$.

Results

First, zero-order correlations between all variables were computed. Collective narcissism was significantly positively related to collective self-esteem, $r(94^3) = .61$, $p < .001$.

² This study also included a failed manipulation of deprivation of personal and collective control, originally for purposes of a different project. Because this manipulation did not significantly affect our variables of interest (all $F_s < 1$), we treat these data as a cross-sectional survey. Including the manipulation as a covariate does not affect the pattern of results. The study also included a measure of inclusion of ingroup in the self (Tropp & Wright, 2001), which was not reliably associated with conspiracy beliefs, $r(91) = .13$, $p = .23$. Finally, we measured (1) blaming Poles themselves for the situation presented in the text and (2) perceptions of the text as inaccurate (both unrelated to collective narcissism or collective self-esteem, $p_s > .10$), as well as (3) experiences of lack of recognition in the context of fighting Communism and (4) anti-German prejudice (in regression analyses both variables positively predicted by collective narcissism and negatively by collective self-esteem; all $p_s < .01$). When we include anti-German prejudice as a covariate, collective narcissism remains a positive predictor of conspiracies ($B = 0.57$, $SE = .20$, $p = .004$), while the effect for collective self-esteem becomes non-significant ($B = -0.12$, $SE = .17$, $p = .49$). Details of these analyses are available on request.

³ Throughout the manuscript, any unaccounted-for drops in degrees of freedom are due to missing data.

Conspiracy beliefs were significantly positively correlated with collective narcissism, $r(91) = .54$, $p < .001$, and marginally positively associated with collective self-esteem, $r(91) = .20$, $p = .061$. To account for the variance shared between collective narcissism and collective self-esteem, we examined both of these variables as predictors of belief in anti-Polish conspiracy. When both types of ingroup positivity were included in the analyses, the effect of collective self-esteem became significant and *negative*, $B = -0.41$, $SE = .19$, $p = .034$, while the effect of collective narcissism on beliefs in anti-Polish conspiracy remained significantly positive, $B = 1.19$, $SE = .19$, $p < .001$; $F(2, 90) = 21.43$, $R^2 = .32$.

We used bootstrapping in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the negative effect of collective self-esteem on belief in conspiracies was suppressed by collective narcissism. We requested 50,000 bootstrap samples. The analysis confirmed a significant suppression effect of 0.73, with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of 0.47 to 1.05. We ran a similar analysis to check whether the effect of collective narcissism was suppressed by collective self-esteem. Indeed, we found a significant suppression effect of -0.26 , with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of -0.46 to -0.10 , indicating that the significant effect of collective narcissism on conspiracy beliefs became stronger when collective self-esteem was accounted for.

Discussion

Study 1 confirmed that the belief in outgroup conspiracies is differentially predicted by collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity. Polish collective narcissism positively predicted a conviction that an international conspiracy is a reason why Poles did not receive proper acknowledgement for their contribution to the fight against Communism. Correlational analyses indicated that ingroup positivity (here operationalized as collective self-esteem; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was positively, albeit marginally, associated with belief in conspiracies. However, when the overlap between ingroup positivity and collective narcissism was accounted for, ingroup positivity without the defensive component captured by collective narcissism predicted *lower* likelihood of endorsing intergroup conspiracies, indicating a suppression effect. Overall, Study 1 provided initial confirmation for our hypotheses. One limitation of this study was that all participants were exposed to an excerpt that discussed the lack of recognition of ingroup achievements, which might have prompted the need to find an explanation for what happened (e.g., in endorsing conspiracy theories). We address this limitation in Study 2.

STUDY 2

Study 2 examined our hypotheses in a different intergroup context. We focused on the Smolensk catastrophe of 2010 that killed the Polish president, the first lady, and almost one hundred government officials. Because the presidential plane crashed in Russia, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Russian massacre of Polish officers in Katyn, beliefs in Russian involvement in the Smolensk crash spread quickly after the tragedy. Conspiracy theories might have been one way of dealing with the trauma associated with the catastrophe. They might have helped attribute causes of the tragedy to negative outgroup intentions and, thus, provide moral justification for finding an outgroup to blame (Kofta & Sędek, 2005). In the aftermath of the crash, we conducted a survey among Polish students, in which we investigated responses to the tragedy, including conspiracy theories about

Russian involvement in the crash, attitudes towards Russians, and perceptions of threat. The survey also measured narcissistic and non-narcissistic regard for the national group, as well as political orientation.

We hypothesized that belief in the Smolensk conspiracy would be positively predicted by collective narcissism and negatively by non-narcissistic ingroup positivity. In addition, we tested whether these relationships would be mediated via perceptions of threat. We hypothesized that collective narcissism would be associated with increased perceptions of threat after the crash, which would at least to some extent account for increased conspiracy beliefs. Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, on the other hand, should be less sensitive to threat, and in turn less likely to foster the endorsement of conspiracy theories.

In Study 2, we also aimed to rule out the possibility that the effects of collective narcissism on conspiracy beliefs can be explained by the fact that collective narcissism breeds general outgroup hostility (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Belief in outgroup conspiracies can be a manifestation of a more generalized prejudice towards the outgroup suspected for conspiring against the ingroup. Previous research demonstrated that conspiracy stereotypes of Jews are a robust predictor of discrimination of Jews (Bilewicz *et al.*, 2013; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Kofta & Sędek, 2005). Similarly and relevantly to the context of this study, prejudice towards Russians has been shown to be a predictor of belief in the Smolensk conspiracy (Grzesiak-Feldman & Haska, 2012). Therefore, in Study 2 we adjusted our analyses for outgroup prejudice by including this variable as a covariate. In this way, we were able to test whether collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity will predict belief in outgroup conspiracies specifically, and over and above more general negative attitudes towards that group.

We also sought to demonstrate that the effects of collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity on conspiracy beliefs would be observed even if we account for another variable typically associated with convictions about the Smolensk crash—political orientation. Research indicates that generalized belief in conspiracy theories is linked to political extremism (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). However, in the context of the Smolensk crash there seems to be a clearer link between endorsement of a conservative, right-wing (rather than extremist) ideology and conspiracy beliefs (Pankowski, 2012). This is likely due to the fact that the Polish president who died in the crash represented an ideologically conservative party (Law and Justice) and, hence, supporters of this party are those who most strongly believe in a conspiracy theory behind the crash (Pankowski, 2012). Therefore, we adjusted our analyses for political conservatism by including this variable as a covariate.

Method

Participants

Study 2 was conducted among 224 Polish students. We excluded data from one participant who reported her nationality as Ukrainian. The final sample included 223 Polish participants. The age of participants ranged from 17 to 27 years ($M = 21.82$, $SD = 1.77$). There were 68 male and 155 female participants.

Procedure

The study took place between 12 April and 27 April 2010 (i.e., in the weeks immediately following the plane crash), as part of a larger survey. Participants were asked to report their political orientation. Then, they were asked to fill out measures of collective

narcissism (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009) and ingroup positivity (operationalized as ingroup identification; Cameron, 2004) with respect to the national ingroup, as well as perceptions of threat, attitudes towards Russians, and beliefs in a Russian conspiracy behind the crash.⁴

Measures

Ingroup identification was measured by Cameron's (2004) scale. Participants were asked to respond to items capturing ties with other ingroup members (e.g., 'I have a lot in common with other Poles'), centrality of ingroup identification (e.g., 'I often think about the fact that I am Polish'), and ingroup affect (e.g., 'In general, I'm glad to be Polish') on a scale from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 5 = *definitely agree*, $\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.77$.

Collective narcissism was measured as in Study 1, $\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.90$.

Perceived threat was measured with two items capturing responses to the Smolensk crash: 'I feel that the fate of the Polish nation is threatened' and 'I feel threatened with what happened', on a scale from 1 = *definitely no* to 7 = *definitely yes*, $r(217) = .49$, $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.42$.

Belief in Russian conspiracy was measured with three items: 'The catastrophe was most likely a result of Russia's secret actions', 'What happened is a consequence of Russian conspiracy', and 'What happened was probably an accident' (reverse-coded). Participants were asked to indicate their response on a scale from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 7 = *definitely agree*, with higher scores indicating a greater belief in conspiracy, $\alpha = .81$, $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.19$.

Anti-Russian attitudes. Two indices of prejudice were used. First, participants were asked to indicate their feelings towards Russians using six semantic differentials: *Cold-warm*, *unfriendly-friendly*, *trustful-distrustful*, *positive-negative*, *respect-contempt*, and *admiration-disgust* (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), on a scale from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater negativity, $\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.06$. Second, participants were asked about their positive (e.g., cooperation, helping; reverse-coded) and negative (e.g., avoidance, fighting) intentions towards Russians (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). We asked them to indicate to what extent they would engage in a total of nine action tendencies on a scale from 1 = *definitely no* to 7 = *definitely yes*, $\alpha = .81$, $M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.91$. These two indices were significantly positively correlated, $r(176) = .58$, $p < .001$, so we *z*-scored both variables and averaged them to create a general index of anti-Russian attitudes.

Political conservatism. The survey included three items measuring ideological self-placement in terms of general, social, and economic issues (Cichočka & Jost, 2014). In the Polish context, the social and economic dimensions tend to be separate, with the former being more relevant for differentiation between left- and right-wing individuals (Golec, 2001; Kossowska & van Hiel, 2003). Therefore, in the analyses we considered only general self-placement item: 'On the scale below, please state your political views', to which participants responded on a scale from 1 = *definitely left-wing* to 7 = *definitely*

⁴ The survey also measured individual responses to the crash, own emotions, and perceptions of Russians' emotions and actions, which were not analysed in the current research. Relevantly, it included measures of ingroup glorification, positively correlated with conspiracy beliefs, $r(182) = .22$, $p = .003$, and attachment, not significantly correlated with conspiracy beliefs, $r(182) = .02$, $p = .76$ (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Unfortunately, due to multicollinearity (indices of tolerance ≤ 0.37), we were not able to conduct analyses accounting for the potential overlap between collective narcissism and glorification or ingroup identification and attachment. As in Study 1, we measured inclusion of ingroup in the self, which was not reliably associated with conspiracy beliefs, $r(182) = .002$; $p = .97$.

right-wing; and self-placement in terms of social issues: 'On the scale below, please state your political views with respect to social issues', to which participants responded on a scale from 1 = *definitely liberal* to 7 = *definitely conservative* as an index of political conservatism, $r(221) = .49, p < .001, M = 3.74, SD = 1.30$.

Results

First, correlations between all variables were computed (Table 1). Collective narcissism was significantly positively related to ingroup identification, threat, conspiracy beliefs, and negativity against Russians. Ingroup identification, on the other hand, was not reliably associated with conspiracy beliefs or anti-Russians attitudes. Conspiracy beliefs were significantly positively correlated with perceived threat, political conservatism, and anti-Russians attitudes.

To further examine the relationship between the two types of ingroup positivity and conspiracy beliefs, we ran a hierarchical regression analysis with conspiracy beliefs as the outcome variable, and two covariates: Political orientation and prejudice. Model 1 included as predictors ingroup identification and collective narcissism, while Model 2 added the two covariates (Table 2).

When both types of ingroup positivity were included in Model 1, the effect of collective narcissism on beliefs in Russian conspiracy remained significantly positive, $B = 0.45, SE = .11, p < .001$, while the negative effect of non-narcissistic ingroup

Table 1. Correlations between collective narcissism, ingroup identification, perceived threat, belief in conspiracies, political conservatism, and anti-russian attitudes (Study 2)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Collective narcissism	—				
2. Ingroup identification	.57***	—			
3. Perceived threat	.40***	.15*	—		
4. Beliefs in Russian conspiracy	.24**	-.01	.41***	—	
5. Anti-Russian attitudes	.20**	-.07	.21**	.36***	—
6. Political conservatism	.43***	.44***	.37***	.36***	.29***

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Collective narcissism, ingroup identification, political orientation, and anti-russian attitudes as predictors of conspiracy beliefs (Study 2)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Ingroup identification	-0.35*	.14	-0.41**	.13
Collective narcissism	0.45***	.11	0.24*	.11
Political conservatism	—	—	0.31***	.07
Anti-Russian attitudes	—	—	0.27**	.10
F	8.11***		14.48***	
R ²	.08		.25	
ΔR ²	—		.17***	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

identification became significant, $B = -0.35, SE = .14, p = .01$ (compared to zero-order correlations). We used bootstrapping in PROCESS to test whether ingroup identification and collective narcissism were mutual suppressors in predicting belief in conspiracies. We requested 50,000 bootstrap samples in PROCESS. The analysis confirmed that indeed collective narcissism was suppressing the effects of ingroup identification, point estimate = 0.32, with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of 0.16 to 0.51. We also found that ingroup identification was suppressing the effects of collective narcissism, point estimate = -0.16 , with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of -0.31 to -0.03 , indicating that the significant effect of collective narcissism on conspiracy beliefs became stronger when ingroup identification was accounted for.

In Model 2, the positive effect of collective narcissism and the negative effect of ingroup identification remained significant when we included general negativity towards Russians as well as political conservatism as covariates. The suppression effects remained significant when these variables were included as covariates of the indirect effect model.

Finally, we considered perceived threat as a mediator of the effects of narcissistic and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity on conspiracy beliefs. We tested a path model (Figure 1) using *Mplus 7* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012).⁵ We used bootstrapping with 50,000 resamples. The analyses included political conservatism and anti-Russian prejudice as covariates. As can be discerned from Figure 1, collective narcissism was positively associated with ingroup identification, $B = 0.39, SE = .05, p < .001$. Collective narcissism positively predicted greater intergroup threat, $B = 0.58, SE = .12, p < .001$, but no longer significantly predicted belief in conspiracies, $B = 0.13, SE = .12, p = .30$. In line with our predictions, perception of threat mediated between collective narcissism and belief in Russian conspiracy, the indirect effect = 0.13, with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of 0.05 to 0.24. This effect remains significant without adjusting for prejudice and political orientation.

In the model, when adjusting for collective narcissism, non-narcissistic ingroup identification was a negative and significant predictor of intergroup threat, $B = -0.32$,

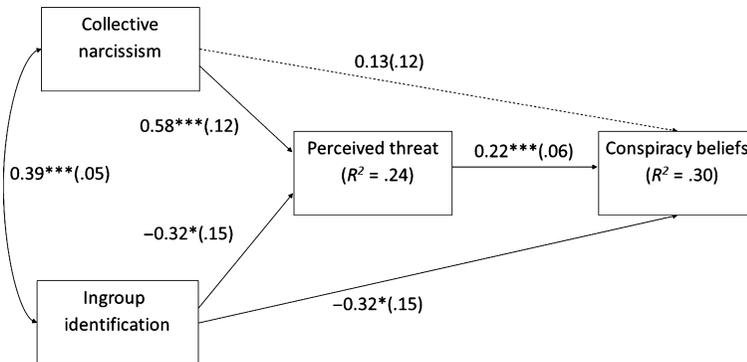


Figure 1. Effects of collective narcissism and ingroup identification on conspiracy beliefs via perceptions of threat (Study 2). Note. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dotted line indicates a non-significant path. Paths for covariates (political conservatism and prejudice) are not presented in the model for simplicity.

⁵ All independent variables were included in the model command. *Mplus* defaults were used for the estimator and treatment of missing data.

$SE = .15$, $p = .03$, and of belief in conspiracies, $B = -0.32$, $SE = .15$, $p = .03$. Perceptions of threat mediated between non-narcissistic ingroup identification and belief in Russian conspiracy, the indirect effect = -0.07 , 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval: -0.18 to -0.01 . However, this effect should be treated with caution as it was no longer significant when sex and age were included as covariates or when we did not include any covariates (i.e., without demographics, political orientation, and prejudice). In both cases, this was due to the fact that the effect of non-narcissistic ingroup identification on threat became non-significant.

Discussion

While the Smolensk catastrophe was not associated with a direct threat from an outgroup, in Study 2 collective narcissism was associated with increased feelings of threat after the crash as well as with beliefs in Russian conspiracy behind this tragedy. Moreover, feelings of threat mediated between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs. These effects remained significant after adjusting for two important variables related to belief in conspiracies: Political orientation and outgroup prejudice. Therefore, the effects of collective narcissism on belief in conspiratorial actions of an outgroup cannot be attributed to mere prejudice towards that group or a specific political stance.

As in Study 1, ingroup positivity (here operationalized as ingroup identification; Cameron, 2004) alone was not significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs. However, when we accounted for the defensive component of ingroup positivity by adjusting for collective narcissism in the analysis, what became a non-narcissistic ingroup positivity was associated with a decreased likelihood to believe in conspiracies and this effect was driven by overall decreased perceptions of threat (although the latter effect was only significant when generalized prejudice and conservatism were adjusted for).

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 corroborated our basic prediction about the opposite effects of collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity on endorsing beliefs about outgroup conspiracies behind concrete events. This is in line with previous studies on conspiracy beliefs, which frequently focus on specific conspiracies, such as those concerning the death of Princess Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2008) or 9/11 (Swami *et al.*, 2010; Wood & Douglas, 2013). While specific events likely trigger the emergence of conspiracy theories about outgroup activities, it is also possible to imagine that collective narcissism would be linked to a more general tendency to believe in conspiratorial actions of outgroups, almost regardless of what those actions entail. Indeed, previous research has been successful in measuring such generic conspiracist beliefs (Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013). Therefore, in Study 3 we sought to examine whether the effects of collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity would replicate if we considered conspiracy mentality more broadly.

Nevertheless, we assumed that the effects of the two types of ingroup positivity on general conspiracies would depend on whether these conspiracy beliefs concerned the actions of outgroups versus those of ingroup members. We hypothesized that collective narcissism would predict beliefs in conspiratorial actions of outgroup members; however, due to their high regard for the ingroup, they should be less likely to believe in conspiratorial actions of their ingroup. Non-narcissistic ingroup positivity, on the other hand, should be

associated with lesser need to believe in conspiracies overall; thus, it should be a negative predictor of any type of conspiracies, regardless of them involving the ingroup or the outgroup. To examine these assumptions, in Study 3 we measured narcissistic and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity with respect to the national group as well as the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs, and we manipulated whether these conspiracies implied malevolent actions of own versus foreign governments.

Method

Participants

Study 3 was conducted among 433 MTurk workers. We excluded data from participants who failed to report nationality or reported their national identity as other than American or mixed American ($n = 92$). The final sample consisted of 341 participants, 152 women and 189 men, aged 18–73 ($M = 31.92$, $SD = 10.57$).

Procedure

First, we asked participants to fill out measures of national collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013) and ingroup positivity (operationalized as group-level self-investment; Leach *et al.*, 2008). Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: Thinking about ingroup versus outgroup conspiracies. In the ingroup condition ($n = 168$), they answered questions about belief in US government's conspiracies. In the outgroup condition ($n = 173$), they answered the same questions about belief in foreign governments' conspiracies.⁶

Measures

Collective narcissism was measured with the shorter, 5-item version of the Collective Narcissism Scale used in previous studies (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agree with the items referring to American identity using a scale from 1 = *I strongly disagree* to 6 = *I strongly agree*, $\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.13$.

Group-level self-investment. We used the Leach *et al.*' (2008) social identification scale. Participants were asked to respond the items referring to American identity on a scale ranging from 1 = *I strongly disagree* to 7 = *I strongly agree*. We operationalized ingroup positivity as the group-level self-investment dimension of social identification, which encompasses satisfaction with the ingroup (e.g., 'I am glad to be American'), solidarity with ingroup members (e.g., 'I feel solidarity with Americans'), and centrality of the ingroup to the self (e.g., 'Being American is an important part of how I see myself'), 10 items, $\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.32$. This dimension of ingroup positivity corresponds to the components of ingroup identification also measured by Cameron's (2004) scale, which capture the emotional investment of the self in the group (Postmes *et al.*, 2013).

The scale also includes a group-level self-definition dimension, 4 items, $\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.33$), which reflects defining oneself through group membership (e.g., 'I

⁶ After the manipulation, we also measured system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003), perceptions of government representativeness and similarity to typical Americans, and feelings of control.

have a lot in common with the average American person') and through similarities with other group members (e.g., 'I am similar to the average American person'). This dimension reflects the process of social categorization which allows for defining the self as part of the group (Turner, 1982).

Conspiracy beliefs were measured with 11 items based on the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton *et al.*, 2013). Participants first read instructions indicating that they will rate statements in relation to the American government (ingroup condition) or foreign governments (outgroup condition) on a scale from 1 = *definitely not true* to 5 = *definitely true*. Most statements additionally manipulated the subject of the conspiracy, for example 'Foreign governments [the American government] deliberately conceal a lot of important information from the world public out of self-interest', $\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.77$.

Results

Collective narcissism and group-level self-investment were significantly positively correlated, $r(339) = .60$, $p < .001$. Conspiracy beliefs were positively although not significantly correlated with collective narcissism, $r(339) = .05$, $p = .35$, and marginally significantly and negatively correlated with group-level self-investment, $r(339) = -.10$, $p = .06$.

We conducted a regression analysis, in which we examined the effects of collective narcissism and group-level self-investment on conspiracy beliefs, accounting for the overlap between these two forms of ingroup positivity. We also investigated whether their effects depend on the subject of conspiracy theories (ingroup versus outgroup). All continuous variables were mean-centred prior to the analyses. Experimental conditions were coded as $-1 = \text{ingroup}$ and $1 = \text{outgroup}$ conspiracy beliefs.

In the first step, we tested the main effects of the experimental condition, collective narcissism, and group-level self-investment on conspiracy beliefs. The model was significant, $F(3, 337) = 4.09$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .04$. We found no significant effect of experimental condition on conspiracy beliefs, $B = 0.05$, $SE = .04$, $p = .20$. However, the results revealed a significant negative effect of group-level self-investment, $B = -0.12$, $SE = .04$, $p = .002$, and a significant positive effect of collective narcissism, $B = 0.12$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$, on conspiracy beliefs.

In the second step, we introduced two-way interactions of the experimental condition with (1) group-level self-investment and (2) collective narcissism (Table 3). The interaction of group-level self-investment with experimental condition was not significant, $B = -0.02$, $SE = .04$, $p = .69$,⁷ while the effect of collective narcissism was qualified by the significant interaction of collective narcissism with the experimental condition (Figure 2), $B = 0.11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$; for the whole model, $F(5, 335) = 4.07$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$. Simple slopes analysis indicated that collective narcissism significantly predicted conspiracy beliefs in the outgroup conspiracies condition, $B = 0.22$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, but not in the ingroup conspiracies condition, $B = -0.01$, $SE = .07$, $p = .91$.⁸

⁷ When we used the whole social identification scale ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.19$), results remain similar to those obtained for group-level self-investment only.

⁸ We considered the possibility that this effect might further depend on whether the government is perceived as legitimate or representative of the ingroup. None of these variables moderated the effects. Results of these analyses are presented in Supporting information.

Table 3. Collective narcissism and group-level self-investment as predictors of ingroup and outgroup conspiracy beliefs (Study 3)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Condition (−1 = <i>ingroup</i> , 1 = <i>outgroup</i>)	0.05	.04	0.05	.04
Collective narcissism	0.12**	.05	0.11**	.05
Group-level self-investment	−0.12**	.04	−0.11**	.04
Condition × Collective narcissism			0.11*	.05
Condition × Group-level self-investment			−0.02	.04
F	4.09**		4.07**	
R ²	.04		.06	
ΔR ²	—		.02*	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

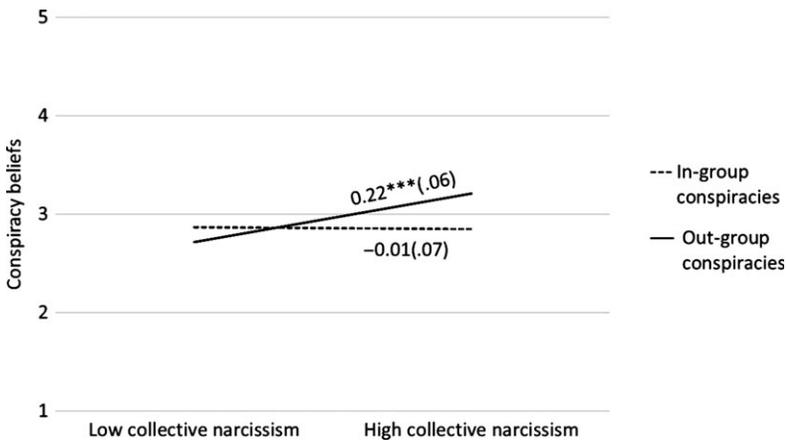


Figure 2. Interaction effect of experimental condition and collective narcissism on conspiracy beliefs (Study 3). Note. *** $p < .001$. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

When we used group-level self-definition in the analyses instead of group-level self-investment, neither the main effect of self-definition, $B = -0.02$, $SE = .04$, $p = .51$, nor its interaction with the experimental condition was statistically significant, $B = -0.02$, $SE = .04$, $p = .66$ (although the interaction of collective narcissism with the experimental condition remained significant, $B = 0.13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .01$).

As in Studies 1 and 2, we again tested whether group-level self-investment and collective narcissism were mutual suppressors in predicting conspiracy beliefs (including the experimental condition as a covariate). We requested 50,000 bootstrap samples in PROCESS. The analysis confirmed a significant effect of collective narcissism suppressing the effects of group-level self-investment, point estimate = 0.06, with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of 0.01 to 0.11. We also tested whether the effect of collective narcissism on belief in conspiracies was suppressed by group-level self-investment. The analysis confirmed a significant suppression effect of -0.09 , with the 95% bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval of -0.15 to -0.03 .

Discussion

Study 3 corroborated the results of Studies 1 and 2 by showing that collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity have opposite relationships with the endorsement of conspiracy theories. The effect of collective narcissism was, however, dependent on whether these theories concerned the ingroup or the outgroup. Collective narcissism was positively associated with belief in outgroup conspiracies but negatively, yet not significantly, with belief in ingroup conspiracies. It then seems that collective narcissism is related to seeing malevolent intentions mostly outside the own-group. On the other hand, ingroup positivity, here operationalized as group-level self-investment (Leach *et al.*, 2008), was marginally significantly negatively related to belief in both ingroup and outgroup conspiracies, and this effect became stronger and significant when the variance shared between ingroup positivity and collective narcissism was partialled out (as indicated by the significant suppression effect). Importantly, Study 3 examined the effects on general conspiracy beliefs rather than conspiratorial explanations for certain events (such as the lack of recognition). This suggests that collective narcissism and non-narcissistic ingroup positivity do not only predict endorsement of conspiracies as explanations of specific events, but they are also linked to a more general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In a series of three studies, conducted in two different social and political contexts, we have examined how the various ways people form attachment to their social groups predict beliefs in conspiracy theories about actions of members of their own and other groups. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that collective narcissism, a defensive form of ingroup positivity (Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2009; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013), predicts the endorsement of conspiratorial explanations for events that are potentially threatening to the ingroup. Study 2 further indicated that collective narcissism is linked to beliefs in conspiracy theories due to increased sensitivity to threat. Study 3 showed that collective narcissism predicts endorsement of conspiracy theories more broadly, but only if they implicate members of other groups (such as foreign governments).

Collective narcissism was, however, unrelated to the endorsement of conspiracies that assume involvement of members of their ingroup (such as members of their own government). Although collective narcissists might be generally prone to suspicion and perceptions of conspiracies, because they are concerned with protecting a positive image of the ingroup, they might be motivated to reject views that might denigrate the ingroup in some way (e.g., by accusing the own government of conspiring against its citizens). Thus, in the case of ingroup conspiracy two tendencies related to collective narcissism are likely to drive the relationship in opposite directions: Collective narcissism should predict the need to maintain positive ingroup image, which could cancel the more general motivation to endorse group-based conspiracy theories. This could result in an overall weak and non-significant effect. Nevertheless, it is at least plausible that collective narcissism emerges as a *negative* predictor of beliefs in own-group conspiracies in certain situations, for example when the ingroup image is at stake and the motivation to protect it becomes especially strong.

Notwithstanding these possibilities, Study 3 demonstrated differences in psychological factors associated with different types of conspiracies. Collective narcissism predicted endorsement of conspiracy theories only when they were attributed to actions of foreign governments. This result challenges the assumption that all types of conspiracy theories

form a monological belief system (Goertzel, 1994) that should be predicted by similar psychological predispositions (see Sutton & Douglas, 2014, for a discussion). Rather, it seems that certain conspiracy theories (in this case, those related to actions of outgroup members) are uniquely predicted by a specific psychological construct (in this case, collective narcissism).

Our results also show that strong positive regard for the ingroup does not always have to assume susceptibility for believing in conspiracies. All three studies included measures of positive regard for the national ingroup: Operationalized in Study 1 as collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), in Study 2 as ingroup identification (Cameron, 2004), and in Study 3 as group-level self-investment (Leach *et al.*, 2008), all of which capture the investment of the self in the group (Postmes *et al.*, 2013; Tajfel, 1978). When the overlap between collective narcissism and ingroup positivity was not accounted for, the relationships between ingroup positivity and conspiracy beliefs were not consistent: Positive and marginally significant in Study 1, negative and non-significant in Study 2, and negative and marginally significant in Study 3.

However, when we partialled out collective narcissism, in all studies ingroup positivity without the narcissistic component emerged consistently as a negative predictor of conspiracy beliefs. This effect emerged consistently regardless of how ingroup positivity was operationalized, and it is likely that it would generalize also to other measures of ingroup positivity (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013). Thus, accounting for the overlap between collective narcissism and ingroup positivity allows us to uncover that non-narcissistic ingroup positivity assures more benevolent perceptions of outgroups' actions and intentions. In Studies 1 and 2, non-narcissistic ingroup positivity was linked to lower endorsement of conspiratorial explanations for important events. In Study 2, this effect was driven by lower feelings of threat. Similarly, in Study 3 non-narcissistic ingroup positivity was associated with decreased belief in generalized conspiracy theories, regardless of these theories assuming involvement of own versus other governments. Presumably, non-narcissistic ingroup positivity predicts more open and trusting attitudes towards members of other groups (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013), which might lower the likelihood of developing suspicions about their actions.

Overall, these findings suggest that belief in intergroup conspiracies is not necessarily linked to identifying with the ingroup that might be a target of secret actions of others. Rather, current research indicates that the conspiratorial mindset is linked only to certain ways in which ingroup positivity can be construed. Conspiracy beliefs are more likely to arise when positive ingroup identity is in some way threatened or undermined. Previous research by Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2013, 2014) showed that ingroup identification predicts conspiracy beliefs in the context of situational threats. We demonstrate that conspiracy beliefs are robustly predicted by chronically threatened ingroup positivity in the form of collective narcissism. One way of dealing with threatened ingroup identity might be to blame potentially dishonest enemies for any misfortunes of the ingroup. In this way, feelings of threat can be attributed to actions of outgroups, which seek to undermine the ingroup. If such actions are not immediately identifiable, they can always be presumed to operate in secrecy as part of a larger conspiracy.

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Supporting Information

The following supporting information may be found in the online edition of the article:

Appendix S1. Supporting information for Studies 1 and 3.