

## Generalized Dispositional Distrust as the Common Core of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality

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*Populism and beliefs in conspiracy theories fuel societal division as both rely on a Manichean us-versus-them, good-versus-evil narrative. However, whether both constructs have the same dispositional roots is essentially unknown. Across three studies conducted in two different countries and using diverse samples (total N = 1,888), we show that populism and conspiracy mentality have a strong common core as evidenced using bifactor modeling. This common core was uniquely linked to (aversive) personality, namely the Dark Factor of Personality (D), beyond basic personality traits from the HEXACO Model of Personality Structure. The association between D and the common core, in turn, was fully accounted for by distrust-related beliefs as captured in cynicism, dangerous and competitive social worldviews, sensitivity to befallen injustice, and (low) trust propensity. Taken together, the results show that populism and conspiracy mentality have a shared psychological basis that is well described as a sociopolitically flavored manifestation of generalized dispositional distrust. The findings thus underscore the value of generalized trust for societal functioning and suggest that increasing trust may simultaneously combat both populism and beliefs in conspiracy theories.*

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**KEY WORDS:** conspiracy beliefs, populist attitudes, personality, dispositional distrust, HEXACO

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In several places across the globe, societal division is on the rise and worldviews that center around an us-versus-them mentality are gaining traction. Prominently, this development is apparent in the widespread approval of both populism and conspiracy theories (Van den Bos, 2018). Whereas populism denotes “a set of ideas that constructs society as divided between ‘us’ the pure people, and ‘them’ the corrupt and self-serving elites” (Obradović et al., 2020, p. 125), beliefs in conspiracy theories describe suspicions that a group of (often powerful) actors join together in secret to achieve malevolent goals (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2018). Besides featuring a Manichean good-versus-evil narrative, both constructs are thus also characterized by distrust in others, particularly elites. Moreover, both constructs can be conceptualized in terms of *generalized* political attitudes, as we do here. Thus, in what follows, we will refer to *conspiracy mentality* to capture the general disposition to endorse conspiracy theories (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Although the conceptual link between populism and conspiracy mentality has been noted before (e.g., Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; van Prooijen, 2018), little is known about the exact nature of the common psychological roots these constructs share—a circumstance that has been voiced repeatedly (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Erisen et al., 2021; Jessen, 2019). Indeed, understanding the potentially shared basis of populism and conspiracy mentality is crucial not only from a theoretical point of view but also because it has important real-life implications. Populists often propagate conspiracy theories (Hameleers, 2021), and beliefs in these theories frequently go hand-in-hand with problematic health behaviors (Douglas & Sutton, 2018), rejection of science (Lewandowsky et al., 2013), increased crime (Jolley et al., 2019), and less environmental protection (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn, COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs (e.g., that the virus was designed as a bioweapon by the Chinese) have been shown to negatively affect engagement in health-protective behaviors (e.g., Allington et al., 2021; Stecula & Pickup, 2021)—and populist leaders have further undermined the effective response to the pandemic, which ultimately increased mortality rates (Bayerlein et al., 2021). That said, it should be noted that conspiracy theories, per se, are not necessarily wrong but sometimes turn out to be true (e.g., Watergate). Nonetheless, the vast majority of conspiracy theories that have been proposed over the years have, in fact, been false (Pipes, 1997).

The idea that populism and conspiracy mentality share a common psychological basis that is linked to general convictions about the world suggests that both constructs may, to some extent, be rooted in personality, that is, people's stable patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For conspiracy mentality, several studies indeed revealed associations with personality traits; however, findings remain mixed and scattered overall. Most consistent evidence is available for socially aversive traits, such as the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy; e.g., Bowes et al., 2021; Kay, 2021; Stasielowicz, 2022), and for dispositional distrust (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Brotherton et al., 2013), all of which are positively linked to conspiracy mentality. However, Big Five Agreeableness—which ought to capture both low levels of socially aversive tendencies and high levels of trust—was unrelated to conspiracy mentality in a recent meta-analysis across 13 studies (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; for similar results, see Stasielowicz, 2022). Then again, HEXACO Honesty-Humility—the “tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others” (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156), which has considerable overlap with Big Five Agreeableness (Thielmann et al., 2021)—has been shown to negatively relate to conspiracy mentality (Bowes et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2019). A recent attempt to clarify the dispositional basis of conspiracy mentality thus concluded that “the picture ... is best regarded as a fuzzy sketch, ideally one to be fleshed out in future research” (Bowes et al., 2021, p. 434).

For populism, in turn, research has largely turned a blind eye on its link with personality (Pruysers, 2021), and the scarce evidence that is available is once again mixed. Whereas some studies provided evidence for a negative relation between voting of populist parties and Big Five Agreeableness (Bakker et al., 2020), studies linking populist attitudes and basic personality traits (including Big Five Agreeableness and HEXACO Honesty-Humility) found weak relations at best (Fatke, 2019; Pruyssers, 2021). Overall, “we know surprisingly little about individuals who hold populist views” (Fatke, 2019, p. 138)—let alone the dispositional roots of the shared basis of populism and conspiracy mentality.

Crucially, if at all, previous research studied the personality correlates of populism and conspiracy mentality in isolation. However, if the goal is to understand whether the two constructs

have *joint* psychological roots—including a shared dispositional basis—it is necessary to specifically model what populism and conspiracy mentality have in common and study the trait basis of this common core. The current work is the first to address this issue. Specifically, we propose and critically test the idea that populism and conspiracy mentality have a common core that can be defined as a *sociopolitically flavored manifestation of generalized dispositional distrust*. By generalized dispositional distrust we mean the relatively enduring belief that others are untrustworthy, exploitative, and self-serving to one's own disadvantage. Thus, we do not refer to distrust in specific others or institutions (such as political actors or parties), but rather to a generalized belief system held by an individual. By sociopolitically flavored we mean that this general tendency to distrust manifests itself in a particular way, namely, in the conviction that one is part of a (majority) group that is being deprived of political influence, kept in the dark, and/or exploited by some (minority) group such as elites, corrupt politicians/the government, or nefarious secret societies. Thus, we refer to an expression of generalized dispositional distrust that subsumes both distrust in others and distrust in society and the world more generally and is therefore much broader than an expression of generalized (dis)trust at a purely interpersonal level (Van Lange, 2015).

According to this conceptualization, the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality should be rooted in personality traits that are accompanied by broad distrust-related beliefs. A prime candidate in this regard is the so-called Dark Factor of Personality (D), which represents the common core of socially and ethically aversive personality traits and which is explicitly defined to be “accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications” (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 656)—among which distrust-related beliefs are highly prominent (Hilbig et al., 2022; Horsten et al., 2021; Moshagen, Zettler, Horsten, & Hilbig, 2020). Thus, aversive personality (D) can be linked to the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality due to distrust-related beliefs in particular. Moreover, the strong conceptual link between D and distrust-related beliefs sets D apart from basic personality traits such as Big Five Agreeableness or HEXACO Honesty-Humility (Horsten et al., 2021; Moshagen, Zettler, Horsten, & Hilbig, 2020), both of which have yielded only inconsistent or weak relations with populism and/or conspiracy mentality. D should thus predict the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality incrementally beyond the basic personality space. By implication, D may be the missing link in explaining the inconclusive evidence relating basic personality traits to populism and conspiracy mentality, while at the same time providing a parsimonious account of the common dispositional basis of populism and conspiracy mentality—a proposition we test herein.

Taken together, the present work includes three studies investigating (1) whether populism and conspiracy mentality indeed have a common core and, if so, how it can be conceptualized theoretically and represented statistically and (2) whether this common core can be accounted for by generalized dispositional distrust in others and in society and corresponding personality traits, most prominently D.

### Methodological Preliminaries

Given that all studies involved identical measurement of populism and conspiracy mentality as well as the same modeling approach, we will summarize these methodological preliminaries in what follows before turning to the specifics of each study. Materials, data, analysis scripts, and supplementary results for all studies are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://osf.io/46twk/>). All studies were conducted in adherence to common ethical standards and legal requirements. None of the studies was formally preregistered.

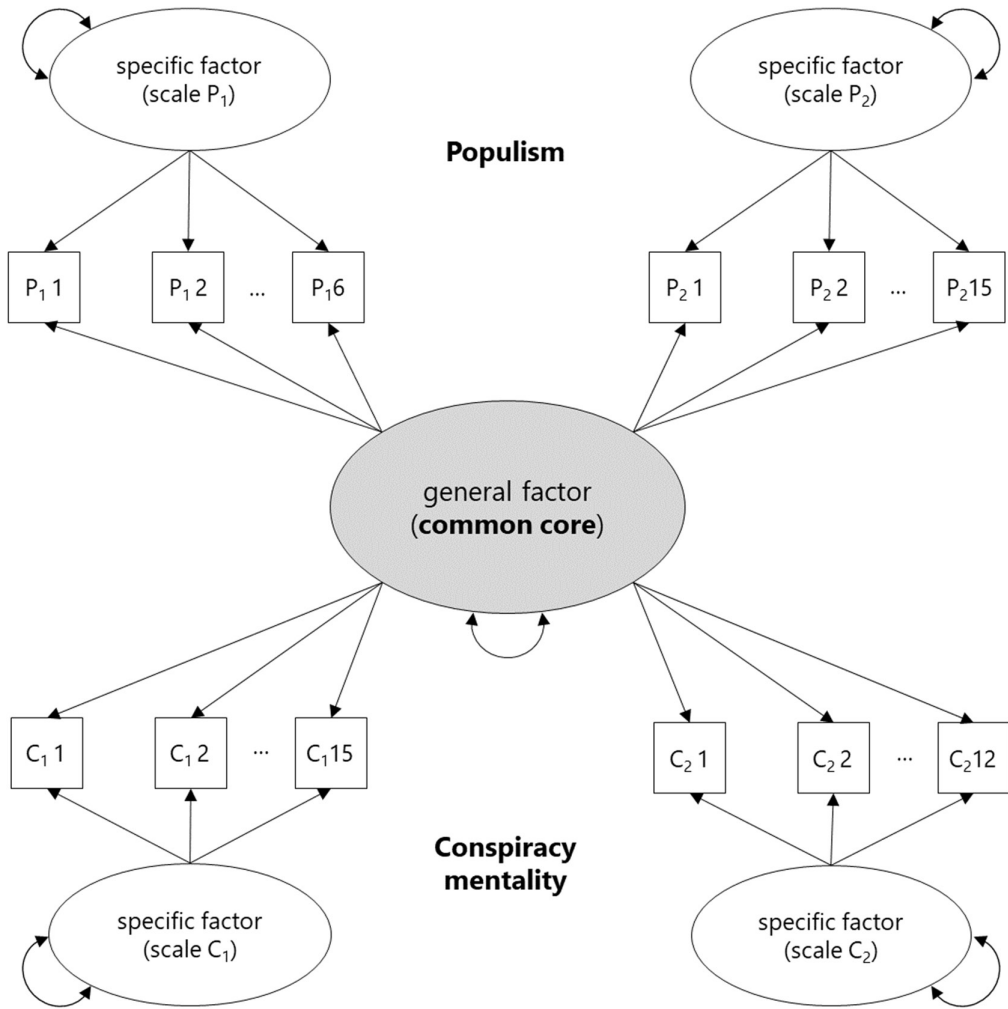
### *Measuring the Common Core*

Given that we sought to capture both populism and conspiracy mentality broadly, and to avoid biases due to reliance on a single measure for each construct, we used two scales per construct. For populism, we selected two scales measuring key aspects of populism, such as a Manichean worldview and antielitism: the six-item populist attitudes short scale (Rothmund et al., 2020) and the 15-item three-dimensional populist attitudes scale (Schulz et al., 2018). For conspiracy mentality, we relied on two scales measuring *general* conspiracy beliefs rather than approval of specific conspiracy beliefs, namely the 15-item generic conspiracist beliefs scale (Brotherton et al., 2013) and the 12-item conspiracy mentality scale (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). In what follows, we will refer to these four scales as  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  (for the two populism scales) and  $C_1$ , and  $C_2$  (for the two conspiracy-mentality scales), respectively. Responses on all scales (including all other measures reported below) were collected on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items are “Politics usually boils down to a struggle between the people and the powerful” ( $P_1$ ), “Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think” ( $P_2$ ), “The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organization” ( $C_1$ ), and “A few powerful groups of people determine the destiny of millions” ( $C_2$ ).

### *Modeling the Common Core*

To investigate the presence, extent, and content of a common core of populism and conspiracy mentality, we relied on structural equation modeling, specifically a bifactor approach (e.g., Reise, 2012). In a bifactor model, each indicator (i.e., each self-report item) is modeled to load on two factors: (1) a general factor on which all indicators across all scales load and (2) one specific factor per scale on which only the indicators of the respective scale load. If several indicators across scales all correlate with each other, the scales arguably share communalities and these are, in turn, represented by the general factor in a bifactor model. Importantly, the general factor captures the communalities (i.e., common core) among *all* indicators and, thus, constructs. The specific factor for each scale captures the remaining covariance among the indicators from this scale that is not due to the common core. The bifactor model used here (see Figure 1) involves one general factor representing the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality and one specific factor for each of the four scales (i.e.,  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ ,  $C_1$ , and  $C_2$ ) representing each scale’s unique aspects beyond the common core, if any.

In statistical terms, the bifactor approach decomposes the variance of each indicator into (1) the variance explained by the general factor (i.e., the common core), (2) the variance specific to the indicators of each particular scale (i.e., content of a scale beyond the common core), and (3) residual variance that is explained by neither the common core nor the specific factors. Unlike other modeling strategies (such as higher-order factor models), the approach thus allows for a direct test of whether a model involving a common core provides a superior account of the data as compared to a model without this common core, that is, a simple correlated factor model. Moreover, one can quantify how much of the explained variance in each construct or scale is due to the common core using the ECV (explained common variance) index, which reflects the ratio of variance explained by the common core to the total variance explained (Ten Berge & Sočan, 2004). Essentially, the ECV is a measure of the general factor strength, with values greater than .80 indicating a basically unidimensional construct (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Finally, bifactor models have been shown to provide unbiased estimates between covariates and hierarchically structured constructs (Moshagen, 2021).



**Figure 1.** Bifactor model representing the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. To enhance clarity, only a subset of three indicators per scale is displayed, and item residuals are omitted.

On a substantive level, our modeling approach allowed us to specifically investigate whether we can represent the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality statistically, how “extensive” this common core is (i.e., how much of the explained variance is actually due to the common core), and what its content is (i.e., which items are strong indicators of it).

In specifying the bifactor model, the general and specific factors were constrained to mutual orthogonality. This reflects the central and strong assumption in bifactor models that the entire overlap across scales is due to the general factor (i.e., common core) and thus, that any remaining variances are independent (Holzinger & Swineford, 1937). All latent factors were identified by setting one unstandardized loading per factor to 1. To account for nonnormality in the data, we employed maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and scaled test statistics (Satorra & Bentler, 2001). All analyses were based on the raw scores and conducted in R (R Core Team, 2020) using the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012).

To evaluate whether the bifactor model provides a superior account of the data as compared to alternative specifications—especially the baseline model with four separate (correlated) latent factors, that is, one per scale—we resorted to model comparisons trading off model fit and complexity. Specifically, the normalized evidence ratio (ER; Wagenmakers & Farrell, 2004) was computed from Bayesian information criterion (BIC) model weights, expressing the likelihood that one model is superior over another given the data and, thus, the degree of (posterior) belief that it reflects the true model. For illustration, an ER of .95 means that one model is  $.95 / (1 - .95) = 19$  times more likely (to be the true model) than the other given the data.

## STUDY 1

### Methods

Data were collected online via Prolific Academic through convenience sampling. Participants first provided informed consent before they completed the two populism and two conspiracy mentality scales in random order. Two instructed attention checks were embedded in the scales (e.g., “It is important that you pay attention to this study. Please tick ‘definitely true’ here.”). Participants received £1.00 as compensation for participation.

All participants were U.K. residents. To ensure a sufficient number of data points for model estimation, we aimed to include data from 400 participants. A total of 416 participants started the study, of which 412 completed it. Of these, 11 participants failed at least one attention check and were thus excluded. Moreover, we excluded another four participants whose response times on at least one of the four scales were suspiciously low (i.e.,  $< 2$  sec per item on average). The final sample thus comprised  $N = 397$  participants (86% female, aged 18–67 years,  $M = 31.6$ ,  $SD = 8.4$ ). The majority of participants (70%) were in employment (for 11% employment status was unknown). Demographic information was retrieved via Prolific.

### Results

To determine the zero-order correlations between the four scales, we first fit a confirmatory factor model with one latent factor for each scale, that is, a simple correlated factor model. This baseline model exhibited acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(1074) = 3145$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .67, TLI = .66, RMSEA = .070, SRMR = .084. Factors representing the same construct (i.e., populism or conspiracy mentality) were most strongly associated (median  $r = .88$ ). Nonetheless, factors representing different constructs were also strongly correlated (median  $r = .52$ ), with all correlations corresponding to large effects ( $r \geq .50$ ; see Table S1 in the online supporting information). As this pattern confirms, there was substantial empirical overlap within and across constructs. Thus, the most basic precondition for a common core among them was fulfilled.

Next, we implemented the bifactor model as specified above (see Figure 1) with one alteration: As the specific factor for  $P_1$  did not yield any variance, it had to be omitted from the model. The bifactor model substantially improved fit as compared to the above baseline model with four separate latent factors: The difference in BICs corresponded to a normalized evidence ratio of  $ER > .999$ , implying that the bifactor model is at least 1,000 times more likely than the comparison model given the data. In other words, the bifactor model provided a vastly superior description of the data compared to a model omitting the common core. Moreover, the bifactor model was clearly superior (all  $ER > .999$ ) to a model involving only one single latent factor across all indicators (i.e., assuming complete unidimensionality across constructs) as well as to a model involving two latent factors across indicators of both scales representing the same



**Table 1.** Proportion of Common Variance Explained by the General Factor (ECV) in the Indicators of Each Respective Scale

Scale	Study 1 ( $N = 397$ )	Study 2 ( $N = 793$ )	Study 3 ( $N = 698$ )
P <sub>1</sub>	[1] <sup>a</sup>	.78	.78
P <sub>2</sub>	.50	.59	.57
C <sub>1</sub>	.32	.39	.48
C <sub>2</sub>	.44	.52	.64

<sup>a</sup>As the specific factor for P<sub>1</sub> did not yield any variance, it had to be omitted from the model and thus the ECV could not be computed; however, since a factor not exhibiting any variance essentially means that all explained variance in P<sub>1</sub> was accounted for by the general factor, the implied ECV is 1.

construct (i.e., assuming unidimensionality within constructs). In summary, the clearly superior model constrains the *entire* shared variance across *all* scales to be due to *one* underlying common factor, but it must also allow for shared explained variance unique to each scale except P<sub>1</sub>—that is, scale-specific content beyond the common core.

We proceeded by evaluating the pattern of loadings. Reliability of the latent general factor was high ( $\omega = .90$ ). The median loading across all indicators on the general factor was  $\lambda = .37$ , and all but six indicators exhibited a significant positive loading (see the additional materials on the OSF for details). Loadings on the specific factors were also substantial (median  $\lambda = .48$ ) and seven (out of 48) were either negative and/or did not differ significantly from zero. The loading estimates thus confirm that a substantial common core exists, whereas it clearly does not entirely obviate the specific factors.

This conclusion was further corroborated by an ECV of .46 of the general factor, indicating that almost half of the total explained variance is due to the common core. As summarized in Table 1, the magnitude of general factor saturation was substantial across all scales, confirming that both constructs are similarly subsumed in the common core. Specifically, whereas P<sub>1</sub> had to be omitted from the model as it did not yield any variance (thus implying that it is entirely subsumed by the general factor), the general factor explained at least a third of the common variance in the items indicating any of the remaining scales.

Similarly, the indicators with the strongest loadings on the general factor originated from all four scales (see the OSF for details), again confirming that the common core is shared by all scales and thus both constructs. In line with our theoretical expectations on the content of the common core, items loading most strongly ( $\lambda \geq .48$ ) on the general factor reflected the idea of a sociopolitically flavored manifestation of generalized distrust well. Such items were, for example, “The system is stacked against people like me.” (P<sub>1</sub>), “People like me have no influence on what the government does.” (P<sub>2</sub>), “The government uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity” (C<sub>1</sub>), and “Those at the top do whatever they want” (C<sub>2</sub>). Indeed, a particularly prominent shared theme—recurring in indicators loading strongly on the general factor—was the negative assessment of individuals in power, albeit ranging from what might be called mild resignation (“Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think.” (P<sub>2</sub>) and “Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.” (P<sub>1</sub>)) to rather extreme insinuations (“The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil” (C<sub>1</sub>)).

## STUDY 2

The results from Study 1 provide initial support for a substantial common core underlying populism and conspiracy mentality, complemented by aspects unique to each construct. In terms of content, the common core was well in line with the conceptual idea of a sociopolitically

flavored manifestation of generalized distrust. Study 2 served (1) to replicate these findings based on a larger and more diverse sample (note that the vast majority of participants in Study 1 were women) and recruiting participants from a different country (Germany) and (2) to provide a direct test of whether the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality is indeed rooted in personality, particularly D.

## Methods

Data were collected online via a professional panel provider in Germany using convenience sampling. Participants first provided informed consent and demographic information. Thereafter, they completed in random order the German versions of the 16-item scale to measure D (D16; Moshagen, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2020) as well as the 60-item HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (HEXACO-60; Ashton & Lee, 2009) to measure basic personality traits. Next, participants worked on the populism and conspiracy mentality scales, again in random order. Two instructed attentions checks were embedded in the personality scales. Finally, participants worked on other tasks not pertinent to the current investigation. Participants received €1.20 for study completion.

We aimed to recruit  $N = 750$  and thus a substantially larger sample than in Study 1 (the exact sample size was determined based on one of the other tasks that participants completed, i.e., a cheating paradigm). A total of 1,074 participants started the study. Of these, 137 participants failed an instructed attention check and were thus redirected to the panel provider without being able to complete the study. Moreover, 92 participants dropped out voluntarily during participation. Of the 845 participants who completed the study, we finally excluded 52 participants because their responses on the personality scales (i.e., D16 and HEXACO-60) indicated careless responding, showing response times less than 2 sec per item on average and/or zero variation in responses (despite 50% reverse-keyed items). The final sample thus comprised  $N = 793$  participants (40% female, aged 18–83 years,  $M = 46.6$ ,  $SD = 17.0$ ). Participants had diverse educational backgrounds. The majority (52%) were in employment; only 10% were students.

## Results

We first reran all analyses from Study 1 to test whether the findings replicate. Here, we only report a condensed summary of the key findings; more detailed results are available in the online supporting information. As before, the baseline model exhibited acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(1074) = 6999$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .75, TLI = .74, RMSEA = .083, SRMR = .084, and the four separate latent factors representing  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ ,  $C_1$ , and  $C_2$  correlated substantially and indeed more strongly so than in Study 1 (median latent  $r = .66$ ; see Table S2 in the online supporting information). The bifactor model<sup>1</sup> again clearly outperformed the baseline model with four separate latent factors (one per scale), a model positing only one single factor across the indicators of all scales, and a model positing two latent factors across indicators of both scales representing the same construct (all normalized ERs > .999).

Reliability of the latent general factor was close to perfect ( $\omega = .97$ ), and loadings on the general factor were even larger than in Study 1 (median  $\lambda = .53$ ; every loading was positive and significant; see the OSF for details) and comparable to the loadings on the specific factors

<sup>1</sup>Unlike in Study 1, the specific factor for  $P_1$  also exhibited some (albeit little) variance and could thus be retained in the model.



**Table 2.** Latent Intercorrelations of D and the HEXACO Dimensions with the Common Core of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality

Variable	Study 2 ( <i>N</i> = 793)	Study 3 ( <i>N</i> = 698)
D	.27***	.34***
Honesty-Humility	-.14**	-.19***
Emotionality	-.01	.00
Extraversion	-.11*	-.13**
Agreeableness	-.08	-.14**
Conscientiousness	-.01	.03
Openness to Experience	-.19***	-.24***

Note: Latent correlation coefficients from bifactor model including D and all HEXACO dimensions.

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

(median  $\lambda = .55$ ). Correspondingly, the proportions of common variance explained (ECVs) were higher than in Study 1, for both the general factor (.52) and all specific factors (see Table 1). Indicators with the strongest loadings on the general factor again originated from all four scales. Loadings on the general factor corresponded closely to those in Study 1 ( $r = .91$ ), and every indicator that had shown a substantial loading ( $\lambda > .40$ ) on the general factor in Study 1 did so in the present replication, too (see the OSF). In summary, Study 2 replicated the results from Study 1 well, if anything demonstrating a still more substantial common core of populism and conspiracy mentality.

We next tested the dispositional nature of the common core by including a latent factor for D and each of the six basic personality (HEXACO) dimensions into the bifactor model (Table 2; for correlations with the specific factors for each scale, see Table S3 in the online supporting information). The latent zero-order correlations confirmed that the general factor was most strongly related to D ( $r = .27$ ). Moreover, we found meaningful, albeit smaller, correlations with HEXACO Honesty-Humility ( $r = -.14$ )—replicating prior research (Bowes et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2019)—and Openness to Experience ( $r = -.19$ ). All other HEXACO dimension yielded small effects at most.

To further gauge the unique contributions of D and the HEXACO dimensions in accounting for the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality, we performed a (latent) regression analysis. D uniquely contributed to the prediction of the common core and yielded the largest regression coefficient (see Table S4 in the online supporting information). Indeed, D almost tripled the proportion of explained variance in the general factor beyond the entire HEXACO space ( $R^2_{\text{HEXACO}} = .07$  vs.  $R^2_{\text{HEXACO+D}} = .20$ ). Overall, the findings are thus compatible with the idea that the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality is rooted in personality, especially and uniquely in D.

### STUDY 3

The third and final study served to replicate the results of the previous ones and to additionally test whether the explanation of the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality by personality—particularly D—is indeed due to generalized dispositional distrust. Therefore, we additionally measured different stable, enduring beliefs capturing distrust in others and society more generally and tested whether these beliefs can account for the link between D and the common core. Stated differently, we tested whether the relation between D and the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality decreases once controlling for different aspects of generalized dispositional distrust.

## Methods

Data were collected in the context of the Prosocial Personality Project (PPP), a large-scale project containing various measurement occasions run via the same panel provider in Germany as Study 2. A detailed documentation of the project including all variables assessed, information on sample compositions and prespecified exclusion criteria for all measurement occasions, as well as prior use of (parts of) the data is available online (<https://osf.io/m2abp/>). In the current investigation, we refer to data measured at T1, T5 (completed 110 days after T1 on average), and follow-up wave 2021-01a (completed 425 days after T1 on average) of the PPP. Crucially, data on the dependent variables (i.e., populism and conspiracy mentality, measured at follow-up wave 2021-01a) have not been used in any previous analyses or publications. At T1, participants were sampled so as to ensure a diverse and approximately representative sample of the German population. At all measurement occasions, we included instructed attention checks and inspected response times and variation in responses to detect careless responding. Participants were remunerated based on the panel provider's regulations.

At T1, D was assessed using the German full 70-item D scale (D70; Moshagen, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2020). Basic personality was measured using the German HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009). The order of the two scales was randomized together with other personality scales not pertinent to the current investigation.

T5 contained different dispositional beliefs scales, five of which specifically capture different aspects of generalized distrust as defined above, namely distrust in others and the world/society more generally. These were the six-item general trust scale (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994) measuring (1) trust propensity (e.g., "Most people are basically honest."), the five-item cynicism scale (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2014) measuring (2) trait cynicism (e.g., "Most people would tell a lie if they could gain by it."), the 12-item two-worldview scale (Sibley & Duckitt, 2009) measuring (3) dangerous and threatening social worldview (e.g., "There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all.") and (4) competitive jungle social worldview (e.g., "You know that most people are out to 'screw' you, so you have to get them first when you get the chance") with six items each, and the 18-item dispositional sensitivity to befallen injustice scale (Schmitt et al., 1995) measuring (5) sensitivity to befallen injustice (e.g., "I am taken advantage of by others."). These dispositional beliefs scales were not specifically included in the PPP for the present investigation; however, they match our broad definition and the different aspects of generalized dispositional distrust well and were thus selected for the current analyses. That said, note that many more scales measuring generalized (dis)trust exist (for a recent review, see Patent & Searle, 2019).

Finally, at follow-up wave 2021-01a, populism and conspiracy mentality were measured using the same four scales as in our previous studies. The scales were completed after participants had worked on other personality scales and trait-related questions that are beyond the scope of the present work.

All T1 participants were invited to follow-up wave 2021-01 where they were randomly assigned to one of two separate studies (of which study "a" included the populism and conspiracy mentality scales). A total of  $N = 1,075$  participants started this study. After applying the prespecified exclusion criteria to the specific scales and the overall measurement occasion (see <https://osf.io/7uhyj/>), 973 participants remained, of which 925 had complete data on all populism and conspiracy mentality scales. Among these,  $N = 698$  also had complete

data on all relevant distrust-related beliefs measured at T5, thus comprising the final sample. The sample was heterogenous with regard to sex (41% female), age (range = 18–69 years,  $M = 46.4$ ,  $SD = 11.7$ ), and education. The majority of participants (61%) were in employment; only 4% were students.

## Results

As before, we first provide a condensed summary of a replication of all previous analyses; more detailed results are available in the online supporting information and on the OSF. The baseline model exhibited acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(1074) = 6896$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .74, TLI = .73, RMSEA = .088, SRMR = .09, and the pattern of associations between the four separate latent factors (representing  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ ,  $C_1$ , and  $C_2$ , respectively) was still stronger than in Studies 1 and 2 (median latent  $r = .75$ ; see Table S5 in the online supporting information). The bifactor model again outperformed the baseline model and all alternative models considered (all ERs > .999).

Once more, reliability of the latent general factor was close to perfect ( $\omega = .97$ ) and loadings on the general factor were high (median  $\lambda = .58$ ; every loading was positive and significant; see the OSF for details), whereas loadings on the specific factors were smaller, though also substantial (median  $\lambda = .46$ ). As such, relative loadings on the general factor closely corresponded to those found in Study 1 ( $r = .92$ ) and Study 2 ( $r = .95$ ). The pattern of ECV still more strongly confirmed that a substantial proportion of common variance is due to the general factor (.59), which held for each scale still more notably than in the previous studies (see Table 1).

Next, we reran all analyses from Study 2 involving D and the HEXACO dimensions. Since the present study used the D70 to measure D, we followed recent recommendations (Bader et al., 2021) to represent D as a general factor within a bifactor structure (along with five specific themes to improve the measurement model and avoid biased estimates). Replicating Study 2, the general factor was again most strongly related to D ( $r = .34$ ) and substantially to Honesty-Humility ( $r = -.19$ ) and Openness to Experience ( $r = -.24$ ), whereas correlations with the remaining HEXACO dimensions were small at best (all  $|r| < .15$ ; see Table 2; for correlations with the specific factors for each scale, see Table S6 in the online supporting information). Latent regression analysis (see Table S4) again confirmed a particularly strong unique contribution of D beyond the HEXACO space in predicting the common core, with D more than doubling the proportion of explained variance ( $R^2_{\text{HEXACO}} = .10$  vs.  $R^2_{\text{HEXACO+D}} = .23$ ).

To address the main question of whether generalized dispositional distrust explains the strong link between D and the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality, we expanded the bifactor model by D and one single latent factor for each of the five distrust-related beliefs (i.e., low trust propensity, trait cynicism, dangerous and threatening social worldview, competitive jungle social worldview, and sensitivity to befallen injustice). Note that we reversed all items from the trust propensity scale such that high values on all distrust-related-beliefs scales indicate distrust. Latent zero-order correlations confirmed that all five distrust-related beliefs were strongly related to the general factor (median  $r = .41$ ), but not systematically to the specific factors (median  $r = -.01$ ; see Table S7 in the online supporting information for the full correlation matrix). Thus, supporting the above reasoning, the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality—but not the unique aspects of the specific factors—heavily saturated with distrust-related beliefs.

Most crucially, the distrust-related beliefs fully accounted for the link between the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality and D: A latent regression predicting the general factor from D and all five distrust-related beliefs concurrently showed that the effect of D vanished entirely ( $\beta = -.04$ ,  $p = .64$ ), adding no explained variance whatsoever ( $R^2_{\text{beliefs}} = .406$  vs.  $R^2_{\text{beliefs+D}} = .408$ ). Thus, the strong link between D and the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality can be attributed to the role of distrust-related beliefs that accompany D.

## General Discussion

Populism and conspiracy mentality have become an integral part of today's societies, with potentially harmful consequences for social cohesion and societal functioning. Conceptually, populism and conspiracy mentality have notable overlap (e.g., van Prooijen, 2018), suggesting that both constructs may have common dispositional roots. The goal of the current research was to put this proposition to a critical test by specifically defining and directly modeling the *common core* of populism and conspiracy mentality and illuminating its dispositional basis—thereby considerably advancing our understanding of who may be prone to both populism and beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Across three studies using heterogeneous samples from the United Kingdom and Germany (total  $N = 1,888$ ), we found strong evidence for a common core of populism and conspiracy mentality that can be described as *a sociopolitically flavored manifestation of generalized dispositional distrust*. Specifically, the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality was (1) most strongly represented by self-report items tapping into distrust and skepticism about others, particularly elites, and society, (2) uniquely linked to the common core of aversive traits—the Dark Factor of Personality (D)—beyond the basic personality space, and (3) strongly related to various distrust-related beliefs, such as trait cynicism, dangerous and threatening social worldview, and (low) trust propensity. In line with the crucial role of justifying beliefs in the definition of D (Hilbig et al., 2022), the association of D with the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality was fully accounted for by these distrust-related beliefs. The findings thus provide empirical support for the repeatedly voiced (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Erisen et al., 2021; Jessen, 2019) yet largely untested proposition that populism and conspiracy mentality have common psychological roots. As such, the current work can advance our theoretical understanding of populism and conspiracy mentality, which has implications for various (sub-)fields within psychology and beyond (e.g., political science and sociology).

Besides providing insights into populism and conspiracy mentality, the findings of Study 3 in particular also have implications for the understanding of dispositional distrust: We found that different forms of generalized beliefs about other people (as, e.g., captured in trait cynicism) and society at large (as, e.g., captured in a dangerous and threatening social worldview) account for similarly large portions of variance in the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. By implication, different forms of generalized distrust can indeed be expressed in a sociopolitically flavored way, that is, in a Manichean us-versus-them, good-versus-evil view of the world as is common in both populism and conspiracy mentality. This once again demonstrates the wide-reaching impact of generalized trust on societal functioning (Yamagishi, 2011). That said, whether more specific forms of trust, such as trust in political actors or parties, may likewise or even better account for the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality is an open question that may be addressed in future research.

Finally, our studies offer information on the relation of basic personality traits from the HEXACO model with the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. In both Studies 2 and 3, Honesty-Humility and Openness to Experience yielded small- to medium-sized negative correlations with the common core. Honesty-Humility has indeed been (conceptually) linked to dispositional trust through the process of social projection or assumed similarity, respectively (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2015a). Specifically, research suggests that individuals high in Honesty-Humility—who tend to be trustworthy (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2015b)—expect others to be high in Honesty-Humility as well (Lee et al., 2009; Thielmann et al., 2020, 2022). Correspondingly, Honesty-Humility has also been empirically linked to trust (Pfattheicher & Böhm, 2018) as well as to conspiracy mentality (Bowes et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2019). The relation of Openness to Experience to the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality is plausible given that the common core, as per our definition, is *sociopolitically flavored*—and Openness to Experience is a consistent predictor of political attitudes (Sibley et al., 2012; Zettler et al., 2020). However, populism is not tied to a particular political ideology, meaning that it occurs at both the right and the left political spectrum. For conspiracy mentality, in turn, meta-analytic evidence suggests a null relation with Openness to Experience (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Stasielowicz, 2022), whereas other research has argued for a *positive* association given the appreciation of unusual or unconventional ideas of open-minded individuals (Swami et al., 2010). In general, future research is needed to clarify whether the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality is indeed, at least to some extent, also rooted in other personality traits beyond D.

To facilitate such future research, the present data can also be used to extract a set of items suited for *direct* measurement of the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. Based on the pooled data from our studies ( $N = 1,888$ ), we identified a short, eight-item scale with highly satisfactory psychometric properties that approximates the general factor in our bifactor model close to perfectly (for details, see the OSF). Thus, future research will not necessarily have to use several full scales of populism and conspiracy mentality or rely on bifactor modeling to study the determinants and consequences of the common core of populism and conspiracy mentality. Rather, we offer an economical and psychometrically sound scale to measure the commonalities of populism and conspiracy mentality directly.

Notwithstanding the new insights provided by the present studies, some limitations ought to be acknowledged. First, we only used two scales to measure both populism and conspiracy mentality. Although the selected scales arguably capture the essence of both constructs, future research may replicate the current findings based on different scales or item sets. Moreover, we only collected data in two European countries. Prior research has, however, suggested that the link between populism and personality may differ by country (Bakker et al., 2020). Future studies replicating the current findings in other countries are thus desired to test the generalizability of the findings. The same holds for other samples more generally given that our findings are largely based on convenience samples. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the distribution of the variables assessed were highly comparable with previous research which, in part, relied on nationally representative samples (e.g., Rothmund et al., 2020).

Taken together, the present work demonstrates that generalized dispositional distrust in others and society at large is at the heart of both populism and conspiracy mentality. Increasing general trust in others and the social world may thus be an effective means to simultaneously combat populism and conspiracy mentality. Indeed, recent evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic shows that transparent communication—even if it is negative—may increase trust in health authorities and, thereby, also increase vaccine acceptance (Petersen



et al., 2021). We hope that the present findings will encourage future research to find ways for increasing generalized trust—which may not only counteract populism and conspiracy mentality but also benefit societal functioning more generally.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work reported herein was supported by a grant from the research focus “Media, Democracy and Citizens” funded by the research initiative of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Isabel Thielmann, Department of Criminology, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law, Günterstalstr. 73, 79100 Freiburg i. Br., Germany. E-mail: [i.thielmann@csl.mpg.de](mailto:i.thielmann@csl.mpg.de). Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Table S1** Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities ( $\omega$ ; in Italics) and Latent Factor Intercorrelations of the Two Populism ( $P_1$  and  $P_2$ ) and Two Conspiracy Mentality ( $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ) Scales (Study 1;  $N = 397$ )

**Table S2** Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities ( $\omega$ ; in Italics) and Latent Factor Intercorrelations of the Two Populism ( $P_1$  and  $P_2$ ) and Two Conspiracy Mentality ( $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ) Scales (Study 2;  $N = 793$ )

**Table S3** Descriptive Statistics and Latent Intercorrelations of D and the HEXACO Dimensions with the Specific Factors of Each Populism and Conspiracy Mentality Scale (Study 2;  $N = 793$ )

**Table S4** Latent Regression Results for Predicting the Common Core of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality by D and All HEXACO Dimensions

**Table S5** Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities ( $\omega$ ; in Italics) and Latent Factor Intercorrelations of the Two Populism ( $P_1$  and  $P_2$ ) and Two Conspiracy Mentality ( $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ) Scales (Study 3;  $N = 698$ )

**Table S6** Descriptive Statistics and Latent Intercorrelations of D and the HEXACO Dimensions with the Specific Factors of Each Populism and Conspiracy Mentality Scale (Study 3;  $N = 698$ )

**Table S7** Descriptive Statistics and Latent Intercorrelations of D and Distrust-Related Beliefs Scales with the General Factor of Populism and Conspiracy Mentality and the Specific Factors of Each Scale (Study 3;  $N = 698$ )