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Conspiracy beliefs and political violence. Empirical application of the
3N model of radicalization

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Alla mia Famiglia,
Ai miei Amici,
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Grazie.

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M	mean
SD	standard deviation
α	Cronbach's Alpha
MSE	mean squared error
F	Fisher's statistics
df	degrees of freedom
p	p-value
β	standardized regression coefficient
SE	standard error
$LLCI$	Lower-limit confidence interval
$ULCI$	Upper-limit confidence interval
VIF	Variance inflation factor
*	$p < .050$
**	$p < .010$
***	$p < .001$

ABSTRACT

In this work, I analyze conspiracy beliefs-CB and radical political reaction to them (violent protests, riots, and terrorism; see Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009) through the 3N model of radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2014; Jasko et al., 2020), that suggest how social psychological determinants such as motivation (need for personal significance), normative influence (social network), and ideology (narrative) lead to radicalization. In two correlational and one experimental study with U.S. online samples, I tested the predictive role of collective narcissism-CN (the quest for one's ingroup external recognition and a group level of need for significance) on support for radicalism mediation through CB. I also tested the moderation role of network ideological influence-NI on the CB- support for radicalism relationship. Study 1 (N_1=547) was conducted with a sample of the general American population. The results supported the moderated mediation model proposed. The positive effect of CN on radicalism was positively mediated by CB. However, the positive effect of CB on support for radicalism was significant only in mean-high levels of NI. Study 2 (N_2=574) replicates the evidence emerged in Study 1 in sample of Americans who voted for Trump in 2020 elections. Study 3 (N_3=402) aims to test causal relations among the variables by manipulating CN, CB, and NI in a web-based experiment $2\times2\times2$ experimental design through. It emerged that participants in experimental conditions (i.e., high CN high CB) showed significantly higher support for radical political participation, rather than those in any control group indicating a main effect of both on CN and CB on radicalism. However, the interaction CN×CB×NI yielded no significant evidence. These findings will be considered as framed in the psychology of terrorism and political violence, counter-radicalization, and de-radicalization.

Keywords: conspiracy beliefs, radicalization, significance quest theory

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL VIOLENCE INDUCED BY CONSPIRACY
BELIEFS.

On January 6th, 2021, in response to President Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election, a mob of his supporters stormed the House of Representatives building in Washington, D.C., intending to prevent a joint session of Congress from counting Electoral College votes to confirm President-elect Joe Biden's victory. They were called to action by Trump himself, to promote his bogus assertion that the 2020 election was "stolen by empowered far-left radical Democrats." (Doig, 2021). Although the majority of those charged with offenses related to the attack had no known ties to far-right or extremist organizations (Mansfield et al., 2021), a sizable proportion had ties to extremist or conspiracy activities (Jensen, 2021). According to the Associated Press (Biesecker et al., 2021), many of them promoted conspiracy theories regarding the 2020 presidential election on social media and believed other QAnon and "deep state" conspiracies.

Acts of political violence promoted by conspiracy beliefs have increased in the last few years (Farrell, 2022). For instance, several attacks against both people and properties were induced by some conspiratorial thinking: the 2019 shooting at Christchurch (New Zealand) and El Paso (Texas, USA) were motivated by ethnic conspiracy theories; during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, some arson assaults damaged or destroyed telecommunications poles across and technicians were exposed to verbal and physical harassment across Europe, North America, and Australia (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Ankel, 2020; Pasley, 2020) because of conspiracies advertising the idea that the COVID-19 virus was spread via telecommunication antennas; the 2021 Capitol attack at Washington, DC (USA) was mainly motivated by a conspiracy theory claiming that the Presidential elections would have been rigged by democrats (Enders et al., 2021). In response to concerns about the rising prevalence of conspiratorial worldviews, experts have lately underlined that, relative to the millions who believe in some conspiracy beliefs, relatively few individuals have performed acts of violence as a

consequence of such beliefs (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). Despite this, the real-life examples described earlier indicated that the potential harm posed by these theories is genuine, since conspiracy ideas are readily disseminated through mass media and are also employed purposefully to exacerbate social and political unrest. Thus, understanding what leads individuals to believing in conspiracy beliefs is necessary to prevent conspiracy beliefs-motivated political violence. Accordingly, this work aims at identifying the motivational mechanism that leads individuals to believe in conspiracy beliefs and in turn engage in political violence and group insurgency.

In what follows I will attempt to define the problem of political violence induced by conspiracy beliefs, addressing several possible antecedents and trying to understand the motivations behind ideological extremism. Therefore, I will first introduce political violence and ideological extremism (Chapter 1) and their psychological antecedents (Chapter 2). Then we will discuss the 3N model of radicalization that I use as an overarching model to study the role of conspiracy beliefs on political violence (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 will provide a detailed description of the studies conducted, while Chapter 5 will conclude this dissertation by outlining a general conclusion of the emerging evidence.

What is political engagement?

Political engagement can be defined as a form of mobilization subsequent to an intensification of extreme beliefs, emotions, and behaviors in support of intergroup conflict (McCauley, 2020; Pavlović et al., 2022; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2020, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). In case of radicalization, McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) suggested a theoretical framework known as pyramid model (cfr. Kruglanski & Webber, 2014). The pyramid model of radicalization is a theoretical framework that seeks to explain the process by which individuals become radicalized and eventually engage in extremist behavior. The model proposes that radicalization occurs in a hierarchical fashion, with each level of the pyramid representing a different stage of the radicalization process. At the base of the pyramid are individuals who hold relatively moderate beliefs, but who may be susceptible to radicalization due to various factors such as personal or social grievances. As individuals move up the pyramid, they become increasingly exposed to extremist ideologies and propaganda, and may eventually become radicalized. At the top of the pyramid are individuals who have fully embraced extremist ideologies and are willing to engage in violence to promote their cause. The pyramid model of radicalization is often used by researchers and policymakers to better understand the factors that contribute to radicalization and to develop interventions to prevent individuals from becoming radicalized. According to the pyramid model of radicalization, engaged agents in political mobilization are just the top of a pyramid based on a majority of non-agentic sympathizers, such as ideological supporters: individuals are assumed to progress through ascending stages of radicalization.

Several studies have operationalized engagement as the intention to involve in collective action motivated by political reasons (Deau et al., 2006; Corning & Mayers, 2002; Foster & Matheson, 1995; Lalonde & Cameron, 1993). According to Bosi and Malthaner (2015), political

violence entails a diverse array of behaviors aimed at causing physical, psychological, and/or symbolic harm to individuals and/or property in an effort to persuade diverse audiences to effect or resist political, social, or cultural change. Antecedents of political violence can be traced at both the macro (Franks, 2006) and the micro-level (Victoroff, 2005). The macro-level includes the functioning of the international system, material deprivation, economic grievances, processes of modernization or interrupted ones; political culture, such as cultural acceptance of violence. Micro-level root analysis includes the focus on radical ideologies as motivated cognitions that promote collective actions (cfr. Webber et al., 2018). From a sociological standpoint, social movement academics (Zwerman et al., 2000; Della Porta 1995; Wieviorka 1993; White 1993) have advocated a critical approach that avoids investigating protest movements and violent groups in isolation. Instead, they have promoted a viewpoint that involves contextualizing the phenomenon in three ways. The first one is that violence is viewed as a subset of larger action repertoires. Actors not only alternate between violent and nonviolent modes of action, but also employ them in a variety of permutations. In other words, violence is not a wholly exceptional type of political action; rather, it must be evaluated alongside nonviolent and "regular" forms of political engagement. Thus, the decision to employ or refrain from using violent methods is not solely the product of available action repertoires, but is also influenced by a group's goals and identity, and particularly responds to changing circumstances and actions of their opponents and/or allies. The second context pertains to the embeddedness through which groups relate to their social environment (State-agents, rival groups, counter movements, etc.), always expressing asymmetrical power balances (McCauley, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2010). In other words, violence arises as a result of relational dynamics that grow as sequences of interaction in which mutual responses and adaptations contribute to a progressive escalation. The third part of contextualizing political violence is its placement within larger political and social conflicts: the social movement view acknowledges that violent exchanges

are interwoven into the larger processes of political dispute that determine the relationships between actors and the course of violent conflicts.

Political violence may occur at both international and domestic level (see Sánchez-Cuenca & De la Calle, 2009). Domestic terrorism can be defined as violence carried out by underground groups that are insufficiently powerful to seize actual control of a portion of the state's territory. It differs from international terrorism by the fact that actors and victims belong to the same nationality, and the attack occurs inside national boundaries. According to Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle (2009), despite the widespread attention paid to acts of foreign terrorism, the majority of political bloodshed is caused by domestic terrorism. For instance, as noted by Asal and Rethemeyer (2008), the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism dataset documented 26,445 deaths from 1998 to 2005, however only 6,447 were caused by international terrorism, more than 3,000 of them were caused by the 9/11 attacks.

Ideological extremism: similarities between conspiracy believer networks and islamic terrorism.

According to the Associated Press (Snow, 2022), one-third of U.S. people think a campaign is ongoing to replace the U.S.-born citizens with immigrants for political purposes. Although it is undeniable that the white population is decreasing not only in the United States (Bahrampour & Mellnik, 2021), but also in other white-majority nations such as Canada (Kufmann & Goodwin, 2018) and United Kingdom (Coleman, 2016; 2010), the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory developed a narrative of White victimization (Dixit, 2022; Garry et al., 2021; Cosentino, 2020) by benefiting from fringe spaces of the Internet, especially 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit. According to Amarasingam and Argentino (2020), certain conspiracy theories, such as QAnon (Moskalenko et al., 2022; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021), have a role in the radicalization of some individuals, leading them to commit significant crimes or acts of violence. Indeed, in the aftermath of the 2021 Capitol Hill insurrection, some observers (Gianotta, 2021; Schmidt, 2021) highlighted several commonalities between QAnon conspiracy theory and ISIS narrative, both less organized and structured than traditional jihadi or far-right extremist organizations. A first communality between QAnon and ISIS' narrative is the long-term goals of the both narratives. QAnon, as widely reported, aims to "wake" (Zuckerman, 2019) ordinary people towards the dramatic understanding of what contemporary history actually would mean: namely, a huge conspiracy involving both liberal elites and the governmental organization (the so-called *deep state*: Chandler, 2020) in Satanic worshiping and child-trafficking in order to drink blood to gain eternal youth (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2022; 2021; Andrews, 2020). Therefore, the ultimate end pursued by QAnon believers would be overthrowing the current ruling classes in Western societies (Oxford Analytica, 2020).A second common feature is the metaphysical openness. Contrary to the precise and pragmatic ends pursued by several radical organization (Wagemakers, 2010; Nisson, 2020) employing anti-establishment narratives (Hayton, 2016), both QAnon and ISIS share the same character of apocalyptic revelation (Wood, 2019; Berger,

2015) aimed to completely overthrow the current political balances at global level. A third communality between QAnon and ISIS's narrative is their thin ideology. In both cases, ISIS and QANON narratives do not offer a highly structured ideology, but rather a core (Schmidt, 2021) concept of anti-establishment beliefs branching out to peripheral beliefs, not necessarily organized in hierarchy nor in mutual agreement or coherence. This characterization of a "thin" semiotic nucleus surrounded by a galaxy of elements borrowed by the "thick" host ideologies is also typical of populist narratives (Mudde, 2004; Schoor, 2020a, 2020b). Four, relative deprivation and anti-establishment ethos (Caputo-Levine & Harris, 2022). As many forms of terrorism (Richardson, 2011), supporting ISIS has its roots in political discontent and grievance, often due to unattained expectation. On its side, QAnon shows a particular anti-establishment ethos (Cosentino, 2020) which places it among the most political conspiracy theories.

Social psychologists have proposed several frameworks to understand political actions, both rooted in group's identity and motivations. For example, From a social identity perspective, the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA, van Zomeren et al., 2018) explains how people's individual identities and group identities influence their participation in collective action. The model posits that people are more likely to engage in collective action when they see their individual identity as being strongly connected to their group identity, and when they perceive the group as being discriminated against or threatened in some way. Additionally, people are more likely to engage in collective action when they believe that their actions will be effective in achieving the group's goals, and when they have a strong sense of collective efficacy, or belief in the group's ability to take action and achieve its goals. Overall, the SIMCA suggests that people's motivations to engage in collective action are influenced by their perceptions of their own identity, the group's identity, and the perceived threats and opportunities facing the group.

Thus, the following chapter aims at reviewing the literature on the motivational and ideological antecedents of political violence rooted in a group's motivation and identity. It will be

focused on: relative deprivation and inequality, intended to be primary reasons fueling violent extremism across groups (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020); collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), a specific tendency to overestimate and exaggerate one's own group importance and to strive for its external recognition, in response to such relative deprivation; conspiracy beliefs, defined as collective motivated cognition (Kréko, 2015),

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ANTECEDENTS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Relative deprivation and inequality

The first two decades of the XXI century witnessed a bloom of violent uprising (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020), in apparent contradiction with the "end of the history" (Fukuyama, 2006) which seemed to be the rationale of the globalized post-cold war era. From the euro-asian "colored" revolutions (Rose Revolution, Georgia, 2003; Orange Revolution, Ukraine, 2004–2005; Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyz Republic, 2005; Cedar Revolution, Lebanon, 2005; Saffron Revolution, Myanmar, 2007) up to the so-called "Arab springs" (Bayat, 2013) which ravaged the northern Africa in two bloody waves: the first in the early 2010s (Algeria and Egypt, 2012-2013; Tunisia, 2013-2014) and the second at the end of the decade (Lebanon, 2019-2021). Although the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) trend of most of these countries has regularly grown since the early 2000s, hunger and famine have been recognized as key factors in determining such uprisings (Costello et al., 2015). In other words, those collective actions which led to violence, despite the overall tendency of gaining wealth, were motivated by a sense of relative deprivation, recognized as a factor of socio-political destabilization (Korotayev & Shishkina, 2020).

Relative deprivation is projected to become one of the primary reasons fueling violent extremism across groups, cultures, and situations in the twenty-first century, as a result of rising socioeconomic disparities and accompanying power asymmetries intra- and internationally (Kunst & Obaidi, 2020). As stated by Walker and Pettygrew (1984) the basic principle of relative deprivation is relational: people may feel deprived of something desired in comparison to their own past, another person, persons, group, ideal, or another social category. In other words, relative deprivation refers to a bad evaluation coming from a social comparison. Subjective perceptions matter in this sense: relative deprivation is the belief that oneself or one's group is deprived of valuable resources,

ambitions, ways of life, or standards of living that others have and to which one feels entitled (Power, 2018), without necessarily mirroring objective conditions. In this way, subjective beliefs and feelings contribute to collective mobilization (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994), and they often exert stronger predictive effects on violent forms of protest, rather than more objective types of deprivation (Miller, 2013). In particular, the affective component of relative deprivation beliefs (perceived illegitimacy, sense of injustice, anger) fuels violence, and other forms of violent political engagement, more than its cognitive component (the discrepancy between the expected and the actual experience).

In turn, the West is not immune to political instability (Kleinfield, 2021; Turchin, 2012). Both the financial (Guiso et al., 2021) and migration (Modebadze, 2019) crisis contributed to nourishing the resentment which shaped the consequential backlash against globalization (Walter, 2021), a hallmark of contemporary anti-establishment political parties (Burgoon, 2013). Teney and colleagues (2014) have described this resentment as ideologically outlined in the *communitarian* vs. *cosmopolitan* polarization. According to them, globalization splits the population into winners and losers that may not always follow traditional cleavage lines, such as those characterized by Lipset and Rokkan as class or confessional differences (1967). In such terms, the losers, citizens whose life opportunities have been harmed as a result of globalization, are deprived in relation to the winners, those who have benefitted from it.

This conflict can be analyzed in both objective and subjective terms of contrast. Objectively, the conflict between winners and losers of globalization can be framed in terms of interests as well as socio-demographic characteristics. The conflicting interests of groups within societies regards the opportunity to open economic and immigration borders (Kriesi, 2008; Kriesi et al., 2008). Winners are more likely to support integrationist ideas, adhere to universal values, and perceive possibilities in border opening (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012; Bornschier, 2010; Azmanova, 2011). On the opposite side, losers of globalization are those citizens who believe the nation-state protects their social standing and security, who firmly identify with the national community, and who are wedded to its

restrictive values and political institutions. They consider the open border policies as a danger to their life chances, and are more likely to endorse nationalist economic attitudes. At the socio-demographic level, education and employment status are considered as main explanatory features of political resentment and violence (Kriesi et al., 2008, 2012; Bornschier, 2010). Where education should provide individuals with the specific skills required to benefit from border openings, employment status should affect whether a sector or job is vulnerable to globalization pressures (Walter, 2010). According to Teney et al., (2014), objective variables of winners and losers of globalization should also include age, immigrant origin, place of residence, and internet usage. At a subjective level, two order of features: individual perception of threat and collective identities. Subjective perception of threat regards the attitude in which the globalization processes are evaluated and expected by individuals, while collective identities are associated with the life chances expectancy at a national (or even sub-national) level. This is the case of fraternalistic relative deprivation (Tomislav & Dinka, 2022; Williams, 2017). Fraternalistic relative deprivation is a type of relative deprivation that occurs when individuals compare themselves to their peers or colleagues within the same group, rather than to the broader society. This can lead to feelings of resentment and discontent, as individuals may perceive that they are not receiving their fair share of resources or rewards within the group. This resentment can be particularly acute when the group is fraternalistic, meaning that it is based on close bonds and a sense of shared identity. In such groups, individuals may feel a strong sense of loyalty and commitment, which can make them more sensitive to any perceived inequities or injustices within the group. As a result, fraternalistic relative deprivation can be a major source of group resentment, as individuals may feel that they are being treated unfairly by their own group members and can induce to the feeling that the group deserves more.

Collective narcissism

As reported by Golec de Zavala and Keenan (2021), the economic anxiety of the "losers of globalization" is motivated by growing economic inequities that make certain social groups feel deceived and defenseless, making them vulnerable to extremist rhetoric. They are indeed susceptible to a "cultural backlash" (Inglehart & Norris, 2017) against the typical values of the wealthy post material European countries: self-expression, equality, tolerance, emancipation of disadvantaged ethnic, cultural or sexual minorities. The relative deprivation that hit members of traditionally advantaged majority groups makes them highly susceptible to illiberal extremist rhetoric. Such susceptibility is rooted in the acceptance of a group identity (often national, but even sub-national) that provides a convincing response to conditions that challenge people's established expectations about self-importance, such as globalization's economic and socio-cultural shifts.

The specific tendency to overestimate and exaggerate one's own group importance, and to strive for its external recognition, has been defined as collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Collective narcissism, although correlated with the same proxies of individual narcissism (low self-esteem, relative deprivation), extends the original definition to a social level of self (Golec de Zavala, 2018). Collective narcissism scale has been generated based on the construct's description and current narcissistic personality questionnaires, primarily the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (Millon, 1997), as reported by Golec de Zavala and colleagues (2009). They employed items that linked to the basic features of individual narcissism while also being able to be meaningfully transferred onto a collective level. In particular, items corresponding to perceived exceptionality, superiority and authority over others. High-scoring individuals on the collective narcissism scale believe that the significance of their group is undervalued, and worthy of special attention and respect. Collective narcissism entails more than a good attitude toward one's own group. It is the notion that the group is

exceptional and so entitled to preferential treatment (Golec de Zavala & Keenan, 2021). Rather than contributing to the well-being of their group, collective narcissists focus their attention on ensuring that their group's brilliance and uniqueness are sufficiently recognized and appreciated by others.

In a nationality-based context, collective narcissism is closely related to *nationalism* (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989), but nourished with relative deprivation. While both promote and pursue the desire for national supremacy, nationalist's beliefs are rooted in an intimate conviction of one's own national group superiority and inherently attitude to dominion. In this sense, nationalist discourse denies any weakness (Golec de Zavala, 2018). Viceversa, inter-group hostility promoted by collective narcissism is motivated by a perceived group weakness and lack of sufficient recognition by external others, in justification of their hostility. Collective narcissism and ethnocentrism are intimately linked; they can be positively associated and frequently proven to be coexisting, but they are separate in the sense that neither can exist without the other (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2018). It has been proposed that ethnocentrism is a manifestation of collective narcissism when it comes to discrimination or aggressiveness motivated by one's group's self-love, or, in other words, exclusion from one's self-perceived superior group (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Cichocka & Cislak, 2020).

Recent studies have found that relative deprivation and collective narcissism were positively correlated. (Lantos & Forgas, 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2021; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Golec de Zavala, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). For instance, Lanton and Forgas (2021) observed how relative deprivation was positively related to both collective narcissism and political conservatism, and may have a role in promoting populist attitudes and predicting voting intentions in Hungary. Moreover, Golec de Zavala and Keenan (2021) highlighted that collective narcissism was related to populism via a social identity grounded in a collective resentment, and promoted by populist leaders. Furthermore, Marchlewska and colleagues (2018) observed that group relative deprivation predicted support for populist vote via the effect of collective narcissism in Poland (Law and Justice Party),

UK (Brexit) and USA (Donald Trump). In summary, collective narcissism seems more likely to occur when groups go through fraternal relative deprivation (Schmitt et al., 2010) and feel strong enough to recognize and combat it (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009).

The relationship between collective narcissism and hostility has been studied in various contexts (Golec de Zavala, 2018), such as general intergroup hostility (Hase et al., 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2020; Golec de Zavala, 2011), ethnic (Cichoka & Cislak, 2020; Dyduch-Hazar et al., 2019), religion (Yustisia et al., 2020; Golec de Zavala & Cishoka, 2012) and gender stigma (Golec de Zavala, 2022; Golec de Zavala & Bierwiaczonek, 2021; Mole et al., 2021). In some cases, collective narcissism can lead to a sense of siege (Sram & Dulik, 2015), as individuals may perceive that their group is under threat from external forces that are conspiring against them. This can lead to paranoid and conspiracy beliefs, as individuals may believe that their group is being unfairly targeted or discriminated against. Therefore, collective narcissism is often linked to a sense of siege and conspiracy beliefs.

Conspiracy beliefs

Several useful definitions have been proposed to define what a conspiracy belief actually is. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2022), it is "a belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people". In addition, the Collins Dictionary (2022), by defining it as "a belief that a group of people are secretly trying to harm someone or achieve something.", enriches the previous definition by including the collective and negativity dimension, beside that pertaining to power, as suggested by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020). Academic definitions vary by underlining, on one hand, the epistemological potential of conspiracy beliefs as explanatory structures (e.g.: "the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable", see Brotherton et al., 2013) and, on the other one, their relationship with extreme ideologies (e.g.: "political world views derived from secularized religious imageries in which gods are replaced by imperialists, monopolists, or secret plots", see Bilewitz & Sedek, 2015).

In the following paragraphs will be outlined how conspiracy beliefs have been studied by scholars in terms of their psychological antecedents, both dispositional and situational, and specified their link with extreme ideologies and political violence in a motivational perspective.

Dispositional approach to conspiracy beliefs

Karl R. Popper captured the notion of "conspiracy theory of society" (2019, original edition 1974), subsequently re-proposed by Moscovici (1987) as a mentality: a generalized political attitude (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) rooted in group perception (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015). Douglas Hofstadter (2012, original edition 1964) had shed light on the conspiratory style of American politics, having defined it as "paranoid", a term borrowed from clinical psychology. Indeed, he described the sense of siege induced by believing in

"a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 29).

As he claimed, the angrier the political arena is, the more exaggerated, suspicious and conspiratorial the rhetoric becomes.

Believing in conspiracies has been outlined as a matter of high gullibility or hyper rational skepticism (van Prooijen, 2019). Such a support has been linked to a variety of psychological processes, individual dispositions and attitudes, such as openness (Swami et al., 2014), schizotypy (e.g., van Der Tempel & Alcock, 2015), collective narcissism (e.g., Cichocka et al.,, 2016), right-wing authoritarianism (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2015), social dominance orientation (e.g., Dyrendal et al., 2021), threatening worldviews (e.g., Moulding et al., 2016), binding moral foundations (Leone et al., 2019). From the evolutionary perspective, avoidant attachment style is linked to conspiracy theories (Leone et al., 2018) because of its emphasis on self-reliance, incentive to hide psychological suffering, and a Manichean worldview centered on a clear division between good and wrong. Indeed, insecure attachment patterns are based on a set of underlying beliefs and objectives (e.g., that others are deceitful and inattentive) which have a significant impact on how new social data is interpreted.

Situational approach to conspiracy beliefs

Several studies (McCauley & Jacques, 1979; Zarefsky, 1984; Young et al., 1990) have stated that one reason for conspiracy theories' popularity is their potential to reclaim control and predictability. When assurance, control, or power are missing, conspiratory thinking is a state activated by the quest for explanations and meaning (Kossowska & Bukowski, 2015). Since uncertainty of any form (motivational, epistemic, existential, perceptual) involves the awareness of a gap between the expected and the actual situation (Jonas et al., 2014), individuals who want clear, organized answers to life's ambiguity and unpredictability, may adopt conspiracy theories as

explanatory narratives, in response to severe social events ambiguous to interpret (cfr. Wheeler, 2021; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Although several maladaptive individual dispositions may antecede the beliefs in conspiracy theories (e.g., Hughes & Machan, 2021), they are the result of normal psycho-social processes based on popular societal perceptions, such as political alienation and distrust of political institutions (Krekó, 2015). Conspiracy theories, in general, are linked to an individual's overall tendency to make sense of the world in a comfortable way.

The collective nature of conspiracy theories is expressed in terms of their cultural background and their targets. According to Krekó (2015), what distinguishes paranoid illusions from societal conspiracy beliefs is that paranoid individuals fear personal plots against themselves (Hofstadter, 1964; Barkun, 2003), while the alleged conspiracy is aimed at a group of people, such as a nation, a community, or a culture. Thus, conspiracy theories are motivated by the emotional processes underneath the group dynamics: its identity, goals and stereotypes reflect in the explanatory structure offered by the conspiracy narrative. Moreover, such a narrative serves as a way for a group to understand and make sense of their social experiences. This can include providing explanations for why things happened the way they did and assigning blame to others (the scapegoating mechanism, cfr. Bilewicz & Krzeminski, 2010). This can help to comfort group members and make their experiences more acceptable. Therefore, conspiracy beliefs function as explanatory and acquittal structures by buffering one's group from lack of collective self-esteem, by providing an explanation for unusual, remarkable and unforeseen events and, by addressing an external target, offering a means to satisfy ambitions of power and significance.

According to Jolley et al. (2020), conspiracy beliefs reduce normative political engagement, climate change awareness, and newborn vaccination (cfr. Cislak et al., 2021), while also boosting prejudice and discrimination against stigmatized groups and denying science-based facts. Conspiracy beliefs may also serve as an ideological fuel for political violence (Vegetti & Littvay, 2021). Indeed, they accomplish two necessary tasks to fulfill that purpose: they aspire to subvert the current societal

order and promote hostility as a means to fulfill such goal (cfr. Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Imhoff et al., 2021). According to Uscinski and Parent (2014), individuals who strongly believe in conspiracies are significantly more likely to oppose gun control and reform. According to Rottweiler and Gill (2020) political extremist and conspiracy beliefs share a common ground. Indeed, both propagate through the internet and social media, benefitting from the echo chamber dynamic (Cinelli et al., 2021) which favors information to circulate among like-minded peers, lessening the circumstances of disproof and refutation. Moreover, due to the easiness and wording simplicity proposed by the sources (for instance, the Q drops spread on 4chan, see Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020), together with the frequent ambiguity and opacity of the message, they often represent catchy and appealing elements to be shared on mainstream and alternative social media. In particular, alternative media platforms play an important role in facilitating polarized online communities where conspiracy theories can promote and amplify violent extremism (Bessi et al., 2015).

In the following chapter the mechanism underlying violent radicalization promoted by conspiracy beliefs will be described, by adopting the motivational framework offered by the Significance Quest Theory and the 3N model or radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2021; Bélanger et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2009). Within such theoretical framework conspiracy beliefs can be seen as a political narrative that, like other political narratives, aim at buffering one sense of self-failure and lack of social worth and, when shared by a plurality of significant others, can promote political violence and extremism as a means to restore a positive sense of the self.

CHAPTER 3. SIGNIFICANCE QUEST THEORY AND THE 3N MODEL OF RADICALIZATION

What is extremism?

Extremism could be considered as the end of a process of radicalization. Extremism can exist in many different forms (sport, diet, addiction, etc.), but the psychological dynamic is the same (Kruglanski et al., 2021; Baumgartner et al., 2021; Siev et al., 2021; Vallerand & Paquette, 2021; Levine & Kruglanski, 2021; Brymer & Bouchat, 2021; Molinario et al., 2021; Weimann, 2021). In common usage, the term extremism has two separate but related meanings. One regards the magnitude in which a phenomenon is manifested (e.g., "extreme poverty"), while the other concerns its rare occurrence, namely its low statistical frequency. These two features are combined in a psychological conception of extremism and moderation (Kruglanski et al., 2021). As a result, it's useful to consider extreme events as rare occurrences whose rarity stems from the intensity of their underlying motive.

Assuming that human individuals are characterized by a wide variety of needs, as outlined by Maslow (1943), they typically put the effort into achieving an average level of satisfaction in most of these needs. When they succeed and all their basic needs are in their area of satisfaction, they are in a state of motivational balance, or equilibrium (Kruglanski et al., 2021). In this state, the many demands exert constraints on one another, thus actions that satisfy one need while diminishing others are generally avoided.

Motivational imbalance, instead, occurs when a certain need takes precedence and overcomes all the others. Such an individual state of concern may be activated by situational factors such as an imminent danger. When occurring, it determines that one fundamental need (e.g., to survive) is aroused at an excessive magnitude, drowning out other basic demands and thus breaking the motivational balance. Because individuals normally attempt to meet all their fundamental necessities,

forsaking some of them when a dominating need pushes others out may be hard to handle; as a result, they tend to avoid motivational imbalance and the extreme conduct that comes with it. In other words, extreme conducts are typically limited in time and fundamentally serve to restore the balance as soon as possible (Kruglanski et al., 2021).

Although such a psychological mechanism applies to various types of extremism, despite their specific content, there are some outcomes that apparently disprove the homeostatic rationale underlying the motivational imbalance. That is the case occurring when the dominant need that overrides the others is the quest for significance, namely the need to matter, to be valuable in the eyes of one's significant others, and to gain social worth. According to studies concerning several areas of human behavior (Chirico et al., 2021; Brymer & Bouchat, 2021; Weimann, 2021), significance-motivated imbalance produces extremist conducts that persist over time, even pushing the individual to severe form of self-sacrifice with the purpose of matter and gain respect and social worth by the reference valued community (cfr. Dugas et al., 2016).

According to Significance Quest Theory (Kruglanski & Ellenberg, 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2022; Kruglanski & Bertelsen, 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Jasko et al., 2019; Kruglanski et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2018; Jasko et al., 2017; Dugas et al., 2016; Kruglanski et al., 2015; Bélanger, 2015; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2014, 2009), individual determinants of violent radicalization are expressions of an existential need to search for personal meaning and (re)affirm self-worth (i.e., Quest for Significance). Such a paradigm is integrated into the 3N model or radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Bélanger et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2018), which integrates the existential motivation to search for personal meaning (*Need*), aspects of an ideological nature that respond to epistemic reasons for knowledge construction (*Narrative*), and finally a normative element of social network influence (*Network*) that validates and supports the ideological narrative in predicting radicalization.

The 3N model was initially developed to study phenomena of violent extremism motivated by religious fundamentalism (Bélanger et al., 2014; Dugas & Kruglanski, 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2009), but has subsequently been used in studies on populism (Molinario et al., 2021; Kruglanski et al., 2021), conspiracy ideologies in violent organizations (Rousis et al., 2022), and extreme behavior in sport contexts (Chirico et al., 2021). According to the 3N model of radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2019), individuals engage in violent responses when three psychological factors interplay to motivate them: (1) the individual need that primarily drives the engagement, (2) the ideological narrative which reflects one's own group culture and (3) the normative influence of group members who endorse that narrative.

Need

Scholars have presented a variety of motives to explain specific terrorist intentions. They can serve both a promotion (to gain honor, social status, monetary benefit) or a compensation focus (to remedy for humiliation, injustice, and disrespect), but are driven by an equivalent fundamental motivation, namely the quest for significance (Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2013, 2014). Kruglanski et al (2022) define the quest for significance as the desire for social worth, the need to matter and to be respected by significant others, and can be triggered by the occurrence of two basic conditions: (1) the significance loss, or its threat, and (2) the significance gain. In this vein, conspiracy beliefs root in those affected by a group-based loss, when humiliation or shame is caused by one's group identification or membership in a certain category.

Psychological theorists have recognized the quest for personal significance as a basic human motive (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). Indeed, self-actualization concerns were at the top of Maslow's motivational hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Such self-actualization, according to Frankl (1984), is encompassed in and accomplished via endeavors to serve a purpose greater than oneself. For its part,

even positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) stated that searching for a purpose is at the heart of genuine happiness, and it may be achieved by committing oneself to a bigger cause. Evidences from Terror Management Theory (Solomon & Greenberg, 2019; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Greenberg et al., 2014; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012) agree in considering the salience of one's own mortality the most serious menace to one's sense of self-worth. Indeed, individuals are driven to join social groupings, defend the collective's worldview, and serve the group to avoid the prospect of personal insignificance (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). In particular, adherence to extreme groups is particularly suited to be explained by focusing on the individual's quest for personal significance triggered by a situational loss of social worth (Kruglanski et al., 2009). When the need for significance becomes prominent, individuals try to satisfy it as quickly as possible (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Therefore, they appeal to plain, simple, socially-built beliefs that, in their ease, provide the individual with self-certainty. In such situations, a belief in the conspiracy activities of others that unjustly undermine one's dignity helps defend sentiments of self-worth (Robins, 1997). Specifically, conspiracy beliefs relate to the need for uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017), in turn sharing evident similarities with the need for significance as well as narcissism (Cichoka et al., 2022; Molinario et al., 2021). Indeed, the need for uniqueness has been found to mediate the relationship between narcissism and belief in conspiracy theories (Kay, 2021). This evidence suggests that believing conspiracy theories can fulfill the need for feeling significant, respected, and important as also suggested by van Prooijen (2022).

It is possible to think of collective narcissism as a contribution to individual quest for significance that comes from social identity. The quest for significance can emanate from individual attainments or non-attainments, but also from insults to one's group. In this vein, collective narcissism measures the contribution to one's own sense of significance from the way one's group was humiliated. As reported by Jasko and colleagues (2020), operationalizing the quest for collective significance is possible via the collective narcissism scale (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Since, such

items measure the degree to which an individual believes that an important social group is not being treated as it deserves. I assumed that they captured the same motivational state—that is, feelings of dissatisfaction that one (or one's group) is not being recognized as deserved, which should induce the need for social significance and worth whose fulfillment should alleviate these feelings.

Narrative

The role of shared narratives in extreme groups has been taken into account, for instance, in the study of violent radicalization promoted by Jihad ideology (Jasko et al., 2020; Lobato et al., 2018; Kruglanski et al., 2015), Tamil nationalism (Gómez et al., 2021), as well as Far-right / White nationalism (Cullings, 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019). Conspiracy beliefs, in turn, have been linked to thin ideologies such as populism (Wojczewski, 2022; Littvay, 2022; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Bracewell, 2021; Hameleers, 2021; Bergman & Butter, 2020; Varis, 2020, Pintilescu & Magyari, 2020; Demeru, 2020; Jessen, 2019; Bergmanm, 2018; Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Indeed, populist narratives, aiming at restoring dignity and respect of the noble people betrayed by the evil elites (Mudde, 2004), work as a political mentality underlying conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen, 2018). As ideological narratives, conspiracy theories incorporate the two main elements of a terrorism-justifying ideology: a grievance and a culprit (Kruglanski et al., 2014). These two main aspects represent violence as a way of achieving importance: they recognize both a grievance committed against one's group and the culprit entity, or perpetrator, who is to blame.

Conspiracy theorists arise in times of strong collective frustration: economic crises, widespread disease, war, severe generalized uncertainty. Those conspiracy theories that justify violence as a means of redressing the groups' grievance are particularly suited to satisfying the need for significance, as violence is a primitive way of asserting one's dominance and power. In this vein, Mayer argues that conspiracy beliefs create a state of mind that can legitimize violent actions against

perceived powerful forces involved in a worldwide conspiracy if existential interests are threatened (Kruglanski et al., 2022).

Network

Since humans need for mutual understanding and a shared perception of reality (Echterhoff et al., 2009), the legitimacy of the violence-justifying ideology must be shared to be validated (Webber & Kruglanski, 2016). The group, already an epistemic provider (Kruglanski et al., 2006), figures as the primal source of consensual validation of the significance-bestowing narrative (Bélanger et al., 2019). According to the 3N model, the network has two main functions: it endorses the narrative and dispenses to the individual who follows the narrative the respect and social recognition they seek. Since violence typically constitutes a violent behavior, its legitimation through a violence-justifying narrative must be shared and validated by a network to become an actual possibility.

Bélanger and colleagues (2020) examined how social networks contributed to the process of radicalization. Indeed they found that affiliation to a radical network mediated the relationship between obsessive and harmonious passion (Mageau et al., 2009) and support for political violence. In turn, Jasko and colleagues (2020) tested the moderating role of belonging to radical versus non-radical social context in the relationship between the quest for significance and violent extremism. They surveyed a sample of participants belonging respectively to a peaceful community or to the violent Tigers of Tamil Eleam (LTTE) group in Sri Lanka. They found evidence that radical social context strengthens the link between the quest for collective significance and support for political violence.

CHAPTER 4. THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Overview of the Studies

The general aim of the present doctoral dissertation was to contribute to the literature about political violence induced by conspiracy beliefs, by deepening some overlooked explanatory aspects. As shown in Chapter 2, most of the studies explaining conspiracy beliefs-derived violence focused on conspiratorial attitudes and mentality (Brotherton et al., 2013), whereas only a few studies investigated such attitudes within a motivational framework (Kruglanski et al., 2022; Krekó, 2015). Such a scarcity of studies has as a consequence the absence of research investigating if and how group motivations would interact with such beliefs. Considering that collective narcissism is linked to both conspiracy beliefs (Golec de Zavala et al., 2022; Bertin et al., 2021; Hughes & Machan, 2021; Sternisko et al., 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Golec de Zavala et al., 2018; Cichoka et al., 2015; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012) and political violence (Hase et al., 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2019; Golec de Zavala, 2018), and that conspiracy beliefs were found a strong predictor of violent and non-violent behaviors, such as science-denialism (van Mulukom et al., 2022) or everyday crime (Jolley et al., 2019), this doctoral dissertation investigated the effects of conspiracy beliefs on the willingness to engage in extreme political actions both violent / non-violent actions within the 3N model of radicalization framework. In particular, this dissertation's research question can be outlined as it follows: do conspiracy beliefs promote violent and non-violent political actions as an ideological narrative justifying violence?

With reference to the research question, the main research hypotheses are summarized as it follows:

1. Collective narcissism (CN) is positively related to and Political Engagement (PE), that is both Non-violent (i.e., activism) and violent political engagement (i.e., radicalism);

2. The effect of CN on PE is mediated by Conspiracy beliefs (CB),

3. The relationship between CB and PE is moderated by Network supporting such beliefs (NET), that is that intention to engage in PE is higher at high vs low levers of CB and NET In formula: $CN \rightarrow CB \times NET \rightarrow PE$.

In addition to the main hypotheses, I also hypothesized that the moderated-mediation effect of CN on PE through CB and at high levels of NET, may persist even when controlling for the effect exerted by the individual mediatization for recognition (i.e., Quest for individual significance) and even when controlling for political orientation (from "Strongly left-wing" to "Strongly right-wing"). To test these hypotheses, I conducted three studies, of which two correlational (Study 1 and 2) and one experimental (Study 3).

Study 1 investigated the role of participants individual and collective need for significance on political engagement, through the mediating effect of Conspiracy beliefs interacting with Network social support to such beliefs within a sample of the general American population ($N_1 = 547$). The main purpose of Study 2 ($N_2 = 574$) was to extend the investigation on political violence induced by conspiracy beliefs in a sample of ideologically oriented participants (i.e., U.S. citizens who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential election) As in Study 1, I tested the concurring role of individual and collective Quest for significance in predicting violent and non-violent Political engagement, through the mediation effect of Conspiracy beliefs. Study 3 was preceded by a Pilot study aimed at developing an effective manipulation of collective quest for significance (i.e., collective narcissism) that was suitable for online experimentation. Study 3 consisted of a 2×2×2 between-subject factor design including novel experimental manipulation of collective narcissism, conspiracy beliefs and network support. Thus, the aim of Study 3 was to establish under what circumstances the effect individuals are more willing to engage in PE. I hypothesized that a group Quest for significance (Collective narcissism) may promote both ideological extremism and the

willingness to engage in violent action (violent), more than non-violent action (non-violent). Moreover, according to recent literature (Pummerer, 2022), a causal relationship between Conspiracy beliefs and such actions has been assumed.

The study overview is summarized in Table below:

Study	Design	Sample	Prescreen	N	X	Med	Mod	Cov	Y	Hypotheses
1	C	USA	_	547	CN	CB	NI	QFS POL	PE	1.1) PE ⟺ all the others 1.2) CN ⟹ CB ⟹ PE 1.3) CB × NI ⟹ PE.
2	C	USA	2020 Trump voters	574	CN	CB	NI	QFS POL	PE	2.1) PE ⟺ all the others 2.2) CN ⟹ CB ⟹ PE 2.3) CB × NI ⟹ PE.
Pilot	E Single-Factor	USA	2020 Trump voters	205	CN☆	_	_	_	_	condition ⟹ X
3	E 2×2×2	USA	2020 Trump voters	402	CN☆ CB☆ NI☆	_	_	QFS POL	PE	3.1) CN☆ ⟹ PE. 3.2) CB☆ ⟹ PE. 3.2) NI☆ ⟹ PE. 3.4) CN × CB × NI ⟹ PE.

where: PE = Political engagement (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), CN = Collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), QFS = Quest for significance (Molinario et al., submitted 2022), CB = Conspiracy beliefs (Brotherton et al., 2013 + ad hoc), NI = Network influence (adapted from Bélanger et al., 2019), POL = Political orientation, , C = correlational design, E = experimental design, ☆= experimental manipulation, ⟺ = correlation.

Ethics

All the studies were approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome. Every participant expressed their consent online. Those who agreed to proceed with the survey answered the questionnaire including the measures described as it follows.

STUDY 1

Materials & Method

Participants & Procedure.

Participants were recruited by Prolific.co, which allows researchers to customly pre-screen the sample. In this study, I selected American individuals only ($N = 547$, $W = 56\%$, $M_{age} = 37.5$, $SD_{age} = 14.2$). Before starting the survey (activated online via Qualtrics.com), they were asked to agree their consensus and informed on the topic that framed the survey. They responded to a questionnaire including several measures among the ones presented in the current research. Table A.2 shows how they are distributed by political orientation, mostly left-wing: 55% were Strongly, Moderate or Somewhat Left-wing, while 23% identified as "In the middle".

Measures.

All measures were administered by using a 7-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Political engagement. Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) developed a new scale of political engagement, measuring willingness to sacrifice for a group or cause, including ten original items varying from low-risk or low-cost actions (volunteering for an organization that advocates for the political rights of a group) to high-risk or high-cost activities (breaking the law, attacking police officers). Such a scale is two-component structured, showing two distinct latent factors: non-violent (legal) activism and violent (illegal) activism, namely radicalism. *Activism*. Non-violent political engagement, namely the non-violent intention to engage in political actions, was measured by Moskalenko & McCauley's (2009) adaptation of four items expressing the willingness to participate in pacific demonstrations (e.g. "I would travel for one hour to join in a public rally, protest, or

demonstration.", α = .87, M = 3.81, SD = 1.55). *Radicalism.* Support for political violence (Violent political engagement) was adapted from Moskalenko & McCauley's (2009). It consists of three items of increasing severity expressing the intention to engage in radical political actions: "I would support an organization that fights for our rights as free citizens, even if it sometimes resorts to violence", "I would participate in a public protest against the oppression of our freedom, even if I thought the protest might turn violent", "I would attack the police or security forces if I saw them denying us our rights as free citizens" (α = .88, M = 2.67, SD = 1.56).

Collective narcissism (5 items, adapted from Golec de Zavala, 2009) was measured by adapting the procedure of group identification from Jackson (2002). Participants were asked to think about various social groups they belonged to, and particularly to the most valuable one for them. Then, they were asked to write that group by the following instructions: "In the box below please write down a group that you belong to and consider a part of your identity; that is, a group that is important and valuable to you. We will refer to this group as your *ingroup*, since it is a group you are in". Subsequently, they were administered with the Collective narcissism scale adapted to the generic ingroup (e.g., "*My ingroup* deserves special treatment", "I will never be satisfied until *my ingroup* gets all it deserves", α = .80, M = 4.09, SD = 1.34). The complete instructions are included in the Appendix.

Conspiracy beliefs. Measured using both two subscales known in the literature ("Malevolent global elite" and "Personal well-being", Brotherton et al., 2013) and by ad hoc creation of a new sub-dimension pertaining to immigration (5 items). In the first two cases, I administered the top items according to loadings of the factor analysis presented by Brotherton and colleagues (2013). The "Malevolent global elite" (3 items) dimension was measured by using the top 3 items according to loadings of the factor analysis presented by Brotherton and colleagues (2013): "The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control", "A small, secret group

of people is actually in control of the world economy", "A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions" (α = .95, M = 3.56, SD = 1.75). The item "Certain significant world events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world politics" was not administered. The "Personal Well-Being" dimension was measured using the same criterion as the previous measure, so the top three items were administered by factor loading: "The rapid spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organization", "Cures for certain deadly and common diseases exist, but are being deliberately withheld", "Certain natural disasters have in fact been the result of secret testing of powerful and advanced technology with unknown capabilities", "The pharmaceutical industry administers harmful treatments without people's consent in order to keep people sick and boost drug sales". Again, I preferred not to administer items such as "Experiments involving new drugs are carried out on the general public without their knowledge", as this could have been implicitly interpreted as a reference to the mass vaccination program, which was explicitly mentioned later in the survey. In addition, I included "Some viruses and/or diseases which many people are infected with were created in laboratories as bio-weapons", because of the COVID-19 pandemic (α = .93, M = 2.96, SD = 1.74). Conspiracy beliefs about immigration (ad-hoc) were measured using five items that reflect statements borrowed from Alt-Right discourse on immigration, which often refers to the "Great Replacement" (Cosentino, 2020): "Immigration policies are actually a precise plan for the ethnic replacement of our national community, "The global elites have planned immigration policies in order to import masses of cheap workers", "The real managers of the world order want to mix all ethnicities and cultures to destroy national identities", "Financial elites want to import immigrants to reduce the wages of our national working class", "Mass immigration is aimed to destabilize our national economy" (α = .94, M = 2.75, SD = 1.60). I successively aggregated the 11 conspiratorial measures into a single index containing information from each of them (α = .97, M = 3.07, SD = 1.50), made possible by an exploratory factor analysis that revealed a unidimensional structure (62.8% explained variance).

Network influence. Finally, I measured how individuals' social networks supported belief in such conspiracies. To do this, after the 11 conspiracy-related statements, I asked participants to indicate the extent to which their family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors (4 items) overall agreed with the above statements ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.64$).

Quest for significance. A 6-item scale developed by Molinario and colleagues (2022), presenting items related to the desire for social worth (e.g., "I wish I could be respected more", "I would like to be more important to others."). The scale was originally conceived as a general measure capable of indexing individuals' stable inclination to quest for recognition and dignity. In this vein, the need for significance is theoretically conceptualized as a unidimensional construct that captures the fundamental desire to matter, to merit respect, to "be someone" recognized as worthy by others. ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.63$).

Data analysis

All analyses were performed with SPSS 24 (Rasch et al., 2011). First, variables were subjected to Reliability test by employing Cronbach's alpha (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). I chose .80 as a cutoff for sufficient reliability. Once obtained a single aggregation by arithmetic mean for each variable, I computed the Pearson correlation matrix to assess the eventual correlations and their statistical significance. Finally, the aggregated indices were employed as dependent (Radicalism or Activism) or independent variables (Collective narcissism), mediator (Conspiracy beliefs) and moderator (Network support).

Results

Correlations. All measured variables showed mutual correlations, both positive and statistically significant (cfr. Tab. A.3.), except right-wing political orientation, showing significant positive correlations with Conspiracy beliefs ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and Network support ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) only. As expected, the highest correlations occurred between Activism and Radicalism dimensions ($r = .60$, $p < .000$), and between Conspiracy beliefs and Network support ($r = .54$, $p < .000$). Above them, I observed how the predictors were positively associated with both the outcomes: Quest for significance (Activism: $r = .15$, $p < .000$; Radicalism: $r = .24$, $p < .000$), Collective narcissism (Activism: $r = .29$, $p < .000$; Radicalism: $r = .22$, $p < .000$), Conspiracy beliefs (Activism: $r = .36$, $p < .000$; Radicalism: $r = .42$, $p < .000$, Network support (Activism: $r = .30$, $p < .000$; Radicalism: $r = .28$, $p < .000$).

Moderated mediation. To test our hypothesis, I employed the PROCESS macro to run a moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2018; Model 14) with collective narcissism as independent variable, the individual quest for significance and right-wing political orientations as covariates.

Political engagement (total effect model). The main effects of collective narcissism on political engagement were positive and significant (cfr. Fig. A.1). In particular, collective narcissism showed higher effect on non-violent engagement (Activism: $\beta = .22$, $SE = .05$, $p = <.001$) rather than on violent (Radicalism: $\beta = .14$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$).

Conspiracy beliefs (mediator). To include the possible mediating role of conspiracy beliefs, I examined the relationship between them and both collective narcissism and quest for significance (cfr. Tab. A.5). As expected, collective narcissism was a significant predictor of conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = .26$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). Right-wing political orientation was also positively related to conspiracy

beliefs (β = .37, *SE* = .03, *p* < .000), whereas individual quest for significance had no significant effect in predicting conspiracy beliefs (β = .09, *SE* = .04, *p* = .18). Test of Collective narcissism (independent variable) × Conspiracy beliefs (mediator) interaction revealed no significant effect observed in predicting either Activism (Tab. A.8, *F(1,541)* = .01, *p* = .90), or Radicalism (Tab. A.16, *F(1,541)* = 3.35, *p* = .07).

Effect of conspiracy beliefs and network influence on political engagement. Conspiracy beliefs were found to exert a higher effect on violent Radicalism (β = .39, *SE* =.05, *p* = < .001) rather than on non-violent Activism (β = .24, *SE* = .05, *p* <.001), as expected from comparison with the literature (cfr. Imhoff et al., 2021). Both relationships were found to significantly interact with the influence of the social network in validating conspiracy theories (cfr. Tabb. A.7 and A.15). The simple effect of network support on political engagement was lower for violent radicalism (β = .14, *SE* = .04, *p* = .001) than for non-violent activism (β = .21, *SE* = .05, *p* <.001). Interaction effects (narrative × network → engagement) were positive and significant for both types of political activism: violent radicalism (β = .09, *SE* = .03, *p* < .001) and non-violent activism (β = .11, *SE* = .03, *p* < .001). Conditional effects at different levels of network influence showed how the effect of CN on Activism was significant at mean and high (mean + 1 *SD*) values of the Network, whereas the effect of CN on Radicalism was significant at all levels of Network (mean ± 1 *SD*) (cfr. Tabb. A.9 and A.17).

Direct effect of collective narcissism and quest for significance on political engagement. Direct effect analysis showed that Collective narcissism and individual Quest for significance show opposite trends when having an effect on political engagement (cfr. Tabb. A.7 and A.15). In fact, while non-violent Activism was predicted by Collective narcissism (β = .16, *SE* = .05, *p* = .001) but

not by the Quest for significance (β = .05, *SE* = .04, *p* = .17), violent Radicalism was predicted by the Quest for significance (β = .16, *SE* = .04, *p* <.001), but not directly by Collective narcissism (β = .04, *SE* = .05, *p* = .40). For both the outcomes, right-wing political orientation showed a negative and significant covariate effect (Activism: β = -.11, *SE* = .04, *p* = .005; Radicalism: β = -.19, *SE* = .04, *p* < .001).

Indirect effect of collective narcissism on political engagement through conspiracy beliefs. Finally, analyses examined the extent to which conspiracy beliefs mediated the effects of collective narcissism on political engagement (cfr. Tabb. A.11 and A.19). Different effects were found for each type of engagement. Specifically, the indirect effect of collective narcissism on political engagement was positive and significant on average (Activism: β = .06, 95% CI [.03, .10]; Radicalism: β = .10, 95% *CI* [.05, .15]) and higher (Activism: β = .11, 95% *CI* [.06, .16]; Radicalism: β = .12, 95% *CI* [.07, .19]) values of network support. Pairwise contrasts between conditional indirect effects were significant on each level of Network support for both types of political engagement (cfr. Tabb. A.13 and A.21).

Multicollinearity diagnostics. Since the moderator variable (network support) was highly correlated (*r* = .54, *p* < .000) with the moderator predictor (conspiracy beliefs), it was possible that the regression coefficients of both variables and the interaction were biased. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed the following values for tolerance (conspiracy beliefs = .10; network support = .21; conspiracy × network = .05) and variance inflation factor (conspiracy beliefs = 9.71, network support = 4.77; conspiracy × network = 18.14). These values indicate that there may be multicollinearity present in the data, which can affect the interpretation of the results. In particular, the high variance inflation factors for the main effects and the interaction suggest that the effects of conspiracy beliefs and network support on the outcome may be confounded by their relationship with each other.

Discussion

In the current study, I investigated the relationship between collective narcissism, conspiracy beliefs, network support, and political engagement using data from the general U.S. population. As expected, I found that collective narcissism had a positive and significant effect on activism and radicalization, mediated by conspiracy beliefs and network support. I also found that collective narcissism directly predicted non-violent political engagement, but not radical engagement. For both types of engagement, the interaction between conspiracy beliefs and network support yielded a positive and statistically significant effect.

These results provide initial support for the 3N model of radicalization, which posits that individual needs, ideological narratives, and social networks interact to promote radical political engagement. Specifically, the findings suggest that collective narcissism, through its relationship with conspiracy beliefs and network support, plays a key role in predicting both non-violent and violent political engagement. Furthermore, the observed interaction between conspiracy beliefs and network support highlights the importance of considering the dynamic relationship between these factors in predicting radicalization.

This study represents a significant contribution to the existing literature, as it is the first to explore the simultaneous effects of need, narrative, and network on political engagement. Additionally, the results extend previous research by examining the mediating role of conspiracy beliefs in predicting non-violent and violent political engagement, and by investigating the interaction between ideological narratives and social networks in promoting radicalization. Further research is needed to replicate and extend these findings, and to better understand the mechanisms underlying the observed effects.

STUDY 2

Study 2 replicated the framework of Study 1 in a pre-screened sample of ideologically oriented participants (i.e, people who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential elections). Trump's constituency has been the subject of scientific investigation for several years (cfr. Wang & van Prooijen, 2022; Robertson et al., 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Hornsey et al., 2020; Morgan & Lee, 2018; Ekins, 2017; Rhoads et al., 2017), but just a proportion of them examined their motivational underpinnings to political engagement under the lens of the Significance Quest Theory (cfr. Grzymala-Moszczynska et al., 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2021; Jasko et al., 2020). The present Study 2 aimed at filling this gap.

Materials & Method

Participants & Procedure.

In Study 2, I introduced a further sample pre-screening by selecting 2020 Donald Trump's voters only ($N = 700$, *Women* $= 56\%$, $M_{age} = 45.1$, $SD_{age} = 14.9$). Exclusion criteria were the following: 1) incoherence: those recruited on Prolific based on voting for Donald Trump in 2020, then answered "No" to the question "Have you voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Elections?" in the questionnaire; 2) attitude change: although having voted for Trump, those who answered no to the question "Would you define yourself as a person who supports Donald Trump?". Final sample accounted for $N^* = 574$ included participants. Table B.2 shows how they are distributed by political orientation, mostly right-wing: 83% were *Strongly*, *Moderate* or *Somewhat Right-wing*, while 14% identified as *In the middle*.

Measures.

The measures employed here (Activism/Radicalism, Quest for significance, Collective narcissism, Conspiracy beliefs, Network influence, political orientation) were administered in the same modality as described in Study 1, except for collective narcissism (e.g., "I will never be satisfied until people who voted for Trump get all they deserve") and the dependent variables (e.g. "I would travel for one hour to join in a public rally, protest, or demonstration for an organization that fights for Trump voters' political and legal rights", "I would attack the police or security forces if I saw them beating Trump voters"), measured with respect to Trump's constituency.

Data analysis

Data analytical procedures pursued were the same as the Study 1. First, I computed Cronbach's Alpha statistic for internal consistency. I considered as "sufficient" a coefficient above $\alpha = .80$. Second, I employed the Pearson correlation coefficient to assess how the variables associated with each other.

Results

The resulting correlations in Study 2 partially follow the pattern found in the previous study. Contrary to what was observed in Study 1, Study 2 yielded all positive correlations among the measured variables. In this case, the highest correlations were observed between Collective narcissism and Activism ($r = .51$, $p < .000$) and, according to Study 1, between Conspiracy beliefs and Network supporting such beliefs ($r = .51$, $p < .000$). Particularly in this sample, Conspiracy beliefs correlated almost equally with both Activism ($r = .32$, $p < .000$) and Radicalism ($r = .31$, $p < .000$). As expected, the individual Quest for significance was found to correlate more with Radicalism ($r = .23$, $p < .000$) than Activism ($r = .13$, $p = .001$). Right-wing political orientation, in turn, revealed a significant correlation with Activism ($r = .25$, $p < .001$) but not with Radicalism ($r = .05$, $p = .156$).

Moderated mediation. As in Study 1, I used the PROCESS macro to run a moderated mediation (Model 14) with collective narcissism as independent variable, individual quest for significance and political orientation as covariate.

Political engagement (total effect model). Even in this case, positive and significant effects of collective narcissism on political engagement were found (cfr. Fig. B.1 and B.3). Collective narcissism, when administered to a random sample of people who voted for Trump in 2020 and worded in a way related to him, has a greater impact on non-violent engagement (Activism: $\beta = .63$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) than violent (Radicalism: $\beta = .32$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$).

Conspiracy beliefs (mediator). Even in this case, conspiracy beliefs were predicted by collective narcissism ($\beta = .42$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, cfr. Tab. B.5). In turn, conspiracy beliefs as ideological extremism had positive effects on both kinds of political engagement, but statistically significant on radicalism only ($\beta = .12$, $SE = .05$, $p = .006$). Contrary to Study 1, the quest for personal significance had a positive effect in predicting conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = .12$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). Test

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of collective narcissism (Need) × conspiracy beliefs (Narrative) interaction also revealed a positive and significant effect in promoting Radicalism ($F(1,567) = 5.84$, $p = .016$), but not Activism ($F(1,567) = 2.20$, p = .138).

Effect of conspiracy beliefs and network influence on political engagement. As in Study 1, conspiracy beliefs had a positive effect on Radicalism ($\beta = .12$, *SE* $= .04$, p $= .005$), but no significant effect on non-violent Activism ($\beta = .06$, *SE* $= .05$, $p = .245$), as shown in Tables B.7 and B.14. Even in this case, both relationships interact considerably with the effect of network influence in validating conspiracies. As for Study 1, simple effects of network influence on political engagement was lower for violent radicalism ($\beta = .16$, *SE* $= .05$, $p = .001$) than for non-violent activism ($\beta = .19$, *SE* $= .05$, $p = .001$). Positive and significant interaction effects (Narrative × Network → Engagement) were found for both types of political activism: violent Radicalism ($\beta = .06$, *SE* $= .02$, $p = .011$) and non-violent Activism ($\beta = .07$, *SE* $= .03$, $p = .009$). The interaction effects were significant at average and higher (+1 *SD*) levels of network support for Radicalism, whereas Activism at higher levels only, contrary to Study 1 (cfr. Tabb. B.10 and B.17).

Direct effects of collective narcissism on political engagement. As shown in Table B.7, while non-violent Activism was strongly predicted by collective narcissism ($\beta = .57$, *SE* $= .05$, $p < .001$), no effect was brought by the individual quest for significance ($\beta = .04$, *SE* $= .04$, $p = .317$). Contrary (cfr. Tab. B.14), violent Radicalism was significantly predicted by both collective narcissism ($\beta = .24$, *SE* $= .05$, $p < .001$) and quest for significance ($\beta = .11$, *SE* $= .03$, $p = .001$).

Indirect effect of collective narcissism on political engagement through conspiracy beliefs. The indirect effect of collective narcissism on political engagement (Activism: $\beta = .06$, 95% *CI* [.01,.12]; Radicalism: $\beta = .08$, 95% *CI* [.03,.13]) was positive and statistically significant for higher Network support values (cfr. Tabb. B.10 and B.17). Indices of moderated mediation was significant (.02, 95% *CI* [.00,.05]. As for Study 1, on each level of network influence, pairwise comparisons

between conditional indirect effects were significant for both types of political engagement (cfr. Tabb. B.12 and B.19).

   Multicollinearity diagnostics. Since the moderator variable (network support) was highly correlated ($r = .51$, $p < .000$) with the moderator predictor (conspiracy beliefs), we assessed the presence of multicollinearity. Diagnostics showed the following values for tolerance (conspiracy beliefs = .10; network support = .20; conspiracy × network = .05) and variance inflation factor (conspiracy beliefs = 10.23, network support = 4.96; conspiracy × network = 19.53).

Discussion

Study 2 replicates findings emerged in Study 1 in a more specific ideological framework. By sampling from a specific ideologically oriented population (U.S. citizens who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 elections), I assessed how collective narcissism (specifically related to such group) may fuel not only violent forms of political engagement, but also non-violent/legal ones, when the ideological narrative interacts with a social network validating such a narrative. In this case, compared to a sample from the general U.S. population (Study 1), I observed a greater role of the quest for significance (both individual and collective) in predicting the proneness to conspiracy beliefs. As expected, due to a majority of right-wing participants, the contribution by political orientation was smaller, compared to Study 1. In turn, Conspiracy beliefs had a smaller effect on both Activism and Radicalism, diminished by the predictive strength of Trump-specific collective narcissism. Support of the network towards the conspiracy claims, in Sample 2, yielded simple effects comparable to Study 1 in promoting both Activism and Radicalism, and with all positive and significant interactions with Conspiracy beliefs.

Results showed how, as in Study 1, there was a positive and significant indirect effect of collective narcissism, via conspiracy beliefs, in promoting political engagement. In this particular case, by surveying a sample of ideologically oriented participants, who voted for Donald Trump in 2020, a direct effect of collective narcissism on both kinds of political engagement (both Activism and Radicalism) was observed. It emerged how the Narrative $\times$ Network interaction effect persisted even when covarying with the individual Quest for significance. Contrary to Study 1, political orientation was not a significant antecedent of political engagement. Moreover, it emerged a significant interaction of collective narcissism (Need) $\times$ conspiracy beliefs (Narrative) in predicting Radicalism, but not Activism. Such evidence, emerged in a sample of ideologically oriented participants, but not observed among the general population, suggested designing a three-factor

between-subject experiment, in order to test the complete interaction pattern between Need, Narrative and Network.

With reference to the Hypotheses 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3, Study 2 verified how there was a positive relationship between Collective narcissism and Political Engagement, mediated by Conspiracy beliefs interacting with the Network supporting such beliefs and, as in Study 1, there was a positive relationship between the individual Quest for significance and the violent political engagement. With reference to the general research question, Study 2 confirmed the relationship between the measured variables as suggested by the literature comparison, and showed how the interaction hypothesis Narrative × Network suggested by the 3N model could be replicable in a correlational sample of ideologically oriented participants. Moreover, it showed how this evidence persisted even controlling for the individual Quest for significance and political orientation. In particular, it emerged how the Quest for significance correlated more with the willingness to engage violent actions (Radicalism), rather than legal/non-violent ones (Activism). The significant effect by QFS indicates that conspiracy beliefs serve a collective and also an individual motivational aspect. In the specific case of the Trump voters, the election loss affected them both as a group and as individuals.

Furthermore, although the correlational design of the study does not allow for causal inferences, it is in line with over a decade of psychological research about radicalization and violence, and shed light on the motivational underpinning of political engagement.

STUDY 3

Study 3 was conducted as the first step toward experimentally establishing the proposed relationship between collective narcissism and both conspiracy beliefs and political engagement (Pummerer, 2022). As such, I first aimed to design a manipulation for both collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs, in order to run an online experiment.

Materials & Method

Participants & Procedure.

Pilot study

Aiming at developing a manipulation for collective narcissism suitable and effective for online experimentation, I am following Webber and colleagues (2018). They designed a loss of significance (LoS) manipulation, imitating how LoS was assessed in the survey data, specifically, by asking participants to recall a time in which they felt ashamed, humiliated, and experienced people laughing at them. Because I operationalized collective narcissism as a group quest for significance, I adapted the experimental manipulation of the significance loss to collective narcissism, via written re-evocation. Participants from Study 2 (N = 574), after having answered all the items, were randomly assigned to two conditions:

1. Experimental: "To learn more about how people recall past information, we'd like you to write about a personal experience you have had. Think back to a situation in which you, as a Trump voter, were feeling humiliated and ashamed because (you felt like) people were laughing at you. Provide a detailed description of who humiliated you, what this (these)

person(s) did, how you felt during this experience and why you, as a Trump voter, feel you deserved better treatment than you received."

2. Control: "To learn more about how people recall past information, we'd like you to write about a personal experience you have had. Specifically, I would like you to think back to the last time you went to a grocery store. While recalling, please provide a detailed description of your trip to the grocery store and how it made you feel."

Text data analysis allowed us to select a reduced set (n = 5) of written experiences to be administered as a reading task of a further (Study 3) experimental manipulation. Through the LIWC software (Boyd et al., 2022), it has been possible to select the most appropriate written memories in terms of personal humiliation, shame and lack of personal significance, based on lexicon. Those whose negative feelings as voters originated from Donald Trump himself (e.g., "I felt ashamed during the Capitol Hill fiasco because he was encouraging people to attack our government.") were excluded. The textual corpus description, in terms of word number and types, is presented in Table D.20.

The following written memories were selected as a reading task for manipulating collective narcissism:

1. Participant 1: "The people in my neighborhood label Trump supports as lunatics. I often get mixed into that crow simply because I support Trump. It made me feel terrible and like I was disrespected. I deserved better because Trump was doing good things for this country".

2. "My neighbors insult me all the time, we can't have a conversation without them bringing political views into it. They are intelligent people and know how to make one feel very inferior for their own beliefs and opinions".

3. Participant 3: "I was ridiculed by one of my bosses for being a Trump supporter. I only felt humiliated because I believed it to be totally inappropriate. Political differences should not be brought up in the workplace".

4. Participant 4: "When my sister-in-law found out I voted for Trump she laughed and just bashed me for weeks. I felt mad and angry. I don't feel I should be treated that way as I feel that I can vote for who I like".

5. Participant 5: "I was humiliated when someone asked me why I voted for Trump, and they made me feel stupid for not wanting to talk about it. I shut down because I didn't want to talk about it, and they made me feel ashamed and humiliated."

These five written memories were used as a reading task for manipulating collective narcissism in the experimental condition. In the control condition, I used memories from the grocery store (e.g., "I went to the grocery store yesterday, to get a gallon of water. I walked to the aisle, grabbed the gallon, then walked to the check-out lane and paid for it. It didn't really make me feel any specific type of way"), paying attention to not include those who recalled it as a negative experience (e.g., "It was super crowded with people and it made me feel uncomfortable and anxious", "A pleasant trip to the store, but after going inside and seeing how much the food prices had become, It made me depressed!! Thank you Joe Biden, You senile old bastard!!"). Once defined the two conditions, I included them in an online survey and selected a new sample of Donald Trump voters (N = 205). After having been randomly assigned to one of two conditions, they were administered with the collective narcissism scale related to Trump voters, as in Study 2. Their political orientation is shown in Table C.2. Mean comparison across groups (cfr. Tab. C.3) showed the effectiveness of the manipulation on collective narcissism ($t = 4.41$, $df = 203.00$, $p < .001$) and individual quest for significance ($t = 2.76$, $df = 203.00$, $p = .006$).

Main study

To run the main experimental study, I recruited a new sample of Trump voters ($N = 500$) via Prolific.co. This study, intended as a 2×2×2 factor design, included three variables to be manipulated: Collective narcissism, Conspiracy beliefs, and Network support. Collective narcissism was manipulated by following the Pilot procedure. To induce conspiratory beliefs by adapting a procedure developed in previous works (cfr. Jolley et al., 2018; Kay et al., 2005; Jost et al., 2005), participants were asked to read a detailed journalistic paragraph that described how the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections were rigged by democrats. Contrary to former studies, there has been no need to create ex novo a fake pro-conspiracy article. Indeed, I employed a real article published on the conservative media LifeSiteNews: (https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/2000-mules-documentary-argues-that-paid-ballot-traffickers-non-profits-stole-the-2020-election-for-biden/), claiming that " [there] was an organized effort to subvert a free and fair election", supported by alleged evidences of vote fraud. To experimentally manipulate the Network support, it has been necessary to adapt the construct to be feasible in online surveys. Instead of asking participants of their own personal social network (family, friends, colleagues, neighbors), it has been chosen to show them a fake poll, reporting different percentages of Trump voters believing the above-mentioned conspiracy (80% in High condition, 40% for Low Network support).

After being administered with the quest for significance scale, included as covariate, participants were randomly assigned in the eight experimental conditions. As manipulation checks, I included the collective narcissism scale (related to Trump voters) and, for conspiracy beliefs, one item which asked to indicate to what extent "There has been an organized effort to subvert the 2020 U.S. presidential election" in a 7-point likert scale. Therefore, participants were administered with measures of activism and radicalism, as in Study 2.

Measures & Conditions.

In this survey, participants were first asked to provide written consent. They were then asked to provide information about their demographics, followed by questions related to the Quest for Significance scale (Molinario et al., unpublished work). The survey then moved on to the first experimental condition (collective narcissism Low vs. High), which involved the random assignment of participants to one of two conditions. This was followed by a manipulation check to assess the effectiveness of the collective narcissism manipulation. Then, participants were randomly assigned to the second experimental condition (conspiracy beliefs (Low vs. High) × network support (Low vs. High). The second experimental condition involved assessing participants' levels of conspiracy beliefs, and how those beliefs were impacted by network support. Another manipulation check was conducted to assess participants' responses to a single conspiracy item. Finally, the survey concluded with questions related to violent and non-violent activism using the Activism & Radicalism scale (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009.

Data analysis

As for Study 1 and 2, analyses were performed by SPSS 24. I ran independent samples t-tests for evaluating simple effects, and ANCOVA to assess eventual interaction in presence of the quest of significance as covariate. As in Study 2, I excluded participants who declared to having not voted for Trump or to not currently supporting him. Final sample included $N^* = 402$ (Women = 51%, $M_{age} = 37.9$, $SD_{age} = 13.7$) participants.

Results

Descriptive statistics and participants' distribution across the eight cells are presented in Tab. D.1. Their political orientation is shown in Table D.2: even in this case, most of them (75%) identified as *Strongly*, *Moderately* or *Somewhat Right-Wing*, while 20% as *In the middle*.

Mean comparison

To assess the experimental effect of collective narcissism across groups, independent samples t-tests was performed. As expected, participants high in collective narcissism (manipulation check: $t = 6.44$, $df = 400.00$, $p < .001$) showed significantly higher values of political engagement (violent and non-violent) rather than those in the control condition. In line with Study 2, it emerged that, among a sample of people who voted for Donald Trump in the U.S. 2020 presidential election, collective narcissism exerted an higher effect on non-violent activism ($t = 2.85$, $df = 400.00$, $p = .005$), rather than on violent radicalism ($t = 2.65$, $df = 400.00$, $p = .009$, cfr. Tab. D.4). According to the literature (cfr. Golec de Zavala, 2018), it emerged that experimentally-induced collective narcissism had a significant effect on proneness to conspiracy beliefs, measured as a single-item manipulation check. Indeed, those in the experimental condition were significantly higher in conspiracy beliefs ($t = 3.14$, $df = 400.00$, $p = .002$) rather than the control group. Such a finding is in line with the mediation hypothesis as conducted in Study 1 and 2. As expected, even the conspiracy factor had a positive and significant effect on the dependent variables. Surprisingly, it affected more non-violent activism ($t = 4.96$, $df = 400.00$, $p < .001$) rather than violent radicalism ($t = 3.92$, $df = 400.00$, $p < .001$). No significant effect was observed by comparing means across the network factor (Activism: $t = .86$, $df = 400.00$, $p = .98$, Radicalism: $t = .63$, $df = 400.00$, $p = .44$).

ANCOVA

To assess eventual interaction effects, a a 2×2×2 between-subject ANCOVA, including the quest for significance and political orientation as covariates, was performed. As expected, the model yielded significant main effects for both the dependent variables (cfr. Tabb. D.7 and D.9). Specifically, and in line with the correlational evidence emerged in Study 2, I found the highest effect by conspiracy beliefs (Activism: $F(1,393) = 25.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$; Radicalism: $F(1,393) = 21.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$), followed by collective narcissism (Activism: $F(1,393) = 17.96$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .02.$; Radicalism: $F(1,393) = 9.91$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .02$) and quest for significance (Activism: $F(1,427) = 15.60$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$; Radicalism: $F(1,393) = 9.65$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Interaction term Collective narcissism × Conspiracy beliefs exerted no significant effect neither on non-violent activism ($F(1,393) = 2.55$, $p = .294$, $\eta^2 = .00$) or violent radicalism ($F(1,393) = .04$, $p = .849$, $\eta^2 = .00$). Right-wing political orientation, contrary to Study 2, yielded a significant effect related to Activism ($F(1,393) = 27.70$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$) but not on Radicalism ($F(1,393) = 2.19$, $p = .204$, $\eta^2 = .00$). Also contrary to Study 1 and 2 correlational evidence, the interaction terms between the explanatory variables in the ANCOVA did not show statistically significant relationships either with activism (CN × CB: $F(1,393) = 1.39$, $p = 0.238$, $\eta2 = 0.00$; collective narcissism × network: $F(1,393) = 0.18$, $p = 0.674$, $\eta2 = 0.00$; conspiracy beliefs × network: $F(1,393) = 0.00$, $p = 0.972$, $\eta2 = 0.00$; collective narcissism × conspiracy beliefs × network: $F(1,393) = 0.22$, $p = 0.640$, $\eta2 = 0.00$), nor with radicalism (collective narcissism × network ($F(1,393) = 0.39$, $p = 0.534$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$), conspiracy beliefs × network ($F(1,393) = 0.25$, $p = 0.615$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$), and collective narcissism × conspiracy beliefs × network ($F(1,393) = 0.41$, $p = 0.524$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$)).

Post-hoc comparison based on estimated marginal means (cfr. Tabb D.8 and D.10, Figg. D.1 and D.2) revealed a significant contrast between the two extreme conditions ([Low, Low] vs. [High, High] for both the types of political engagement (Activism: $t = 5.63$, $df = 397.00$, $p < .001$; Radicalism: $t = 4.71$, $df = 397.00$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Study 3 provided experimental evidence of the effects that collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs have as antecedents of political engagement. Although there is a body of literature about experimental settings aimed to induce conspiratory thinking (e.g., Cookson et al., 2021; Jolley et al., 2020), this was the first study presenting a successful manipulation of collective narcissism, here intended as a group quest for significance, according to the 3N model of radicalization (e.g., Jasko et al., 2020; Bélanger et al., 2019). Conspiracy beliefs experimental manipulation, in turn, has been realized by adopting a reading clue which was not fake (as, for instance, the one adopted by Jolley et al., 2019), but directly borrowed by the U.S. media environment. As predicted, I found positive and significant main effects on both the types of political engagement, non-violent and violent. Specifically, those who were conditioned to be higher in collective narcissism endorsed both non-violent and violent activism more than those who were lower.

Exposure to conspiracy beliefs, in turn, revealed to be a major antecedent for political engagement and, surprisingly, more effective on non-violent activism rather than on violent radicalism. With reference to the hypotheses summarized in the previous section, Study 3 confirmed hypotheses 3.1 and 3.2. In particular, it has emerged that political engagement, both as non-violent Activism and violent Radicalism, was significantly predicted by Collective narcissism and Conspiracy beliefs, in a sample of U.S. citizens who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 election. Contrary to correlational evidence emerged in Study 1 and 2, there has been no significant mean differences across two levels (Low vs. High) of network support (H. 3.3). This evidence suggests that different types of social networks (one's personal relationships versus one's constituency) could be specifically explored, but this is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The hypotheses regarding interaction effects (H. 3.4) have not been verified either. Possible reasons for such an unsuccess could lie in poor experimental settings given by online trials. In this case, the scarcity of a Web-based

experimental environment may have contributed to the inefficiency of the procedure. As reported by several investigations about online experimentation in psychology (cfr. van Steenbergen & Bocanegra, 2016; Zhou & Fishbach, 2016), web-based experiments are severely impacted by the absence of environmental constraints which are entirely under the control of researchers in a conventional laboratory setting.

A further pitfall of the present experiment may be the sample itself. Indeed, whereas in Study 2 the extreme narrative to which the participants' social network adhered concerned general themes of mainstream U.S. political debate (globalization, personal welfare, immigration), in this case I selected a very specific conspiracy theory (2020 election fraud) to expose to the sample, and even the dependent variables were modeled to adhere to a generic constituency of Trump voters (e.g., "I would attack the police or security forces if I saw them beating up those who voted for Trump"). In this case, the increased relevance of the selected topic may have increased respondents' biases, even taking into consideration how the contemporary extreme right is susceptible to victimhood (Boussalis et al., 2022; Marcks & Pawelz, 2022; Sengul, 2021). In support of this conjecture, a sample of comments written by participants at the end of the survey may be illustrative: "Wow. You must really hate Donald Trump and his supporters.", "Best of luck contorting your study results to fit your preconceived notions!", "I take offense to the fact that the facilitators of this survey seem to think that Trump voters are a bunch of whack jobs that think they deserve special treatment and resort to violence to support the cause". To be fair, there were even comments reporting a positive tone, such as: "Great Republican survey", "Great survey, enjoyed taking it", "I absolutely loved this study. Especially since its subject matter is about someone I hold a high praise of". Further development could be achieved by controlling variables of a different nature, such as textual measures, but this is also beyond the scope of this thesis. In conclusion, with reference to the problem statement as summarized in the Overview, Study 3 demonstrated how collective need and narrative have a causal effect on political engagement, which persists even controlling specific covariates such as the

individual quest for significance and political orientation. Nevertheless, this study shed light on processes of radicalization and violent extremism, by showing the causal effect exerted by a collective need for significance and an extreme narrative in promoting political engagement, by extending the applicability of the 3N model to a wider range of political extremism.

CHAPTER 5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present dissertation aimed to advance the understanding of violent and non-violent political engagement by analyzing three samples of U.S. citizens. As stated by McCauley and Moskalenko (2009), political engagement is subsequent to an intensification of extreme beliefs, emotions and behaviors in support of a cause. Despite the large number of incidents of political action and violence promoted by various forms of ideological extremism (Webber et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019), the present dissertation has focused on the narratological influence exerted by conspiracy theories, including motivational and social factors. This choice is based on Significance Quest Theory (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2021), which has been adopted in the study of violent extremism phenomena. Based on the assumption that violent behavior is promoted by needs, networks, and narratives, my ultimate goal was to understand whether even an unstructured and "thin" ideology (Mudde, 2004), such as most conspiracy beliefs, could promote political engagement when interacting with a social network that supports such beliefs.

Conspiracy beliefs, as they are collected motivated cognitions (Kréko, 2015), always grounded in a group's motivation and identity, not only provide explanations to escape uncertainty (Wheeler, 2021; Sutton & Douglas, 2020), but fulfill one's own sense of personal significance by promoting violent actions (see Jolley & Paterson, 2021) as a mean to restore the lost social worth, through a scapegoat mechanism (Bilewicz & Krzeminski, 2010) that always identify a grievance committed against one's group, and its perpetrator. The collective nature of conspiracy beliefs has led us to view them as motivated not just by a quest for personal significance, but also a group need, here operationalized as collective narcissism. While Study 1 surveyed participants sampled from the general population, Study 2 and 3 were designed to interview participants among people who voted for Donald Trump in 2020.

Such a specific choice was made with reference to the 2021 January 6 Capitol attack, mainly motivated by a conspiracy theory diffused by Trump himself. With this choice, I aimed at testing the same hypotheses in different samples, controlling for the effect of political orientation, in order to gain generalizable evidence. Despite the diverse pre-screening requested in samples, our analysis showed that political engagement may be caused by both motivational (a quest for group significance, operationalized as collective narcissism) and ideological (proneness to conspiracy beliefs) antecedents. At a correlational level, in Study 1 ($N_1 = 547$) and 2 ($N_2 = 574$) was shown how a very highly like-minded social network may promote engagement in individuals toward non-violent and violent kinds of actions, when sharing a common extreme ideology such as conspiracy beliefs. This is in line with findings evidenced in the literature review (cfr. Vegetti & Littvay, 2021), and, by widening the model to the social context (cfr. Jasko et al., 2020), it enriches the study of political conspiracy beliefs through the 3N model or radicalization. In Sample 2, the relationship between Need and Narrative, here operationalized in terms of antecedent dependency, showed a significant interaction effect in promoting radical and violent action, in opposition to Non-violent activism. This evidence allowed us to design a multi factorial between-subject survey to test our hypotheses in an experimental setting. At the experimental level (Study 3): (1) a novel manipulation for collective narcissism was developed, having intended it as a quest for group significance; (2) I proved how such need for group recognition promotes both ideological identity-based narratives and willingness to self-sacrifice for a cause favoring the group.

The present findings, although still preliminary, highlight the effectiveness of the 3N model in explaining the antecedents of radicalization by broadening its applicability from violent extremisms to more general forms (even non-violent) of self-sacrifice for a cause. In conclusion, conspiracy beliefs should no longer be considered as bizarre urban legends, but in relationship to those subtle ideologies that, as in the case of populism, can promote political violence if motivated by the quest for significance and shared by a significant group. The concurrent effect of dispositional

(political orientation) and motivational (collective narcissism) variables suggests that their role in determining radicalization processes should not be underestimated and opens up possibilities for intervention aimed at de-radicalization.

Limitation and further developments

In the correlational Studies 1 and 2, the strong correlation between narrative and network would suggest to improve the measure, in order to avoid multicollinearity biases. In Study 3, online setting would be improved in terms of ecological validity. In comparison to traditional lab experiments, online trials may have various advantages, including reduced demand characteristics, automation, and the capacity to generalize results to larger populations (Dandurand et al., 2008; Birnbaum, 2004; Reips, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). Nevertheless, there are some severe limitations in terms of experimental setting (fr. van Steenbergen & Bocanegra, 2016; Zhou & Fishbach, 2016). Indeed, web-based experiments are severely impacted by the absence of environmental constraints which are entirely under the control of researchers in a conventional laboratory setting.

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