



AN APS MEMBER SYMPOSIUM

2025 Festival of Psychology

PERSPECTIVE IN PSYCHOLOGY

Why do Vulnerable Narcissists Believe Conspiracy Theories?

The Potential Role of Social Motivations

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Provisional Psychologist

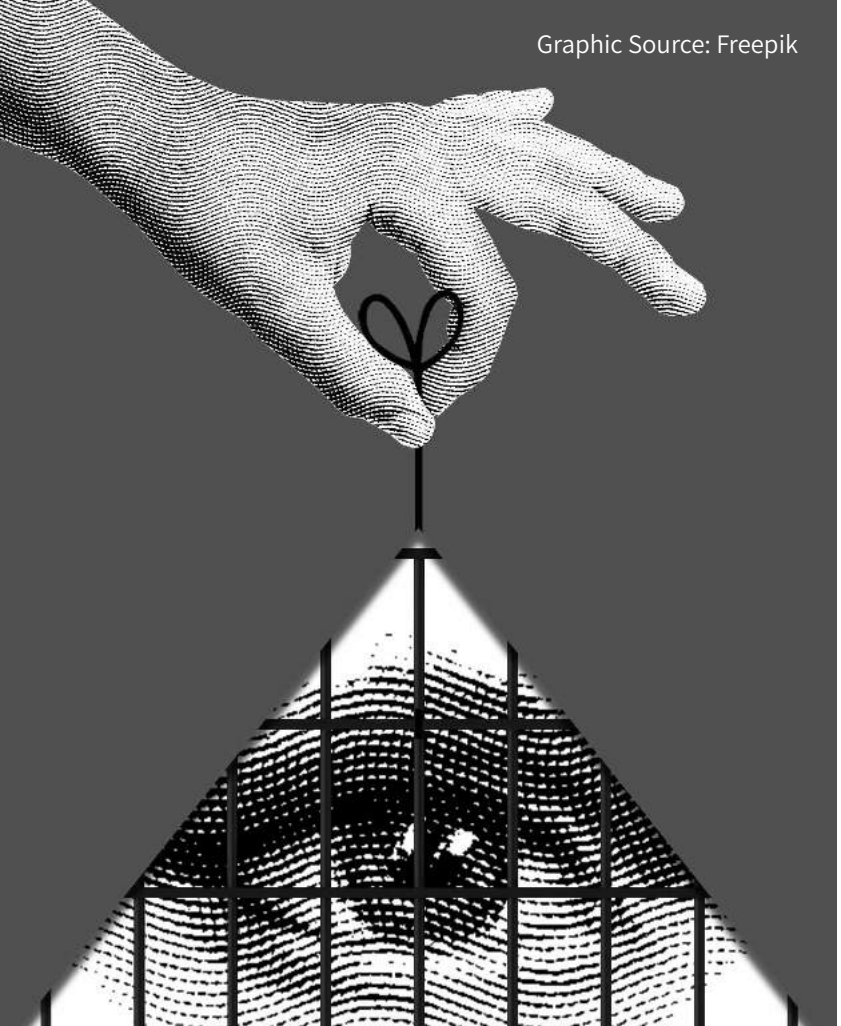
- Current student at Victoria University
- Graduated from Monash University
- Strong interest in social motivations
- Primary researcher



Tylor Cosgrove

Supervisor & Research Support

- Online Course Facilitator, University of South Australia
- Supervisor, Monash University
- Research background in narcissism, social cognition, and conspiracy belief
- Key contributions to study design, theoretical framing, and data analysis



“Conspiracy beliefs explain major events as secret plots by malevolent groups”

- Cichocka et al., 2022

Conspiracy and Personality

- Promoting vaccine resistance during COVID-19 (Douglas et al., 2017; Blanchard et al., 2023).
- Undermining democracy in U.S. Capitol riots (Robertson et al., 2022).
- Endorsement resistant to change
- Narcissism has been consistently linked to conspiracy belief (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Kay, 2021; March & Springer 2019)



Vulnerable Narcissism Profile





Vulnerable Narcissism and Conspiracy Belief

Vulnerable narcissism has been consistently linked to conspiracy belief

- Correlational studies (Jolley & Patterson 2020; Kay, 2021)
- Experimental studies (March & Springer, 2019)
- Clinical trials treating narcissism show drop-out rates as high as 64% (Gamache et al., 2018)
- Cognitive interventions to conspiracy belief have been found to backfire (Jolley & Douglas, 2017)

This highlights the need to explore new perspectives.

What Makes Conspiracy Belief Appealing?



Graphic Source: Freepik

Activity:

Why would someone high in vulnerable narcissism turn to conspiracy beliefs?

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- c) To feel belonging

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- b) To feel special or different**
- c) To feel belonging**
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Why Need for Uniqueness?

Graphic Source: Freepik



Has a well-established link with conspiracy belief

- Cross-sectional studies (Lachrach & Furnham, 2017)
- Experimental studies (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Lantian et al. (2017))

How is it related to Vulnerable Narcissists?

- Traditional ways of feeling special (e.g., standing out) feel too risky
- Conspiracy beliefs offer a private, emotionally safe sense of distinctiveness



Why Need for Belonging?

Is an emerging variable in conspiracy literature

- Included in social motivation accounts (Douglas et al, 2017; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018)

How is it related to Vulnerable Narcissists?

- Studies have found a correlation (Casale & Fioravanti, 2018)
- They avoid connection due to fear of rejection, despite craving validation
- Conspiracy groups may offer shared worldview, validation, and low-risk connection

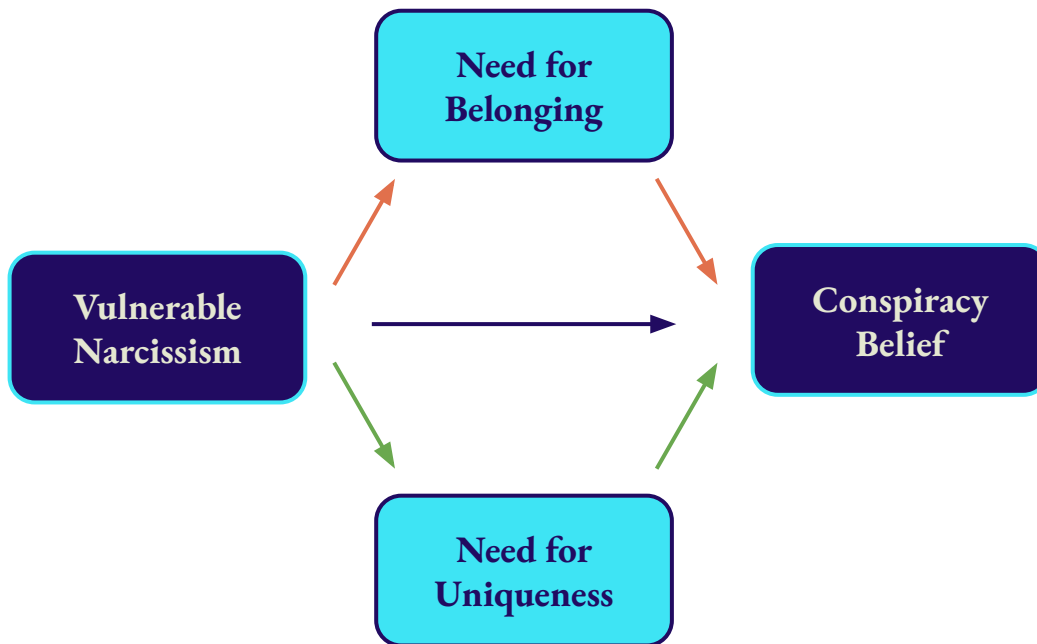
“In essence, conspiracy belief offers vulnerable narcissists two things at once:

A way to feel special but connected at the same time.”





Theoretical Model



Methodology

Participants

- N = 371 U.S.-based adults (CloudResearch)
- Average age = 47.8
- Data collected over ~5 days in November 2023

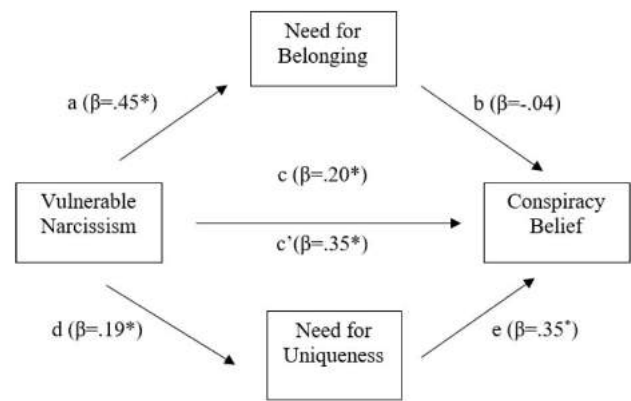
Measures

- **Vulnerable Narcissism:** FFNI-SF (vulnerable subscale) (Sherman et al., 2015)
- **Conspiracy Belief:** Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS) (Brotherton et al., 2013)
- **Need for Belonging:** Need to Belong Scale (Leary et al. 2013)
- **Need for Uniqueness:** Self-Attributed Need for Uniqueness Scale (Lynn & Harris, 1997)

Results

Fig.1

Parallel Mediation Model Showing the Effects of Vulnerable Narcissism on Conspiracy Belief through Need for Belonging and Need for Uniqueness



Note. Path coefficients (β) represent standardised regression weights. **p* < .01 (two-tailed).

Fig.2

Pathway Coefficients for the Parallel Mediation Model of Vulnerable Narcissism, Need for Belonging, Need for Uniqueness and Conspiracy Belief

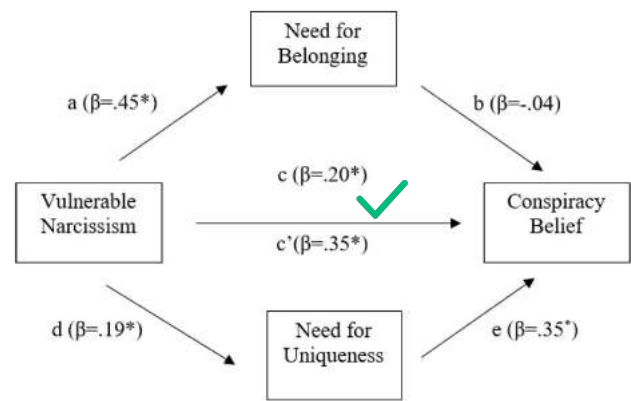
Pathway	β	B	SE	t	p	b [95% CI]
c	.25	.03	.01	5.02	< .001	[.02-.04]
c'	.20	.02	.25	5.60	< .001	[.92 - 1.92]
a	.45	.32	.03	9.60	< .001	[.25 - .38]
b	- .04	-.01	.01	-.69	.49	[-.02 - .01]
d	.19	.08	.02	3.79	< .001	[.04 - .12]
e	.35	.09	.01	7.27	< .001	[.07- .12]
a+b	-.02	-.01	.03	-	-	[-.07-.03]
d+e	.07	.01	.02	-	-	[.03 - .11]

Note. Pathways a+b and d+e represent the indirect effects through need for belonging and need for uniqueness, respectively.

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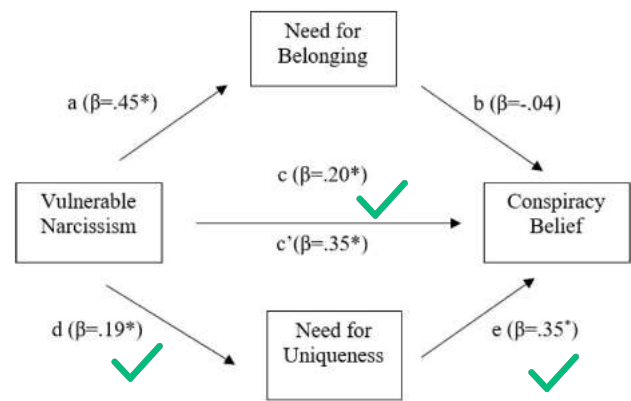
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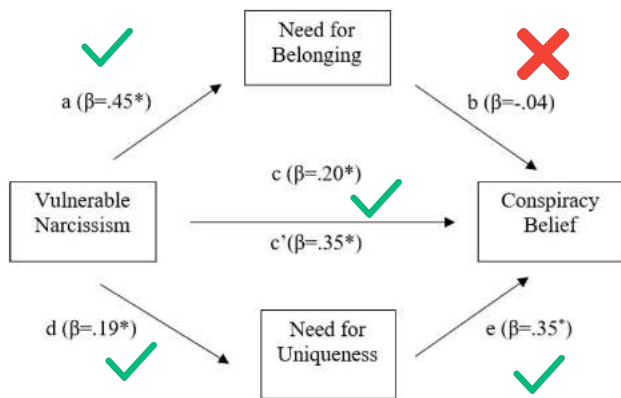
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What does it mean?

- Higher scores in vulnerable Narcissism linked to conspiracy belief
- Need for uniqueness significantly this relationship
- Need for belonging was related to VN but did not predict belief
- Belonging may matter more in ideological or political conspiracies
- They may find conspiracy groups too alternative



Graphic Source: Freepik



Practical Implications

Clinical:

- Focus on psychological drivers over content of beliefs
- Strengths-based CBT: creativity, mastery, niche goals

Research Implications:

- Need for replication across experimental studies
- Future studies should examine political/ideological conspiracies

Public Policy:

- Fact-checking often backfires
- Promote open-mindedness, humility, critical thinking as ideals



Key Takeaways

- Vulnerable narcissism is positively linked to conspiracy belief
- Need for uniqueness helps explain this link
- Person-centred approaches to meet this need may offer more effective paths for intervention

Q&A

Questions welcome!

Feel free to ask any questions :D

Graphic Source: Freepik



Feel free to connect!

Thank you for your attention!



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Provisional Psychologist

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Tylor Cosgrove

Supervisor at Monash University

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