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Is the World Run by Evil Forces? Conspiracy Mentality Among Adolescents in Relation to Right-Wing Extremist Ideology and Discriminatory Behavior

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Abstract

In conspiracy narratives, certain individuals or groups are identified as solely responsible for important social problems. The belief in such narratives shares many similarities with political extremism in general and an integral part of a conspiracy theory— that the world is run by evil forces— is also found in far-right rhetoric. Although conspiracy beliefs have typically been studied in adult populations, adolescents constitute a group that may be particularly susceptible to these ideologies. Therefore, this study aims to examine conspiracy mentality as well as association with a right-wing extremist ideology (RWEI) and discriminatory behaviors toward foreign and homosexual persons among adolescents. The present study uses data from 2,824 students of different educational backgrounds (mean age 15) from Germany to investigate this relationship. Results indicate that adolescents believe in conspiracy theories to a lesser degree than adults in similar studies. It is further established that the higher the conspiracy mentality, the more adolescents share a right-wing extremist ideology. A significant association between conspiracy mentality and discriminatory behavior is also found in the 9th grade, but not in the 7th. Moreover, a conspiracy mentality moderates the established relationship between RWEI and discriminatory behavior at this grade level. Johnson-Neyman plots indicate that a conspiracy mentality already amplifies the effect of RWEI on discriminatory behavior toward foreign persons when adolescents attribute an average probability of 10% or more to the various conspiracy myths (30% for discrimination against homosexual persons). This illustrates that even a rather weakly developed conspiracy mentality can strengthen this attitude-behavior relationship.

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Introduction

The extent and consequences of conspiracy beliefs have typically been studied in adult populations. This is concerning, considering that adolescents spend an average of 4 hours per

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day on the Internet (JIM, 2022), a place where serious news sources exist alongside dubious fake news articles that include conspiracy narratives. Around half (51%) of young people have already been confronted with conspiracy theories online, while 42% have already encountered fake news (JIM, 2022). As Dyrendal and Jolley (2021) initially considered, it is conceivable that the extent of conspiracy thinking is greater among adolescents than in the general population because the thinking styles that are closely linked to the belief in conspiracy theories, such as analytic thinking (Swami et al., 2014), are less prevalent in adolescents. While critical and analytical thinking is learned later in life and increases with educational level, intuitive, intentionalist, and anthropomorphic thinking is more common among children (Rizeq, 2019). One of the few studies about the extent of conspiracy thinking among adolescents is by Jolley et al. (2021). They observe that conspiracy thinking appears to be heightened at the age of 14 and remains constant during adolescence. In comparison with mixed age adults, 18-year-olds tend to hold stronger beliefs in conspiracy narratives, which further demonstrates that adolescence may constitute a peak life stage for belief in conspiracy narratives (Jolley et al., 2021). Rizeq (2019), on the other hand, finds no difference between 12- to 19-year-old adolescents and 18- to 30-year-old young adults in terms of their belief in conspiracy theories. She argues that the endorsement of unwarranted beliefs (including conspiracy thinking) should decrease with age as adolescents develop cognitively and attain higher education; however, since adolescents are increasingly exposed to more "contaminated mindware" (e.g., anti-scientific beliefs), this could mask the effect of cognitive development (Rizeq, 2019).

While the relationship between a conspiracy mentality and a right-wing extremist ideology has been observed in many studies in adults (e.g., Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Imhoff & Decker, 2013; Rees & Lamberty, 2019), we do not know much about whether a conspiracy mentality is related to right-wing extremism in adolescents as well. A Swiss study found that the association between conspiracy mentality and extremism in various domains was larger for a juvenile sample than for an adult sample (Baier & Manzoni, 2020). This study aims to examine the extent of conspiracy mentality among adolescents in Germany as well as the relationship between a conspiracy mentality and right-wing extremist attitudes and behaviors. Since knowledge about the normative

development of problematic attitudes enables timely identification of deviant developmental tendencies in order to implement preventive measures at an early stage or determine the optimal time for intervention (Raabe & Beelmann, 2009), the analyses are made separately in the 7th and 9th grade. According to the German Juvenile Court Act (Jugendgerichtsgesetz; JGG), juveniles are understood to be persons between the ages of 14 and 18. In this study, however, students between 12 and 19 (average age 15) are analyzed and considered adolescents. This is because it is assumed that 12-year-olds who are already in the 7th grade and 19-year-olds who are still in the 9th grade are comparable in terms of developmental level to typical 7th graders (average age 14) and 9th graders (average age 16), respectively.

When considering the study design, it must be noted that conclusions on causal relationships cannot be drawn on the basis of the analyses carried out here. The available data are purely cross-sectional, meaning that causal relationships would have to be verified by longitudinal studies. Statements relating to the order of the relationship between a conspiracy affinity and right-wing extremist attitudes (i.e., a conspiracy affinity as the cause or the effect) can thus not be made. In reality, the causal relationship is very complex and will certainly differ from case to case. In addition, both ideologies may reinforce each other. Following most of the upcoming cited studies, conspiracy mentality was considered as an explanatory factor of right-wing extremism and the empirical models of this study are developed on this basis. However, reading conspiracy mentality as a cause of right-wing extremism is not the only possible connection that is conceivable. Arguments can also be made that the conspiracy mentality is a facet of right-wing extremism, although this line of research was not further pursued in this study (for an approach to disentangling the two concepts, see Jolley et al. (2020), who employed an experimental design to examine the causal effects of conspiracy theories on intergroup prejudice).

Conspiracy mentality

In conspiracy narratives, certain individuals or groups are identified as solely responsible for important social processes. These narratives contradict academic knowledge by claiming that certain events are caused by secret actions of powerful groups (Douglas et al., 2017; Goertzel,

1994). Conspiracy narratives can thereby reduce the complexity of certain social or political events to monistic explanations. Since the group responsible is assumed to work in secret and have infinite power, these "theories" are hard to falsify (Castanho Silva et al., 2017, p. 426). Conspiracy believers think that people who *see through* a conspiracy have rather *exclusive* knowledge that remains hidden from most so-called *ignorant* people. However, individuals differ not only in the extent to which they believe in certain conspiracy narratives, but also in their general susceptibility to such explanations, which constitutes their conspiracy mentality (Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Evidence for a conspiracy mentality partially stems from studies highlighting that belief in one conspiracy narrative is related to belief in other conspiracy narratives (Kofta & Sedek, 2005), even if, logically speaking, they are mutually exclusive (Wood et al., 2012). Generally, one can distinguish between upward and downward conspiracy theories. While upward conspiracy theories are directed against relatively powerful groups (e.g., bankers, governments, pharmaceutical companies), downward conspiracy theories are directed against less powerful social groups (e.g., Muslims, migrants, LGBTQIA+ people) (Nera et al., 2021). This study does not ask about belief in specific conspiracy theories but considers conspiracy mentality as a proxy for belief in these theories, as previous studies have found conspiracy mentality to predict beliefs in specific conspiracy theories and consistency between the beliefs in different conspiracy theories (Bruder et al., 2013).

There are three main psychological functions of a conspiracy mentality (Douglas et al., 2017). First, conspiracy narratives satisfy the desire for causal explanation for complex interrelationships in the world (*epistemic motive*). Second, particularly in situations of loss of control, failure to satisfy this need by means of an official explanation can lead to the development of conspiracy narratives because they provide an alternative interpretation that gives back control (*existential motive*). Finally, conspiracy narratives satisfy social needs by maintaining a positive image of the self and the in-group. Negative outcomes, on the other hand, can be blamed on certain out-groups (*social motive*) (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538ff.).

Conspiracy Mentality and Right-Wing Extremism

In this study, I follow the consensus definition of a right-wing extremist ideology as proposed by Decker and Brähler (2006). They understand it as "a multidimensional pattern of attitudes whose unifying characteristic relates to notions of inequality" (Decker & Brähler 2006, p. 20). Such notions of inequality "are expressed in the political sphere: in the [1] *advocacy of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship,* [2] *chauvinistic attitudes* and the [3] *trivialisation of National Socialism*. In the social sphere, these notions are characterised by [4] *antisemitic*, [5] *anti-immigrant,* and [6] *social Darwinist attitudes*" (Decker & Brähler 2006, p. 20).

The belief in conspiracy narratives shares many similarities with political extremism in general (Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Political extremists have a strong need to make sense of social realities via black-and-white thinking. Such individuals only trust information from their own group and ignore other sources of information. They see their political ideology as the sole and simple solution to all social problems (Van Prooijen et al., 2015). According to Van Prooijen et al. (2015), the belief in conspiracy narratives is fundamentally linked to these sense-making processes since the conspiracy mentality also constitutes a monological belief system. The conspiracy mentality can thus form a core characteristic of political extremism, as in both cases, the desire to make sense of social events is related to a clear set of assumptions about the world (Van Prooijen et al., 2015, p. 2). Recent studies have established a connection between a conspiracy mentality or belief in certain conspiracy theories and the support of extreme political ideologies (Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Nera et al., 2021; Krouwel et al., 2017; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Many studies have found a linear relationship between self-reported political orientation and conspiracy advocacy, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs are more prevalent on the political right than on the political left (Douglas et al., 2016; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2018). However, a recent study by Imhoff et al. (2022) concludes that, in most cases, both a linear and quadratic relationship between a conspiracy mentality and political orientation applies to the data (Imhoff et al., 2022, see also Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Conspiracy mentality peaks among supporters of parties considered extreme left and extreme right (Imhoff et al., 2022). Both extremes may be prone to conspiracy ideas; however, this is especially the case among supporters of parties that are

socially right-wing and do not represent liberal values (Imhoff et al., 2022). Since they performed their study in multiple countries, they found a clear positive relationship between greater conspiracy mentality and the political right in the areas of central and northern Europe, including Germany (Imhoff et al., 2022).

As there is no measurement of forms of extremism in this study other than right-wing extremism, we cannot explore the curvilinear relationship between extremism and a conspiracy mentality any further, which is why the focus lies upon right-wing extremism. An integral part of a conspiracy theory - that the world is run by evil forces - is found in far-right rhetoric (Imhoff, 2015). According to these ideologies, the supremacy and purity of the German people must be actively defended against those forces responsible for infiltrating the country through the uncontrolled immigration of foreigners (Imhoff, 2015). Moreover, in such worldviews, it is assumed that legitimate national pride is suppressed by constantly bringing up the memory of National Socialism (Imhoff, 2015). Multiple right-wing-motivated attacks have highlighted the connection between a pronounced conspiracy mentality and a politically right-wing-motivated act of violence. The latest example for Germany is the murder of nine people in front of and inside shisha bars that occurred in Hanau on February 19, 2020. The perpetrator had previously published a pamphlet in which he wrote about his racist, Islamophobic, and antisemitic ideologies, which were shaped by various conspiracy narratives. This pamphlet called for violent struggles and the annihilation of entire state populations. According to an analysis by a German newspaper, parts of the document point to an extreme right-wing ideology (Zeit, 2020).

Empirically, conspiracy beliefs have traditionally been associated with authoritarian worldviews, as evidenced by the positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Milošević Đorđević et al., 2021; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009). According to Imhoff and Decker (2013), the conspiracy mentality is a neglected factor in the scientific explanation of right-wing extremist attitudes. They argue that it makes sense to consider the conspiracy mentality as a further factor within the concept of authoritarianism. Since the psychoanalytical assumptions of Adorno's original concept of authoritarianism are considered outdated (Imhoff & Decker, 2013), Altemeyer (1988) further developed the construct into the right-wing authoritarianism concept (RWA).

However, Altemeyer's significant reduction of Adorno's nine components to only three means that the dimension *projection* was also discarded (Imhoff & Decker, 2013, p. 146f). According to Adorno and colleagues (1950), the *projection* dimension includes the conviction that dangerous things are happening in the world and that they are controlled by hidden powers, which closely relates to the concept of conspiracy mentality (Bruder et al., 2013, p. 10; Imhoff & Decker, 2013, p. 147).

In previous studies, conspiracy mentality has been shown to be associated with antisemitism (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) and further misanthropic attitudes, particularly anti-immigrant attitudes and hostility toward Muslims (Rees & Lamberty, 2019) as well as further right-wing extremist attitudes (Imhoff & Decker, 2013). Jolley et al. (2020) demonstrate that exposure to conspiracy narratives concerning immigrants as well as Jewish people increased prejudice and discrimination against the respective group (see also Bilewicz et al., 2013). It was also indirectly related to increased prejudice regarding other out-groups (e.g., Asians, Arabs, Americans, the Irish, or Australians). Empirical studies also show relationships between conspiracy thinking and Social Dominance Orientation (Dyrendal et al., 2021; Hartman et al., 2021), an "ideological cousin" (Rudman & Saud, 2020) of the right-wing extremist attitude of Social Darwinism. Both ideologies are based on biological determinism, but only Social Darwinism argues that tampering with social hierarchies will "weaken humankind," which is why prejudice and discrimination are considered "necessary" (Crandall & Eshleman, 2005; Rudman & Saud, 2020).

Connections between right-wing extremism and conspiracy beliefs related to Decker and Brähler's (2006) consensus definition of right-wing extremism can also be found. Within conspiracy theories, there is a clear distinction between one's in-group and the out-group (e.g., people feel discriminated against by the "corrupt elite"). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals draw their positive social identity from their group membership by derogating out-groups. One could argue that the conspiracy mentality is only associated with attitudes and behaviors that are directed toward high power groups, which was discussed by Imhoff and Bruder (2014) in relation to prejudice. However, according to Moscovivi (1987), downward conspiracy theories against less powerful groups can also be

characterized by the fact that power is attributed to the affected groups, while, objectively speaking, they need not really hold much power at all. People who believe in such conspiracy theories project power on minorities who threaten the privileges of the majority (Nera et al., 2021). An example would be immigrants supposedly stealing their jobs or being the originators of the COVID-19 pandemic. A special instance occurs in the case of antisemitism, as conspiracy ideologues believe that "the Jews" aspire to or possess world domination. This makes hostile attitudes toward minorities more likely (*anti-immigrant attitudes*, *antisemitism*). When individuals perceive their own group as disadvantaged, a possible coping strategy for dealing with this situation, apart from devaluing the other group, is the search for a new dimension of comparison in which one's own group performs better (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). A common dimension of comparison is nationality, where the in-group's nationality is perceived as superior to foreign nationalities (Decker et al., 2020) (*chauvinism*). A generally perceived superiority of certain groups of people seems even more plausible when considering the distinction between the in- and out-group (*social Darwinism*). Conspiracy ideologues see themselves as representatives of the majority and reduce democracy to the idea of the authoritarian implementation of a majority or the "people's will". On the one hand, minorities have no place in this anti-democratic understanding of politics, and on the other hand, no opposition is allowed to exist within it (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2021). Therefore, it is conceivable that conspiracy believers would favour a *right-wing authoritarian dictatorship* or would *trivialise National Socialism*. Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

H1: The more pronounced the conspiracy mentality, the more likely a person is to hold a right-wing extremist ideology.

Furthermore, conspiracy narratives can act as a type of radicalisation accelerator in which certain groups are delegitimised and regarded as enemies (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Important functions of conspiracy narratives form a collective self-defence against perceived threats from members of the out-group as well as moral justifications for discriminatory and cruel behavior targeted at them (Kofta & Sedek, 2005, p. 43). Thus, it stands to reason that a conspiracy mentality is associated with violent political behaviors and discriminatory

behavior. In a thus far unpublished study, Lamberty and Leiser (2019) conclude that conspiracy mentality is related to justifications of and willingness to use general violence as well as violent political action (Lamberty & Leiser, 2019; see also Vegetti & Littvay, 2021). The current study examines whether a conspiracy mentality increases discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons. For example, the conspiracy narrative referred to as "The Great Replacement" proposes the existence of a secret plan to exchange white majority populations with non-white immigrants. Discriminatory behavior directed toward immigrants may thus become more likely as people feel increasingly threatened by the idea of losing their privileges to the minority. An example for a conspiracy narrative against *homosexual* persons would be the so-called "gay agenda." Supporters of this conspiracy theory argue that *homosexual* people are trying to convert more and more people to homosexuality and want to bring about an end to marriage and the traditional family.

H2: The more pronounced the conspiracy mentality, the more likely a person is to exhibit discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons.

The relationship between prejudice or right-wing extremist attitudes and discriminatory behavior or behavioral intentions as well as violent political behavior and aggressive tendencies has been demonstrated in previous studies (Dovidio et al., 1996; Jasko et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2017; Krieg, 2022; Schütz & Six, 1996; Talaska et al., 2008; Van Hiel et al., 2020). These studies are based in part on *Situational Action Theory* (Perry et al., 2018; Pauwels et al., 2021; Pauwels & Svensson, 2017; Schils & Pauwels, 2016; Wikström & Bouhana, 2016) and the *Justification-Suppression Model* (Jones et al., 2017). Others view this relationship as a classic example of the *Attitude-Behavior Relationship* (Schütz & Six, 1996; Krieg, 2022). This relationship is the subject of the *Theory of Reasoned Action* (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and its further development the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Ajzen, 1985). According to this theory, intention is the best predictor of behavior, provided there is sufficient motivation, time, and mental capacity. Intention, in turn, depends on attitude toward the behavior. According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), a person will perform a behavior if they value it positively. In the present study, it is assumed that the more pronounced the

adolescent's extreme right-wing attitude, the greater the likelihood of committing a discriminatory behavior (for a detailed analysis of this relationship, including consideration of the social environment, see Krieg, 2022). As Jasko et al. (2022) argue, character traits of right-wing extremists are their closed mindedness and their dogmatism (Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011), which in turn lead to greater outgroup hostility and make them prone to violence (Jasko et al., 2022). However, not every attitude results in comparable behavior, which can also be seen in the fact that, even among adolescents, right-wing extremist attitudes are more widespread than corresponding actions (Krieg et al., 2019). The question arises as to whether the perpetration of a discriminatory act becomes more likely in instances where the belief in conspiracy ideological narratives is also present. In other words, it is unclear whether a conspiracy mentality can moderate the association between right-wing extremist attitudes and discriminatory behavior. Belief that a secret plan by powerful people is behind certain events may make the situation more threatening and may motivate people to act on their right-wing extremist beliefs.

H3: The more pronounced the conspiracy mentality, the stronger the relationship between a right-wing extremist ideology and discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons.

Methods

Data Collection and Sample Description

The following analyses use representative data from 7th and 9th grade students from the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, which were collected between February and June 2018 by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony. The survey is of a cross-sectional design and is mainly dedicated to the study of right-wing extremism and its influencing factors. For the survey, a stratified, random sample was drawn according to the prevalent school types, the four regional court districts in Schleswig-Holstein, and the school year group. The survey was conducted using the school computers. Survey conduction occurred within the context of the school class group and lasted for one school lesson (45

minutes). Survey guidance was delivered by a trained test leader and the class teacher. The study was pre-approved by the State school authorities of Schleswig-Holstein. Only students whose parents had agreed to the survey could participate in the study. Prior to the commencement of the study, the pupils were informed that the survey was voluntary and anonymous and could be stopped at any time.

The study achieved a final response rate of 30.1%, meaning that a total of n = 2,824 pupils took part in the survey. The sample consists of 50.7% male students, with the average age being just under 15 years (14.7) (7^{th} grade: 13.7 years; 9^{th} grade: 15.7 years). While 39.2% of the students receive a higher education, 60.8% have a lower education. Higher and lower education are related to the type of school and can be classified in accordance with the ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education). According to this categorization, students of the lower education reach Lower Secondary Education (Level 2). Pupils of the higher school type reach Upper Secondary Education (Level 3) after 13 years of school. The different school types are about equally frequent in the sample as in the total population (Krieg et al., 2019). In receipt of social benefits are 7.5% of the adolescents' families. Overall, 23.2% of adolescents have a migration background.

Operationalization

Dependent Variables

A right-wing extremist ideology is measured on the basis of the FR-LF (Fragebogen zur Rechtsextremen Einstellungen – Leipziger Form) with 18 questions that correspond to the six dimensions depicted in Table 1 (e.g., Decker et al., 2020). The students evaluated the statements using a four-point scale (1- *completely disagree* to 4- *completely agree*). A mean value scale of right-wing extremist ideology is formed using all 18 items. This means that adolescents who strongly agreed with only 1 or 2 items but disagreed with the other items still get a lower score. The mean scale is only formed if all 18 items have been completed. Missing data were imputed for the regression analyses (see Analytical Strategy). The scale shows a Cronbach's α = .90, which indicates a reliable scale.

Discriminatory behavior toward a *foreign* person is measured by asking students whether they had ever done any of the following to a *foreign* person in their lives: 1) *verbally*

abused, 2) *verbally threatened*, 3) *damaged property*, 4) *committed bodily harm*, or 5) *threatened with a weapon*. For the analysis, a sum value scale for the adolescents' discriminatory behavior was formed. The scale ranges from 0 to 5 (0 = no discriminatory behavior; 5 = all discriminatory behaviors). Because the reported frequency of all mentioned behaviors was rather low, the variable was then transformed into a dichotomous variable for the analyses. Thus, only those students who had not committed any of the politically motivated crimes against *foreign* persons were given the value 0. Students who had committed at least one (or more) offence(s) against them were given the value 1. Discriminatory behavior toward a *homosexual* person was measured in the same manner.

Table 1. Dependent Variables: Right-Wing Extremist Ideology (RWEI) and Discriminatory Behavior.

	Variables	Operationalization	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max
RWEI	Anti-immigrant attitudes[a]	1) When jobs become scarce, foreigners living in Germany should be sent back to their homeland	1.85	0.93	1	4
		2) Germany is alienated to a dangerous degree as a result of the many foreigners	2.12	0.96	1	4
		3) Foreigners only come here to get money from the state	1.93	0.91	1	4
	Antisemitism	1) The Jews simply have something special about them and do not really fit in with us	1.63	0.80	1	4
		2) Jews have too much influence in the world	1.58	0.77	1	4
		3) In comparison to other people, the Jews use more evil tricks to achieve what they want	1.63	0.81	1	4
	Chauvinism[b]	1) The Germans should have the courage to have a strong national feeling	2.34	0.98	1	4
		2) The Germans must assert German interests against foreign countries in a hard and forceful manner	1.96	0.91	1	4
		3) The ultimate goal of German policy should be to give Germany the power and recognition that it deserves	1.71	0.85	1	4
	Social Darwinism	1) As in nature, the strongest should always prevail in society	1.95	0.93	1	4
		2) Some nations are fundamentally superior to other nations	2.34	0.99	1	4
		3) There are valuable and unworthy lives	1.74	1.00	1	4
	Trivialisation of National Socialism	1) Without the extermination of the Jews, Hitler would now be seen as a great statesman	1.72	0.91	1	4
		2) The crimes of National Socialism have been greatly exaggerated in historiography	1.79	0.89	1	4
		3) National Socialism also had its good sides	1.82	0.90	1	4
	Advocacy of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship[b]	1) Germany needs a leader again to govern with an iron fist for the benefit of all	1.51	0.85	1	4
		2) A dictatorship (sole rule of a person/group) is the best form of government	1.30	0.63	1	4
		3) What Germany now needs is a single strong party that embodies the German people as a whole	2.02	1.01	1	4
	Scale		1.83	0.55	1	4

[a] Particularly with regard to anti-immigrant attitudes, it should be noted that hostile attitudes are directed against people who, from the point of view of the hostile person, have a migration background (for a critique of the term, see El-Mafaalani, 2017), but the victims may in fact be equally German

[b] These items were only answered by students who perceived themselves as German (90.8%), as these dimensions refer to a German national feeling.

	Variables	Operationalization	in %	Min	Max
Discriminatory behavior	Toward *foreign* persons	1) I verbally abused the person	6.8	0	1
		2) I damaged the person's property	1.2	0	1
		3) I verbally threatened the person	3.4	0	1
		4) I beat or kicked the person	2.0	0	1
		5) I threatened the person with a weapon (e.g., knife)	0.9	0	1
		Scale	8.8	0	1
	Toward *homosexual* persons	1) I verbally abused the person	2.5	0	1
		2) I damaged the person's property	0.7	0	1
		3) I verbally threatened the person	1.5	0	1
		4) I beat or kicked the person	0.7	0	1
		5) I threatened the person with a weapon (e.g., knife)	0.6	0	1
		Scale	3.3	0	1

Independent Variables

Conspiracy Mentality

Conspiracy mentality was measured using the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) (Bruder et al., 2013). Due to the young age of the sample, some of the items were phrased in a somewhat simpler language (see Table 2). The adolescents evaluated five statements according to how certain they were that the things described in them would actually happen. Responses were graded on an eleven-level percentage scale ranging from 0 (*0% certainly not)* to 10 (*100% certainly)*. A mean value scale was formed using all five items and only when all five items had been answered. For the regression analyses, the missing data were imputed (see Analytical Strategy). The scale shows a Cronbach's α = .82, meaning that the scale is considered reliable.

Table 2. Conspiracy Mentality.

	Operationalization	***M***	***SD***	**Min**	**Max**
Conspiracy mentality	1) There are secret organisations that greatly influence political decisions	3.75	2.79	0	10
	2) Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions	4.39	2.70	0	10
	3) Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about	4.77	2.66	0	10
	4) Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities	3.70	2.52	0	10
	5) Government agencies closely monitor all citizens	3.54	2.63	0	10
	Scale	4.17	2.01	0	10

Control Variables

Furthermore, sociodemographic control variables that have been associated with right-wing extremist attitudes and discriminatory behavior in previous studies (e.g., Krieg, 2022; Küpper et al., 2021), such as sex (0- *female*; 1- *male*), age (*12-19*), and school type (0- *low education*; 1- *high education*), were included. In addition, adolescents' migration background (0- *no migration background*; 1- *migration background*) was included. A migration

background exists if the student, or at least one of their parents, were not born in Germany or did not have German citizenship.

Analytical Strategy

First, the level of conspiracy mentality between 7th and 9th graders is compared using *t*-tests. Following bivariate correlations of the dependent variables with conspiracy mentality, multilevel linear regression models are calculated using Stata 14.2. All analyses are calculated separately for 7th and 9th graders. To account for missing data, I applied multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) to estimate the missing data for all variables (proportion of missing values of the items: 1.1% – 28.3%, 53 imputations) using logistic regression imputation for binary variables and predictive mean matching (three nearest neighbors) for continuous variables.[2] The dependent variables were included in the imputation model while the regression analyses were later restricted to only those cases with an observed dependent variable value.

The first model (M1) relates to the scale for right-wing extremist ideology. The second model (M2) of discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons includes the right-wing extremist ideology as a further independent variable; an additional interaction term between this variable and conspiracy mentality is integrated in the third model (M3). The fourth (M5) and fifth models (M5) contain the same independent variables and relate to the discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons. Since the slope of the predictor is often only statistically significant at some values of the moderator in interaction terms, the interaction term was plotted using the Johnson-Neyman procedure (Johnson & Neyman, 1936). A plot of the confidence intervals illustrates the values of the moderator for which the effect of the predictor on the dependent variable is significant. We can clearly see in which interval a moderation effect occurs and in which it does not.

The dependent variables of all models except for the first have a dichotomous structure that would entail logistic regression analysis. However, this method was decided against because of the inclusion of interaction variables. Logistic regression models already contain

[2] As a robustness check, all regression analyses were also run with the ten nearest neighbors and 53 imputations, as well as the ten nearest neighbors and ten imputations, but no major differences were found.

implicit interactions between predictors; therefore, a non-significance of a multiplicative term cannot be unambiguously interpreted in terms of the absence of a substantial interaction effect (Klein et al., 2018; Jagodzinski & Klein, 1997; Berry et al., 2010). Based on suggestions that linear probability models constitute a suitable alternative to logistic regression when working with dichotomous outcomes (Hellevik, 2009; Mood, 2010; see also Gomila, 2021), these were calculated for models M2 to M5 on discriminatory behavior. There are three main criticisms of performing a linear regression analysis on a binary outcome variable. First, linear probability models routinely violate the homoscedasticity assumption due to the binary outcome variable. This does not affect the coefficients, but it may affect the standard errors. However, when examining the differences in *p*-values between logistic regressions and linear probability models in a simulation study, Hellevik (2009) found nearly identical outcomes. Nevertheless, Mood (2010) recommends using robust standard errors to avoid overestimations related to the significance of the relationships (Long & Ervin, 2013). To also account for the clustered data structure of students within classroom groups, cluster-robust standard errors were chosen. The second point of criticism is that with linear coefficients, the researcher risks meaningless results, since a predicted probability may fall outside the range of 0-1 (Hellevik, 2009; Mood, 2010). This may be the case if there is interaction in the data, which could be solved by including the corresponding interaction term (Hellevik, 2009). It can also occur if the association between such a variable and the dependent variable is non-linear. One alternative for this would be a transformation of the continuous variable into a set of dummy variables (Hellevik, 2009). The third problem mentioned is a misspecified functional form (Mood, 2010). But since we are primarily interested in sign and significance of an effect, the use of a linear probability model is reasonable (Mood, 2010). The advantages of using linear probability models are the possibility of including an interaction term and the fact that the coefficients can be directly interpreted as changes in predicted probabilities (Gomila, 2021). This is an interpretation that is easy to follow, which makes it easier to communicate to broader audiences outside of the scientific community (Hellevik, 2009).

Results

Zero-Order Correlations

Table 3 shows the differences of the means between 7th and 9th graders regarding their conspiracy mentality using *t*-tests. The mean value of the *conspiracy mentality scale* is *M* = 4.15 (*SD* = 2.01) in the 7th grade, which means that, on average, 7th graders rated the likelihood of events occurring as 41.5% certain. In the 9th grade, this applies for 41.8% of the students (9th grade: *M* = 4.18; *SD* = 2.02). The mean values do not differ significantly between the two school grades (*t* (1849) = -0.35, *p* = .725, *d* = -0.01). There are also no significant differences between the grades in terms of the individual items. The statement most agreed with in both grades was that *many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about*. While 7th graders rate this statement as 46.8% likely, 9th graders estimate the probability at 48.4%, which, on average, rates the statement among students as almost as possible as impossible. Adolescents in both grade levels rate *government agencies closely monitor all citizens* as least likely, with probability estimates at 34.5% (7th grade) and 36.1% (9th grade).

To illustrate the differences between adults' and adolescents' levels of conspiracy mentality, we draw on the study by Rees and Lamberty (2019), who also include one of the items used here in their study for a population-representative sample in Germany. In their study, they categorized all individuals who scored higher than the middle of the scale (> 3, scale of 1-5) as agreeing. In order to compare the percentage of agreeing individuals, this is applied in a similar manner to the present data (> 50%, scale of 0-100%). Our data shows that 24.6% of the 7th and 9th graders attribute a certainty of over 50% to the statement *there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*. In the adult survey, this figure is considerably higher. There, 45.7% of the respondents agree with the statement. Although the figures are not exactly comparable due to the different scale values, there is nevertheless a clear tendency for adults to have a greater conspiracy mentality.

Correlations between a right-wing extremist ideology/discriminatory behavior and the conspiracy mentality are almost all significant and positive. This means that a more pronounced conspiracy mentality often coincides with an extreme right-wing extremist

ideology (7th grade: $r = 0.18$, $p < .001$; 9th grade $r = 0.30$, $p < .001$) and discriminatory behaviors toward *foreign* persons only in the 9th grade (7th grade: $r = 0.07$, $p = .059$; 9th grade: $r = 0.22$, $p < .001$). Discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons correlates with a conspiracy mentality at both grade levels (7th grade: $r = 0.07$, $p = .037$; 9th grade: $r = 0.16$, $p < .001$). It is noticeable that the correlations are stronger in the 9th grade than in the 7th grade.

Table 3. Differences Between 7th and 9th graders regarding Conspiracy Mentality.

	7th grade		**9th grade**		**Comparison of 7th and 9th grade**			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*
There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions	3.75	2.77	3.74	2.82	0.08	2035	.939	0.00
Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions	4.33	2.73	4.44	2.67	-0.99	2086	.323	-0.04
Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about	4.68	2.69	4.84	2.63	-1.38	2113	.167	-0.06
Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities	3.69	2.48	3.70	2.54	-0.08	2022	.938	0.00
Government agencies closely monitor all citizens	3.45	2.62	3.61	2.65	-1.37	2054	.170	-0.06
Conspiracy mentality	4.15	2.01	4.18	2.02	-0.35	1849	.725	-0.01

Regression Model Results

Tables 4 and 5 show the linear regression model for the extreme right-wing ideology for the 7th and 9th graders respectively (M1). The analyses show that at both class levels a conspiracy mentality has a significant positive relationship with this ideology, even when controlling for migration background, sex, age, and educational level. The stronger the conspiracy mentality, the more the right-wing extremist ideology is approved (7th grade: $b = .11$; $p < .001$; 9th grade: $b = .15$; $p < .001$), which supports hypothesis 1. All included variables can explain 14.9% (7th grade) and 19.2% (9th grade) of the variance within the

advocacy of a right-wing ideology. Conspiracy mentality provides a small but considerable contribution to the explanatory power of a right-wing extremist ideology (Without CM: 7th grade $\Delta = .041$; 9th grade $\Delta = .066$ 9th grade; Wald-Tests $p < .001$)

Tables 4 and 5 also show linear probability models for discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* (M2 and M3) and *homosexual* persons (M4 and M5) with and without the interaction effect. The models without the interaction effect (M2) show a significant association between conspiracy mentality and discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons in the 9th grade but not in the 7th, which supports hypothesis 2 only for the older adolescents. As conspiracy mentality increases, the probability of perpetrating discriminatory acts toward *foreign* persons increases significantly ($b = .03$; $p < .001$) for 9th graders (7th graders: $b = .01$, $p = .222$). Moreover, the strength of right-wing extremist ideology is also significantly related to the performance of discriminatory acts at both class levels (7th grade: $b = .07$; $p < .001$; 9th grade: $b = .10$; $p < .001$). The more the adolescent advocated an extreme right-wing ideology, the greater the likelihood that they had exhibited these behaviors. Regarding the interaction effect in the M3 model, conspiracy mentality moderates the association between the right-wing extremist ideology and discriminatory behavior only for the 9th graders (7th grade: $b = .02$; $p = .094$; 9th grade: $b = .03$; $p < .001$). Models M4 and M5 relate to the discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons. M4 and M5 can replicate the findings of M2 and M3 regarding discrimination against *foreign* persons, although most associations are weaker.

Table 4. Linear Regression Models on a Right-Wing Extremist Ideology (RWEI) and Discriminatory Behavior in the 7th grade.

	RWEI	**Discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons**		**Discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons**	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
	b (SE)	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*
Migration background	.01 (.05)	-.02 (0.02)	-.02 (.02)	.03 * (0.01)	.03 * (0.01)
Female[a]	.10 * (.04)	-.02 (0.01)	-.02 (.01)	-.03 ** (0.01)	-.03 ** (0.01)
Age (z)	.01 (.04)	.01 (0.01)	.01 (.01)	.02 (0.01)	.02 (0.01)
Low education[b]	.33 *** (.05)	.01 (0.02)	.02 (.02)	.00 (0.01)	.00 (0.01)
Conspiracy mentality (CM) (z)	.11 *** (.02)	.01 (0.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (0.01)	.01 (0.01)
Right-wing extremist ideology (RWEI) (z)		.07 *** (0.01)	.07 *** (.01)	.02 *** (0.01)	.02 *** (0.01)
CM x RWEI			.02 (.01)		.01 (0.01)
n	796	1289	1289	1289	1289
Adjusted R^2	.149	.081	.086	.038	.039
Adjusted R^2 without CM and CM x RWEI	.108	.081	.081	.036	.036

Note. Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. (z) = Variables are z-standardized. R^2 calculated using the Stata command mibeta (based on Fisher's z transformation).
[a]Reference: Male, [b]Reference: High education, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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Table 5. Linear Regression Models on a Right-Wing Extremist Ideology (RWEI) and Discriminatory Behavior in the 9th grade.

	Right-wing extremist ideology	**Discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons**		**Discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons**	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
	b (SE)	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*
Migration background	-.09 (.05)	-.03 (0.02)	-.03 (.02)	.05 ** (0.02)	.05 ** (0.02)
Female[a]	-.06 (.03)	-.05 ** (0.01)	-.04 ** (.01)	-.04 ** (0.01)	-.04 ** (0.01)
Age (z)	.13 *** (.03)	-.01 (0.01)	.00 (.01)	-.01 (0.01)	-.01 (0.01)
Low education[b]	.26 *** (.04)	.02 (0.01)	.02 (.01)	.01 (0.01)	.01 (0.01)
Conspiracy mentality (CM) (z)	.15 *** (.02)	.03 *** (0.01)	.04 *** (.01)	.01 * (0.01)	.02 * (0.01)
Right-wing extremist ideology (RWEI) (z)		.10 *** (0.01)	.09 *** (.01)	.04 *** (0.01)	.03 *** (0.01)
CM x RWEI			.03 *** (.01)		.03 ** (0.01)
n	1118	1452	1452	1452	1452
Adjusted R^2	.192	.177	.193	.088	.110
Adjusted R^2 without CM and CM x RWEI	.126	.167	.167	.084	.084

Note. Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. (z) = Variables are z-standardized. R^2 calculated using the Stata command mibeta (based on Fisher's z transformation). [a]Reference: Male, [b]Reference: High education. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The significant interactions are also plotted graphically for the 9th graders. Figure 1 depicts a Johnson-Neyman plot for the conditional relationship between RWEI and discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons at different levels of CM. The interaction term suggests that the strongest relationship between right-wing extremist ideology and discriminatory behavior toward this group is present in adolescents with a high conspiracy mentality, which supports hypothesis 3 for the 9th graders. The Johnson-Neyman plot also tells us that the interaction term becomes significant from a value of about 1.0, since the confidence intervals no longer intersect the horizontal zero line. Thus, a conspiracy mentality does not amplify the effect of RWEI on discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons until adolescents attribute an average probability of 10% or more to the various conspiracy myths. Figure 2 shows the Johnson-Neyman plot for the conditional relationship between RWEI and discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons. The plot shows similar results, although the interaction term only becomes significant at a value of about 3.0.

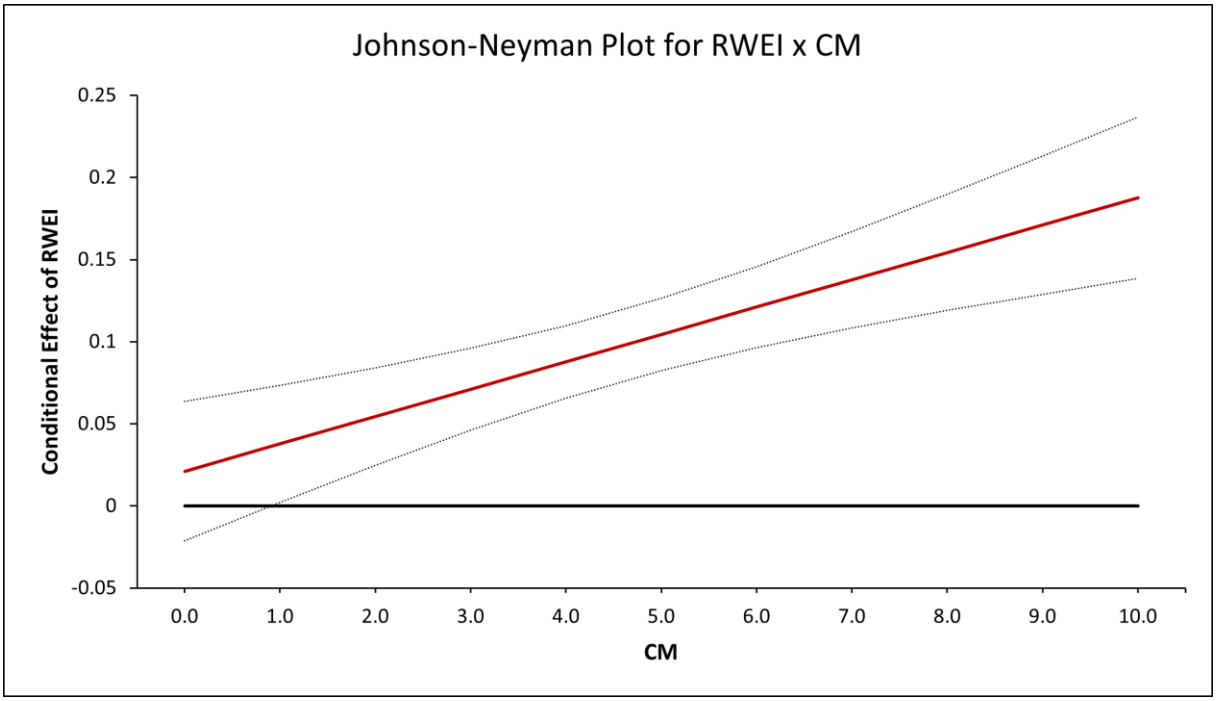

Figure 1. Johnson-Neyman plots for the conditional relationship between RWEI (z-standardized) and discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons in 9th graders. The red line represents values of the conditional effect at different levels of CM (z-standardized; original

values as axis labeling for easier interpretation). The dotted lines represent 95% confidence bands around the conditional effect. The black line is the horizontal zero line.

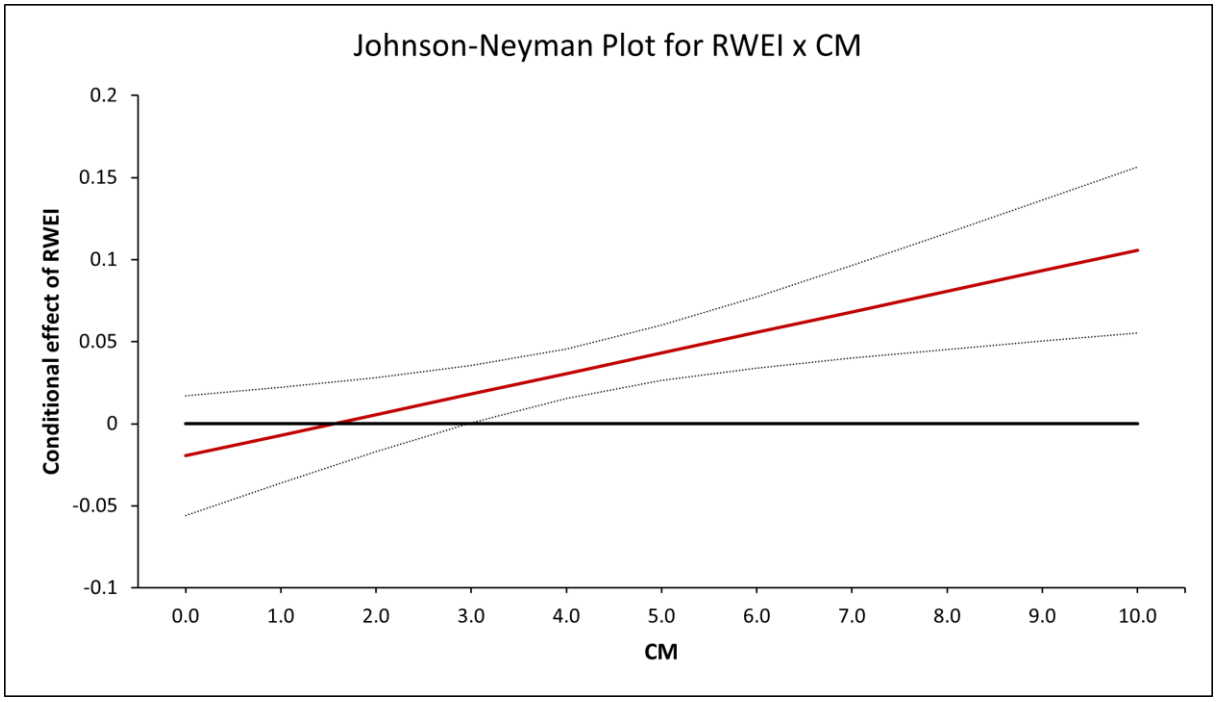

Figure 2. Johnson-Neyman plots for the conditional relationship between RWEI (z-standardized) and discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons in 9th graders. The red line represents values of the conditional effect at different levels of CM (z-standardized; original values as axis labeling for easier interpretation). The dotted lines represent 95% confidence bands around the conditional effect. The black line is the horizontal zero line.

A comparison of the total R^2 values of the two M3 models (discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons) with and without CM and the RWEI x CM interaction term shows a difference of $\Delta = .005$ for the 7th grade and $\Delta = .026$ for the 9th grade (M5 – discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons: 7th grade $\Delta = .003$; 9th grade $\Delta = .026$). Results of Wald-Tests indicate that the change of variance in the dependent variables increased significantly when including CM in the model for the 9th graders (discriminatory behaviors toward *foreign* persons: $p < .001$; discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons: $p = .031$). The same cannot be said for the 7th graders (discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons: $p = .259$; discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons: $p = .125$). It can thus

be concluded that the conspiracy mentality contributes to a small account to the explanatory power of the discriminatory behavior model for the 9th grade but not for the 7th grade students. The explained variance is 8.6% for 7th grade and 19.3% for 9th grade for discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons and 3.9% (7th grade) and 11.0% (9th grade) for discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons.

Discussion

The present study is one of only a few research studies to date that empirically approaches the extent of conspiracy mentality in adolescents and, to my knowledge, the only one to further explore the connection between conspiracy mentality and a right-wing extremist ideology as well as discriminatory behavior among them. The study findings suggest that, in contrast to the study by Rees and Lamberty (2019), adolescents agree with the statement that *there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions* to a lesser degree than adults. Adolescence does not seem to represent a peak for susceptibility to conspiracy theories in this study. Further, it is shown that the stronger the conspiracy mentality, the stronger the endorsement of a right-wing extremist ideology and the likelihood of discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons (9th grade). In addition, the more a student advocates a right-wing extremist ideology, the more likely they are to engage in discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons in the 9th grade. It is important to note that conspiracy mentality moderates the relationship between the right-wing ideology and discriminatory behavior at this grade level. Therefore, the association becomes stronger the more pronounced the conspiracy mentality is. However, by plotting Johnson-Neyman plots, it becomes clear that the interaction effect already becomes significant at a CMQ scale value of about 10% for discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* persons and 30% for discriminatory behavior toward *homosexual* persons. Thus, it makes no difference whether adolescents have no conspiracy mentality or a very weak conspiracy mentality in terms of the relationship between RWEI and discriminatory behavior. However, if adolescents assign an average probability of more than 10% (respectively 30%) to the various conspiracy myths, then this belief may motivate them to act on their right-wing extremist beliefs regarding discrimination. It is interesting to note

that the effect is already apparent from a value of 10% respectively 30%, which corresponds to an almost total rejection of the different conspiracies; after all, at this value the adolescents still rate the five different events as fairly unlikely, but do not rule them out completely. In other words, even a rather weak conspiracy mentality can strengthen this attitude-behavior relationship.

Thus, the danger of a right-wing extremist ideology in relation to discriminatory behavior should thus be specifically addressed if conspiracy myths are also believed. The belief in both ideologies poses the greatest potential for danger in terms of discriminatory behavior toward *foreign* and *homosexual* persons. All findings remain constant even when gender, age, school type, and migration background are controlled. A comparison of the explanatory power of the models with and without conspiracy mentality shows that this concept makes a small but considerable contribution to the explanatory power of the respective models.

An interesting finding emerges when comparing the results of the 7th and 9th graders. The conspiracy mentality is equally strong at both class grades, which underscores the findings of Jolley et al. (2021). At this point, the considerations of Rizeq (2019) can be used. Rizeq assumes that with increasing age, thinking styles are adapted that are associated with less conspiracy belief, but that adolescents are also exposed to more and more conspiracy ideologies with increasing age, so the effects may cancel each other out. Furthermore, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and discriminatory behaviors as well as the interaction effect between conspiracy mentality and a right-wing extremist ideology on discriminatory behaviors are only evident in the 9th grade. Just because the mean level of conspiracy mentality remains the same, this does not necessarily mean that those who continue to exhibit this mentality in 9th grade will not further "radicalize" or turn their attitudes into actions. Thus, it can be speculated that the consequences of a conspiracy mentality become more severe with age.

Limitations

As mentioned in the introduction, conclusions on causal relationships cannot be drawn based on the analyses carried out here because the data is cross-sectional. Moreover, the data may have been falsified by the students due to social desirability or deliberate deception. In general, school surveys show a high validity of adolescents' self-reports. However, there seems to be a tendency to underreport among respondents with a high educational status (Köllisch & Oberwittler, 2004). In relation to the present study, underreporting may pose a potential issue for a sensitive topic such as discriminatory behavior or right-wing extremist attitudes. Especially among adolescents with a high educational status, the relationships could be underestimated if students conceal their true attitudes. By providing the participating students with detailed explanations of the underlying data protection mechanisms (e.g., anonymous survey, no feedback to parents, school, or teachers), we attempted to limit such response behavior. Another limitation is the self-selection bias. Since only those students whose parents agreed to the participation of the survey took part in the study, parents who sympathize with right-wing extremism or conspiracy theories might not have allowed their children to participate. One can argue that the attitudes of parents often influence the attitudes of their children (Haselbach, under review; Degner & Dalege, 2013; Jugert et al., 2016), which would result in underestimation of the extent of conspiracy ideology and right-wing extremist attitudes in this study.

Another limiting factor to mention here is that the scale measuring conspiracy mentality has thus far only been used with adults. The question arises whether the CMQ scale measures what it is supposed to measure in adolescents or whether probability distortion or skepticism of authority and knowledge sources also play a role here. The publication of the Adolescent Conspiracy Beliefs Questionnaire (ACBQ) in 2021 means that a validated scale for measuring conspiracy beliefs in adolescents now exists (Jolley et al., 2021). In addition, it should be noted that this study was only able to examine connections between conspiracy mentality and right-wing extremism, but not with other forms of extremism. However, there are certainly points of overlap between a conspiracy mentality and other extremist ideologies. Another limiting factor is that only discrimination against *foreign* and *homosexual* persons

was studied. Other marginalized groups, such as other members of the LGBTQIA+ community, religious minorities, or political opponents, are also typical targets of right-wing extremists and conspiracy ideologues. Thus, further research is needed to shed light on how conspiracy mentality among adolescents affects discriminatory behavior toward these groups.

Implications for Practice and Intervention

These limitations notwithstanding, the dissemination of conspiracy ideologies should be counteracted as quickly as possible based on the findings of this study. Considering that a significant number of young people have an affinity for conspiracy narratives, the situation surrounding conspiracy narratives should be further examined. Other possible political consequences of a conspiracy mentality can be the belief in election fraud (Edelson et al., 2017), lower levels of trust in government (Einstein & Glick, 2015), or less engagement in politics (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), all of which can turn young people into politically disaffected adults. The present topic has been particularly important since the beginning of 2020, as the spread of conspiracy theories has continued to increase in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis situations like the pandemic predispose people to believe in conspiracy theories because of the perceived fear and loss of control (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). For adolescents, the containment of the pandemic included social isolation and school closures. Such measures result in a lack of exchange with peers and can be held accountable for tense familial relationships (see e.g., Neubert et al., 2020). Related to this is the desire for a COVID-19 culprit, which is provided by coronavirus conspiracy narratives. Pandemic-related school closures mean that teachers are unable to provide comprehensive education regarding these conspiracy theories. Young people also have more time to spend on social media, which is generally found to be the preferred news source for adolescents when compared to traditional news sources (Marchi, 2012). The use of YouTube or Facebook as a research tool can be problematic considering that social media exhibits both serious news and absurd conspiracy narratives in the same manner. Another issue is the algorithms that are designed to ensure the longest possible screen time (e.g., by playing increasingly extreme videos via auto-play).

Although the study results all refer to one federal state in Germany, the implications of our empirical findings reach beyond the specificities of Germany. In every country, it seems almost impossible to convince conspiracy believers of the opposite by simply using facts (see Berinsky, 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Their distrust of the so-called *mainstream media* and the political system is very pronounced. They also have a strong urge to proselytize others since they believe that they know the real truth. However, there are many people who share conspiracy theories (e.g., on social media) and sympathize with the content disseminated, but have not yet been completely absorbed by the related ideology (e.g., Pennycook et al., 2020). Discussions regarding the truth content of conspiracy theories may be quite possible with such individuals. Therefore, adolescents in particular should benefit from awareness campaigns, as their political opinions have a higher probability of being influenced. Teaching young people how to detect false news and conspiracy theories is essential. According to the PISA study, only slightly more than half of the students report that they were taught in school how to decide whether to trust information on the Internet in Germany. Slightly less than half have been taught how to determine whether information is subjective or biased (OECD, 2021). Within the context of social media, adolescents often do not take the credibility of news sources into account (Ofcom, 2018). Many students evaluate a news tweet based on the amount of detail it contains or whether it includes a large photo, rather than on its source (McGrew et al., 2018). Within the school context, it is important that young people learn to critically analyze sources and data as well as evaluate information according to its origin. Furthermore, critical media literacy, which includes how online platforms (e.g., algorithms, clickbait) work, is essential. Critical and analytical thinking skills should also be part of the curriculum, since they are related to lower levels of conspiracy thinking (Swami et al., 2014). Students may also benefit from inoculation, a communication strategy that presents a "weaker version" of the misinformation to students, enabling them to develop a resistance to it (Dyrendal & Jolley, 2020). This strategy was originally developed by McGuire (1961). Inoculation strategies are already associated with more psychological reactance in response to extremist propaganda and more negative perceptions of left-wing and right-wing extremist groups' credibility. This in turn reduces the likelihood of supporting extremist groups (Braddock, 2019). Another study found that playing the online game *Radicalise*, a game that

combats the effectiveness of online recruitment strategies used by extremist groups (e.g., isolating vulnerable individuals from their community and pressuring them into committing a criminal act), significantly improved participants' ability and confidence in spotting manipulation and traits associated with vulnerability (Saleh et al., 2021). There is also some evidence that primary and secondary prevention programs aimed at enhancing potential protective factors (Brouillette-Alarie et al., 2022) or implementing counter-narratives such as counter-stereotypical exemplars (Carthy et al., 2020) can reduce violent radicalization.

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