



## The relationship between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs via cognitive processes



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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to replicate previous work showing relationships between components of schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs, and extend it by examining the mediating role of cognitive processes. An international online sample of 411 women and men (mean age = 35.41 years) completed measures of the schizotypal facets of Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking and Ideas of Reference, conspiracist beliefs, and cognitive processes related to need for cognition, analytic thinking, and cognitive insight. Path analysis confirmed the associations between both schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs in the present sample. Confirmatory evidence was found for the association between analytic thinking and conspiracist beliefs, and results also suggested an association between cognitive insight and conspiracist beliefs. Cognitive insight also mediated the link between Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking and Ideas of Reference with conspiracist beliefs. However, analytic thinking provided a mediating link to conspiracy ideation for Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking and not Ideas of Reference. Finally, there was an association between Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking and need for cognition, but this path did not extend to conspiracist beliefs. These results suggest possible mediating roles for analytic thinking and self-certainty between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs.

### 1. Introduction

Belief in conspiracy theories (i.e., a belief that the world or an event is manipulated by omnipresent and omnipotent agents in the pursuit of malevolent goals; Bale 2007; Swami and Furnham, 2014) is both a stable and widespread aspect of contemporary public opinion. For example, Oliver and Wood (2014) reported that almost 55% of respondents in a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults agreed with at least one of seven conspiracy theories they were presented with. Such findings are of concern because conspiracist beliefs are reliably associated with a range of negative civic, social, and health outcomes (for reviews, see Douglas et al., 2015; Swami and Coles, 2010). Not surprisingly, scholars have sought to understand the factors that make one more or less likely to adopt conspiracist beliefs, with research variously focusing on social psychological, differential, and psychopathological aspects (for reviews, see Bilewicz et al., 2015; van Prooijen and van Lange, 2014).

One particular factor that has received sustained attention from

scholars is schizotypy, which is a latent personality organisation reflecting a putative liability for schizophrenia-spectrum disorders (Ettinger et al., 2015, 2017; Lenzenweger, 2015). Schizotypic traits include anomalies in cognition (e.g., hallucinations), socio-emotional function (e.g., constricted affect), and behaviour (e.g., odd behaviour and language), that do not meet the clinical threshold for psychotic disorders (Cohen et al., 2015; Lenzenweger, 2010). Although the latent dimensionality of schizotypy continues to be debated, the available literature consistently indicates that the phenotypic expression of schizotypy is multidimensional (e.g., Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2017). This multidimensionality is important because several studies have reported significant and positive associations between conspiracist beliefs and schizotypal traits (Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Swami et al., 2014; van der Tempel and Alcock, 2015). More specifically, it has been reported that schizotypal facets of Odd or Magical Thinking and, to a lesser extent, Ideas of Reference, are significant predictors of conspiracist beliefs (Barron et al., 2014). In explanation, it has been suggested that conspiracist beliefs require a rejection of

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official mechanisms of information generation and expert opinion, as well as a high degree of suspiciousness of mainstream sources of information, which may be motivated by high schizotypy (Barron et al., 2014; Dagnall et al., 2015; Holm, 2009; Swami et al., 2016).

One limitation of this body of research, however, is the assumption that schizotypal facets are directly associated with conspiracist beliefs. While the extant findings have certainly provided preliminary support for this assumption, it is also possible that the links between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs are mediated by additional factors that have hitherto gone unmeasured. For example, some studies have examined paranoid ideation as a mediating variable between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs (Dagnall et al., 2015; Darwin et al., 2011); that is, it has been suggested that the continual fear of external agents and deficits of perception typified by paranoid ideation may mediate the relationship between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs (see also Holm (2009)). Given such findings, investigating the mediating utility of additional variables could result in a fuller picture of the ways in which schizotypy may be related to conspiracist beliefs.

Beyond paranoid ideation, another set of potentially useful mediating variables can be broadly grouped under the category of “cognitive processes”. In this view, schizotypal facets may be associated with a number of cognitive processes, which in turn are related to belief in conspiracy theories. Such a focus is pertinent for two reasons. First, studies of the associations between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs typically suggests that it is positive facets of schizotypy (i.e., those associated with cognitive-perceptual elements) that motivate greater conspiracist beliefs (Barron et al., 2014). Second, related research has applied a similar conceptual perspective in seeking to understand associations between schizotypy and paranormal beliefs, which in turn have been associated with conspiracist beliefs (Stieger et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2011); that is, studies have suggested that cognitive processes may mediate the link between schizotypy and paranormal beliefs (Bogart et al., 2010; Dagnall et al., 2015; Kata, 2010; Williams and Irwin, 1991).

A number of facets of cognitive processes may be of relevance when considering the associations between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs. One such facet is an analytic (or rational) cognitive style, which is believed to be one of two distinct branches of reasoning processing (Epstein et al., 1996; Evans, 2010; Evans and Stanovich, 2013; Kahneman, 2011; Ross et al., 2016; Stanovich, 2011). The analytic branch, also referred to as Type 2 thinking style, represents a cognitive processing style that has a low capacity, is measured and slow, and is dependent on cognitive ability (Ross et al., 2016). A second branch, also referred to as Type 1, represents an intuitive processing style that has a high capacity, operates quickly, and is independent of cognitive ability (Ross et al., 2016). Although there is little research investigating cognitive style and schizotypy, greater intuitive cognitive style has previously been associated with negative factors of schizotypy, including interpersonal aspects (Wolfradt et al., 1999). Importantly, however, analytic thinking is a core component of rationality (e.g., Stanovich, 2011) and has important consequences for diverse domains of psychological functioning (Pennycook et al., 2015). In particular, Swami et al. (2014) reported significant negative associations between analytic thinking and conspiracist beliefs (see also van Prooijen (2017)); these authors also found that priming analytic thinking was successful at reducing belief in conspiracy theories. Thus, it might be suggested that analytic thinking may mediate the relationships between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs.

Analytic thinking style represents one of several cognitive processes that may have an influence over atypical beliefs (Gray and Mill, 1990). A need for cognition is another potential antecedent of conspiracist beliefs (Swami et al., 2014). Need for cognition can be defined as dispositional thinking differences in the tendency to engage in, and enjoy, effortful cognitive actions (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Cacioppo et al., 1996). Individuals high in need for cognition intrinsically devote cognitive resources to thinking, are more likely to actively approach

cognitively challenging situations (Fleischbauer et al., 2010), are more likely to attend to, elaborate, evaluate, and recall information (e.g., Peltier and Schibrowsky, 1994). In addition, individuals who are high in need for cognition may also be less likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2014). While there has been no previous evaluation of the association between need for cognition and schizotypy, these constructs share similar negative associations with other personality dimensions. For example, high schizotypy has been shown to be negatively associated with Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience (Gurrera et al., 2005), with these factors having similar associations with a need for cognition (Sadowski and Cogburn, 1997). Thus, examining the mediating utility of need for cognition between schizotypal facets and belief in conspiracy theories may be useful.

In addition to analytic thinking and need for cognition, metacognitive factors (i.e., the ability to think about thinking) may be another cognitive processing aspect that mediates the relationship between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs. One particular facet of meta-cognition that may be important vis-à-vis schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs is cognitive insight, which can be conceptualised as the mental processes involved in self re-evaluation of anomalous experiences and misunderstandings (Beck et al., 2004; Sumiyoshi et al., 2016). One prominent measure of cognitive insight is the Beck Cognitive Insight Scale (BCIS; Beck et al., 2004), which has two subscales: Self-Reflectiveness and Self-Certainty. Those with psychotic disorders have been shown to be less self-reflective (e.g., unwilling to acknowledge the possibility that they are wrong) and more assertive in their own judgments in comparison to psychiatric patients who did not have psychosis (Beck et al., 2004). However, researchers have postulated that Self-Reflectiveness reflects a state characteristic, while Self-Certainty reflects a trait characteristic (Bora et al., 2007; Sacks et al., 2012), suggesting that Self-Certainty may be more relevant to schizotypal research than Self-Reflectiveness. In accordance with this view, previous studies have suggested that higher self-certainty may be associated with positive factors of schizotypy (Sacks et al., 2012; Stirling et al., 2007), although associations with belief in conspiracy theories has not been previously examined. Thus, self-certainty was included in the present study as a third potential mediating factor between schizotypal facets and belief in conspiracy theories.

To summarise, the aim of the present study was to examine the mediating potential of three cognitive processes – analytic thinking, need for cognition, and self-certainty – in the relationship between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs. Doing so is important as it provides a more nuanced conceptual view of the link between schizotypy and conspiracist beliefs, and would also help to further explicate previous findings (e.g., whether the relationship between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs is mediated by other variables). More specifically, a hypothesised model of relationships was developed in which lower-order schizotypy facets from previously investigated associations (i.e., Odd Beliefs or Magical Thinking and Ideas of Reference; Barron et al., 2014) were included as distal factors in a path analysis framework. Both schizotypal components were predicted to be directly associated with belief in conspiracy theories, as well as indirectly via the variables of analytic thinking, need for cognition, and self-certainty. A hypothesised model of these relationships is presented in Fig. 1.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were an online, international sample of 252 women and 159 men, who ranged in age from 18 to 69 ( $M = 35.41$ ,  $SD = 13.06$ ). Most participants were from the United States (65.1%), India (18.7%), and the United Kingdom (10.7%), with the remainder of the sample consisting of various nations (5.5%).

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