

Running head: *Conspiracy theories in organizations*

# **Suspicion in the workplace: Organizational conspiracy theories and work-related outcomes**

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**Abstract**

Belief in conspiracy theories about societal events is widespread and has important consequences for political, health and environmental behaviour. Little is known, however, about how conspiracy theorising affects people's everyday working lives. In the present research, we predicted that belief in conspiracy theories about the workplace would be associated with increased turnover intentions. We further hypothesised that belief in these organizational conspiracy theories would predict decreased organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Finally, we hypothesised that these factors would mediate the relationship between organizational conspiracy theories and turnover intentions. In three studies (one correlational and two experiments,  $Ns = 209, 119, 202$ ), we found support for these hypotheses. The current studies therefore demonstrate the potentially adverse consequences of conspiracy theorising for the workplace. We argue that managers and employees should be careful not to dismiss conspiracy theorising as harmless rumour or gossip.

## **Suspicion in the workplace: Organizational conspiracy theories and work-related outcomes**

Conspiracy theories explain events as the result of secret, deliberate actions and cover ups at the hands of malicious and powerful groups (Goertzel, 1994; McCauley & Jacques, 1979; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). For example, well-known conspiracy theories propose that the 9/11 attacks were an ‘inside job’ (Wood & Douglas, 2013, 2015), and that people are being lied to about the reality of climate change (Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Lewandowsky, Oberauer & Gignac, 2013). It seems that conspiracy theories have always been popular (Uscinski & Parent, 2014), and presently over 50% of people believe at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Whilst research to date has focused on conspiracy theories about larger societal events, some scholars argue there is such a thing as a *conspiratorial mindset* that is endemic to human life (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Informed by this perspective, the present research examines the potential implications of conspiracy theorising in the ubiquitous, everyday setting of the workplace.

### **Psychology of conspiracy theories**

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the psychological factors associated with conspiracy belief (see Bilewicz, Cichocka & Soral, 2015 for an overview). For example, conspiracy belief has been linked to distrust in authority, cynicism (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory, 1999; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010), Machiavellianism (Douglas & Sutton, 2011), collective narcissism (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala & Olechowski, in press), and a tendency to attribute agency and intentionality where it is unlikely to exist (Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry & Harvey, 2016). Conspiracy theories are said to thrive under conditions of powerlessness (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

Psychologists have also begun to consider what some of the potential consequences of conspiracy theories might be. In particular, whilst conspiracy theories may allow individuals to question social hierarchies and require elites be more transparent (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Fenster, 1999; Swami & Coles, 2010), recent empirical findings suggest that they may have important negative societal consequences. These include discouraging people from voting (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), having their children vaccinated (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), using contraception (Bird & Bogart, 2003; Bogart & Thorburn, 2006), and engaging in climate-friendly behaviours (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; see also Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Douglas, Sutton, Jolley & Wood, 2015). These effects may occur without people's awareness, since people are persuaded by conspiracy theories even when they perceive their beliefs to have been unchanged (Douglas and Sutton, 2008). It is therefore becoming clear that conspiracy theories cannot be dismissed as trivial notions that affect the lives of only a small handful of individuals and marginalised communities. However, whilst scholars have made progress in understanding the broader societal consequences of conspiracy belief, little is known about how conspiracy theories might affect people's day-to-day working life. We argue that, in addition to their influences on wider society, conspiracy theories may also have important and potentially detrimental consequences in the workplace.

### **Organizational conspiracy theories**

We define *organizational conspiracy theories* as notions that powerful groups (e.g., managers) within the workplace are acting in secret to achieve some kind of malevolent objective. For example, managers may deliberately conspire to hire a preferred candidate for a job, or work together to have an employee fired. We differentiate organizational conspiracy theories from various associated concepts. Specifically, rumour and gossip more often implicate individuals than groups and do not

necessarily allege conspiracies *between* individuals (Allport & Postman, 1947; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). General mistrust, whilst correlated with conspiracy belief about societal events (e.g., Goertzel, 1994) refers to broader negative feelings about individuals or groups rather than specific allegations of dishonesty and wrongdoing by groups. Like general conspiracy beliefs, organizational conspiracy beliefs may also thrive under conditions of powerlessness (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) and uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Specifically, in situations where workers lack control (e.g., have little responsibility, or little control over their duties) or under conditions of uncertainty (e.g., new management, concern about the motives of managers), organizational conspiracy theories may prosper.

What effects are such organizational conspiracy theories likely to have on the workplace? Our investigation focuses on one of the most important outcomes for organizations – *employee turnover*. Turnover represents a significant challenge to organizations and can be very costly, resulting in financial losses associated with training employees who opt to leave, associated recruitment and other administrative costs (Cascio, 2006; Shaw, Gupta, & Delery, 2005; Weisberg & Kirschenbaum, 1991) as well as the potentially disastrous loss of valuable individuals. Turnover can also affect organizational performance outcomes, including customer service, profits and revenues (Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pierce, 2013). Given the difficulty of studying the causes of actual turnover, and considering that turnover intentions are strongly correlated with actual turnover (Steel & Ovalle, 1984), research has primarily focused on the measurement of *turnover intentions* (e.g., Randsley de Moura, Abrams, Retter, Gunnarsdottir, & Ando, 2009; Van Dick et al., 2004). We argue that conspiracy theorising may influence such intentions. Specifically, workers may be more likely to consider leaving their organization to the extent that they view it as a negative place

where groups act secretly and maliciously in the pursuit of their own selfish interests. Indeed, some recent research shows support for this idea, demonstrating that belief in workplace-related conspiracies – as a result of despotic or laissez-faire leadership – is associated with turnover intentions (van Prooijen & de Vries, in press).

As yet, however, much is unknown about the relationship between conspiracy theorising in organizations and workers' intentions to leave their workplace. Specifically, because previous research used a correlational design (van Prooijen & de Vries, in press), it has not yet established whether, as we reason in this paper, organizational conspiracy belief leads to increased turnover intentions, or if one's intention to leave the workplace reinforces or heightens conspiracy belief. Further, we know little about the precise mechanism(s) that link these two variables. In the present research, we therefore explicitly examine *how* conspiracy belief may affect psychological ties to the organization. To do so, we investigate the roles of three variables that have been found to either directly or indirectly predict turnover intentions – organizational identification (Randsley de Moura et al., 2009; Van Dick et al., 2004), organizational commitment (Schwepker, 2001; van Prooijen & de Vries, in press), and job satisfaction (Randsley de Moura et al., 2009; Schwepker, 2001; Van Dick et al., 2004).

### **Organizational identification**

*Organizational identification* refers to individuals' self-definition as members of a particular organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1995).

Organizational identification has been found to uniquely predict organizational outcomes (e.g., Abrams & Randsley de Moura, 2001; Ouwerkerk, Ellemers, & De Gilder, 1999; Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003) and attitudes and behaviors at work (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015; Riketta, 2005). For example, it has been associated with workers' wellbeing (Wegge, Van Dick, Fisher, Wecking, & Moltzen, 2006; Van Dick, 2004), performance

(Lee et al., 2015; Van Dick, 2004), and, most relevant to the current investigation, turnover intentions (Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Van Dick, 2004).

We argue that organizational conspiracy theories will decrease organizational identification. If an organization is riddled with perceptions of conspiracy, such as beliefs that managers are deliberately trying to harm employees, this is likely to weaken the importance of the organization to the individual and reduce the positive self-esteem they derive from it. Research has shown that self-esteem and identification are positively influenced by receiving procedural justice from a group (Tyler, DeGoey & Smith, 1996). It is therefore unlikely that employees will positively identify with a workplace where conspiracies are perceived to occur. Since existing research links organizational conspiracy belief with turnover intentions (van Prooijen & de Vries, in press), and organizational identification with increased turnover intentions (Abrams, Ando, & Hinkle, 1998; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Randsley de Moura et al., 2009; Van Dick et al., 2004), it is reasonable to test the idea that organizational identification may mediate the relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions.

### **Organizational commitment**

Similarly, *organizational commitment* can be understood as the psychological link people have to the organization (Meyer, Becker, & Van Dick, 2006; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974; Schwepker, 2001). Commitment is commonly associated with the extent to which employees' behaviour is aligned with their organizations' interests and goals (Porter et al., 1974). That is, committed individuals often believe in and accept the organization's goals and values, are willing to put in a great deal of effort on behalf of the organization, and are motivated to continue to be part of the organization (Porter et al., 1974). Research suggests that commitment is also a significant predictor of turnover intentions (e.g., Eby, Freeman, Rush & Lance, 1999; Loi, Hang-yue, & Foley,

2006; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Schwepker, 2001).

Further, van Prooijen and de Vries (in press) found that organizational commitment was associated with belief in workplace-related conspiracies and that it mediated the association between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions. It remains to be seen whether organizational conspiracy belief exerts a causal influence on organizational commitment. There is some evidence from previous research to suggest that this may be the case. Specifically, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) showed that conspiracy theories concerning the government weakened political engagement by generating feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. It is reasonable to suggest that the same processes may occur at the more specific social level of the organization. Like political engagement, organizational commitment entails willingness to act on behalf of the interests of the collective.

### **Job satisfaction**

*Job satisfaction* is the evaluation that employees make of their job and includes their attitudes to specific aspects of the job (van Dick et al., 2004). Research has found that, like organizational identification and organizational commitment, job satisfaction is associated with turnover intentions, and that more satisfied workers are less likely to want to leave their jobs (Eby et al., 1999; Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Randsley de Moura et al., 2009; Schwepker, 2001; Van Dick et al., 2004).

Like organizational identification and organizational commitment, we argue that organizational conspiracy theories will decrease job satisfaction. A perceived climate of conspiracy, or specific beliefs that groups are conspiring against employees, are likely to lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction in the job, or at least with specific aspects of the job. Since job satisfaction is a robust predictor of turnover intentions, it is reasonable



to suggest that job satisfaction may also mediate the relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions.

### **The present research**

This research tests the overarching hypothesis that organizational conspiracy theories will increase turnover intentions. We also examined *how* organizational conspiracy beliefs may affect people's psychological ties to the organization. In Study 1, we measured workers' belief in organizational conspiracy theories, and turnover intentions, and also tested the potential mediating roles of organizational identification, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated the nature of the organizational climate (positive vs. negative) to induce organizational conspiracy belief, and compared turnover intentions across the two conditions, examining the same potential mediators as in Study 1. Finally, in Study 3, we directly manipulated exposure to organizational conspiracy theories (vs. control) and compared turnover intentions across the two conditions, examining the same potential mediators as in Studies 1 and 2.

### **Study 1**

This study first aimed to corroborate the finding that organizational conspiracy belief is correlated with turnover intentions (see van Prooijen & de Vries, in press). Going further, we also tested the mechanisms that may be responsible for this association. We reasoned that the relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions could be mediated by organizational identification, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Unlike previous work, we also aimed to rule out that the effect can simply be explained by a more general tendency toward conspiratorial thinking, that is, by individuals' tendency to believe in conspiracies in general that are not necessarily related to the workplace (e.g., conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11 and

climate change). Whilst organizational and general conspiracy belief should be significantly related to each other according to the well-established finding that belief in one conspiracy theory tends to predict belief in others (Goertzel, 1994; Swami, Coles, Stieger, Pietschnig, Furnham, Rehim & Voracek, 2011; Wood, Douglas & Sutton, 2012), there is no reason to expect that general conspiracy belief would predict organizational outcomes. We expect organizational conspiracy belief to make a unique contribution in explaining organizational outcomes and therefore, organizational conspiracy belief should predict organizational outcomes whilst controlling for general conspiracy belief.

## **Method**

### **Participants and design**

Two hundred and nine MTurk workers completed an online questionnaire (74 women, 122 men, 1 transgender, 12 unreported,  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.27$ ,  $SD = 11.05$ ). Further participant characteristics for all three studies are given in the online supporting materials. They were each paid US \$0.75. The design of the study was correlational. The predictor variable was belief in organizational conspiracy theories and the dependent variable was turnover intentions. The proposed mediators were organizational identification, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. We also included an established measure of belief in other conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2016).<sup>1</sup>

### **Materials and procedure**

The questionnaire was designed and administered using the Qualtrics questionnaire design software. Participants were first presented with an information page where they were asked to give their informed consent. They were asked to only complete the questionnaire if they were currently employed in either a full-time or part-

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<sup>1</sup> The current study was part of a larger-scale investigation including measures for another project, such as intention to engage in unethical workplace behaviour, and demographic factors. These variables were not analysed as part of the current study.

time position and whilst answering the questions, they were asked to think about their current workplace. They then completed a series of scales in a random order.

#### *Belief in organizational conspiracy theories*

Participants were asked to read seven statements related to conspiracies within their workplace (e.g., “A small group of people makes all of the decisions to suit their own interests”; “A small group of people secretly manipulates events”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .93$ ; see online supporting materials).

#### *Organizational identification*

Participants read six statements adapted from Edwards and Peccei (2007) related to their level of identification with their workplace (e.g., “What my workplace stands for is important to me”; “I feel strong ties with my workplace”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .96$ ).

#### *Organizational commitment*

Participants read 16 statements from Allen and Meyer (1990) related to their affective and normative commitment to the workplace (e.g., “I would be happy to spend the rest of my working life in my workplace”; “I do not feel like ‘part of the family’ in my workplace” (reverse scored); 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### *Job satisfaction*

Participants read seven statements from Randsley de Moura et al. (2009) concerning satisfaction with various aspects of their jobs (e.g., “Your work in general”; “Your opportunities for advancement”; 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### *Turnover intentions*

Participants were asked three questions related to their intention to leave their current position (Mitchell, Holton, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001) – “Do you intend to leave your job in the next 12 months?” (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*), “How strongly do

you feel about leaving your job within the next 12 months?” (1 = *not very strongly*, 5 = *very strongly*), and “How likely is it that you will leave your job in the next 12 months? (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*). These items were summed to form a scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### *Belief in other conspiracy theories*

To measure general conspiracy belief, participants read seven statements related to well-known conspiracy theories relevant to an American sample (Douglas et al., 2016; “Scientists are creating panic about climate change because it is in their interests to do so”; “The attack on the Twin Towers was not a terrorist action but a governmental plot”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .86$ ). At the completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked and paid.

### **Results and discussion**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all measures are presented in Table 1. As expected, organizational conspiracy belief was significantly correlated with all of the organizational outcomes and turnover intentions.

Testing our hypotheses, we found the predicted relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions,  $\beta = .393$ ,  $t(196) = 5.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . We proceeded to test whether this was mediated by organizational identification, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction. Belief in general conspiracy theories was significantly correlated with turnover intentions (but not any of the other organizational outcomes), and we included this variable as a covariate. Bootstrapped mediation analyses (10,000 resamples) examined the indirect effect of organizational conspiracy belief on turnover intentions via the predicted mediators using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (model 4; see Hayes, 2013). Bootstrapping procedures have several advantages over traditionally used parametric approaches such as regression. They make no assumptions about distribution and are more robust up to sample sizes of

approximately 1,000. This procedure calculates the total and all possible specific indirect effects of the IV on the DV. In this procedure, an indirect effect is estimated as being significant if zero is not contained within the 95% lower (LLCI) and upper (ULCI) confidence intervals.

In line with our predictions, the significant total effect of organizational conspiracy belief on turnover intentions ( $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 5.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI 0.32, 0.67) was reduced in the direct model ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 1.88$ ,  $p = .061$ , 95% CI -0.01, 0.34). However, the indirect effects were only significant for job satisfaction ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI 0.09, 0.34) and organizational commitment ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI 0.06, 0.31); the indirect effect was not significant for organizational identification ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95% CI -0.14, 0.05). That is, organizational commitment and job satisfaction significantly mediated the relationship between organizational conspiracy beliefs and turnover intentions (indirect total effect,  $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI 0.22, 0.45), when controlling for belief in other conspiracy theories (see Figure 1). The pattern of findings remained unchanged when general conspiracy beliefs were not controlled for.<sup>2</sup> From this point, we made the decision to focus on organizational commitment and job satisfaction as potential mediators, leaving out organizational identification. Although future research could further explore the potential role of organizational identification in these processes, the primary focus of our research was to establish the importance of conspiracy theories to key organizational outcomes quite broadly, and both organizational commitment and job satisfaction are such key

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<sup>2</sup> We also investigated whether the two different components of commitment measured in this Study – affective and normative commitment – had different effects on turnover intentions. We ran model 4 again and results showed that job satisfaction, normative commitment, but not affective commitment significantly mediated the association between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions ( $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI 0.01, 0.17 and  $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI -0.07, 0.22, respectively). We could not run these detailed analyses in the remaining studies as we used shortened versions of the scales. Although these fine distinctions between specific components of commitment were not the focus of this research, we feel that this is an important finding to follow up in future research.

outcomes. To further justify this decision, we found that organizational identification and organizational commitment were highly correlated ( $r = .75$ ) and when the two were combined into one variable, the pattern of results remained unchanged across all three studies reported in this paper.

We next tested for serial mediation to contribute to the discussion about the psychological process through which organizational outcomes predict turnover intentions. Van Dick et al. (2004) found support for a model in which turnover intentions were predicted by organizational identification in a process mediated by job satisfaction. As we noted earlier however, organizational identification did not significantly mediate the relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions in this study, and we therefore decided to focus on only organizational commitment and job satisfaction. We therefore tested here whether the indirect path observed by Van Dick et al (2004) would apply if organizational identification was replaced by organizational commitment. Specifically, we tested whether organizational conspiracy belief sequentially predicts organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and whether job satisfaction predicts turnover intentions when controlling for belief in other conspiracy theories.

We used the PROCESS macro (Model 6; see Hayes, 2013) and found that the significant total effect of organizational conspiracy belief on turnover intentions ( $b = 0.49$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 5.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI 0.32, 0.67) was reduced in the direct model ( $b = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ , 95% CI 0.01, 0.35). In other words, organizational commitment and job satisfaction significantly and sequentially mediated the effect of organizational conspiracy belief on turnover intentions (indirect total effect,  $b = 0.32$ ,  $SE$

= 0.06, 95% CI 0.21, 0.44). The specific indirect effect for this path was,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI 0.05, 0.18 (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

This study therefore demonstrates that belief in organizational conspiracy theories has potentially important consequences for organizations. Specifically, in the current study they predicted the extent to which people wish to stay in their jobs. Further, this relationship was driven by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. This supports and extends on previous research (van Prooijen & de Vries, in press). Importantly, it also eliminates the possibility that the relationships are explained by the general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. All predicted relationships were present when including general conspiracy belief as a covariate.

One significant limitation of the current study and previous research, however, is that they only provide correlational evidence for the association between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions. The direction of causality can therefore not be assumed. In the next study, we address this issue by directly manipulating an aspect of the working environment that is likely to influence the extent of conspiratorial thinking: the organizational climate.

## Study 2

In this study we investigate how a negative (vs. a positive) organizational climate that fosters organizational conspiracy belief can increase turnover intentions.

Organizational climate is the psychological environment of an organization (Pritchard & Karasick, 1973), and it refers to shared perceptions of – and the associated meanings of –

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<sup>3</sup> Other authors have found support for a different indirect path whilst testing for the effects of organizational identification and job satisfaction on turnover intentions. Randsley de Moura et al. (2009) found that organizational identification mediated the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions more strongly than job satisfaction mediated the relationship between organizational identification and turnover intentions. We therefore tested a second order of our model by changing the order of the organizational commitment and job satisfaction variables. Although significant, the specific indirect path proposed (organizational conspiracy belief → job satisfaction → organizational commitment → turnover intentions) was weaker than the order described above ( $b = 0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI 0.02, 0.12).

the policies, practices, and procedures experienced within an organization and the behaviours that are observed and expected (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). It has been linked to job satisfaction (Friedlander & Margulies, 1969; Ostroff, 1993; Pritchard & Karasick, 1973), commitment (Ostroff, 1993) and turnover intentions (Ostroff, 1993; Schwepker, 2001). For example, one study of the ethical climate – a specific aspect of organizational climate which refers to employees' shared perceptions of the organization's ethical values, procedures and policies (Schneider, 1975; Schwepker, 2001; Wimbush & Shepard, 1994) – highlighted its effects on organizational outcomes. Specifically, it has been found that ethical climate influences organizational behaviour, such that a positive ethical climate is a key predictor of greater job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment and consequently lower turnover intentions amongst salespeople (Schwepker, 2001).

In this study, we manipulated organizational climate more generally by asking participants to imagine themselves working for an organization in which the climate has positive or negative features. We argue that the organizational climate of a workplace, in addition to predicting workplace outcomes, will also influence the extent to which people in the organization engage in conspiracy theorising. Specifically, in a negative climate where employees perceive that they have little autonomy over their work and there is much conflict and gossip, it is likely that workers will perceive conspiracies, perhaps as explanations for their difficult circumstances and lack of control (see Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). On the other hand, in a positive climate where workers perceive more autonomy and there is little conflict and gossip, there is little reason for workers to perceive that conspiracies are occurring. Although negative features of the workplace such as conflict and gossip may not necessarily create conspiratorial thinking on their own, they may together contribute to an overall climate that fosters conspiracy belief.



Manipulating the overall nature of the organizational climate, rather than just tapping into general negativity about the workplace, may therefore also be a way to manipulate conspiracy belief. We tested the hypothesis that organizational climate would affect turnover intentions such that workers would show greater intention to leave the workplace when the climate is negative vs. positive. Following Study 1, we further tested a serial mediation model such that organizational climate would predict organizational conspiracy belief, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

## **Method**

### **Participants and design**

One hundred and nineteen Prolific Academic workers completed an online questionnaire (63 women, 55 men, 1 transgender,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.59$ ,  $SD = 10.32$ ), and were paid GB £0.50. Full-time students were excluded from participating. The study was a two-group experimental design. The independent variable was organizational climate (positive or negative) and the dependent measure was turnover intentions as in Study 1. The potential mediators were organizational conspiracy beliefs, organizational commitment and job satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

### **Materials and procedure**

As in Study 1, the online questionnaire was designed using the Qualtrics software and first presented participants with an information page where they gave their informed consent. Participants were then asked to imagine working for a large consultancy firm and having worked there for five years. They were then asked to read a paragraph about the overall organizational climate. For half of the participants, this was positive (e.g., employees had a lot of autonomy over their work, had the opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> We also included a brief measure of organizational identification which was not included in the analysis, as discussed in Study 1.

gain rewards, and there was very little conflict and gossip), and for the other half this was negative (e.g., employees had little autonomy over their work, few opportunities to gain rewards, and there was frequent conflict and gossip). These were taken from features assessed in Litwin and Stringer's (1968) organizational climate questionnaire.

#### *Potential mediators*

We again measured organizational commitment (abridged to three items;  $\alpha = .98$ ) and job satisfaction (abridged to three items;  $\alpha = .93$ ). The three items from each scale, along with intercorrelations between items, are presented in the online supporting materials. Organizational conspiracy belief ( $\alpha = .95$ ), turnover intentions ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and general conspiracy belief ( $\alpha = .87$ ) were measured as in Study 1. At the completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked and paid.

### **Results and discussion**

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 2. As predicted, we found that organizational climate predicted turnover intentions,  $\beta = .857$ ,  $t(118) = 17.96$ ,  $p < .001$ .

We then tested whether the relationship between organizational climate and turnover intentions was sequentially mediated by organizational conspiracy belief, organizational commitment and job satisfaction, whilst controlling for belief in general conspiracy theories. To do so, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 6; see Hayes, 2013) using 10,000 bootstrapped resamples. In line with our predictions, the significant total effect of organizational climate on turnover intentions ( $b = 2.44$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t = 16.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI 2.15, 2.74) was reduced in the direct model ( $b = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t = 2.56$ ,  $p = .012$ , 95% CI 0.13, 0.97). That is, organizational conspiracy belief, organizational commitment and job satisfaction significantly sequentially mediated the effect of organizational climate on turnover intentions (indirect total effect,

$b = 1.89$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ , 95% CI 1.46, 2.30; indirect effect for the specific proposed path,  $b = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95% CI 0.05, 0.38; see Figure 3). The pattern of findings remained the same when general conspiracy beliefs were not controlled for.<sup>5</sup>

So far, we have therefore demonstrated that conspiracy belief predicts turnover intentions via organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and that organizational conspiracy belief, organizational commitment and job satisfaction also sequentially mediate the effect of organizational climate on turnover intentions. Organizational conspiracy theories therefore appear to play an important role in predicting the extent to which people wish to stay in their workplace. However, we do not as yet have conclusive evidence that conspiracy theories have a *causal effect* on turnover intentions. In Study 2 we used negative organizational climate as a proxy for organizational conspiracy theories. Although this was a successful manipulation, the best test of the hypothesised causal relationship between organizational conspiracy theories and turnover intentions is to manipulate organizational conspiracy theories directly. This is the aim of the final study.

### Study 3

In this study, exposure to conspiracy theories was manipulated as in previous research (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b). Participants were asked to read a piece of text about a workplace which either mentioned conspiracies occurring in that workplace or not (control). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they would remain working in this organization, and also their organizational commitment and job satisfaction. We predicted that exposure to conspiracy theories would affect turnover

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly to Study 1, we tested a second order of the mediation (organizational climate → organizational conspiracy belief → job satisfaction → organizational commitment → turnover intentions). The test of this specific indirect path was weaker than in the order described above ( $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI 0.02, 0.29). On the other hand, the first model shows that the direct path between organizational conspiracy belief and job satisfaction is not significant,  $b = -.16$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t = -1.27$ ,  $p = .205$ , CI -.42, 0.10, which highlights the importance of organizational commitment as a mediator between the two.

intentions, such that participants would report higher turnover intentions when exposed to organizational conspiracy theories than when they were not. We also predicted that organizational commitment and job satisfaction would sequentially mediate this effect.

## **Method**

### **Participants and design**

Two hundred and two MTurk workers completed an online questionnaire (73 women, 128 men, 2 rather not say,  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.42$ ,  $SD = 9.81$ ). They were paid US \$0.75 for their participation. We asked participants to only participate in the study if they were currently employed in full-time or part-time work. The study was a two-group experimental design. The independent variable was the presence of conspiracies in the workplace (present vs. control). The dependent variable was turnover intentions as in Studies 1 and 2 and the potential mediators were also the same as in Studies 1 and 2 – organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

### **Materials and procedure**

As in Studies 1 and 2, the online questionnaire was designed using the Qualtrics software and first presented participants with an information page where they were asked to give their informed consent.

#### *Manipulation of organizational conspiracy belief*

Participants were asked to carefully read a paragraph and imagine that they were working for a large consultancy firm and had been working there for over five years. One half of the participants were in a control condition where the company was said to be celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The other half (the conspiracy condition) were presented with a workplace scenario in which a conspiracy had occurred or was occurring. There were three scenarios and participants were randomly assigned to read one – the first scenario involved a leaked email suggesting that the management team had

plotted to fix the employee of the year award, the second involved a leaked email suggesting that the management team were secretly planning to cut the company pay budget to save their own bonuses, and finally, the third scenario involved a situation in which employees were suspected of being deliberately hand-picked to work on lucrative projects whilst others were left with smaller, less prestigious projects.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Potential mediators*

We then measured the same potential mediators using the abridged scales as in Study 2 – organizational commitment ( $\alpha = .98$ ), and job satisfaction ( $\alpha = .91$ ).<sup>7</sup> We also measured turnover intentions (DV;  $\alpha = .96$ ).<sup>8</sup> We did not measure either organizational or general conspiracy beliefs in this study. At the completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked and paid.

### **Results and discussion**

Means and standard deviations for all measures are presented in Table 3. We found the predicted effect of exposure to organizational conspiracy theories on turnover intentions  $\beta = .626$ ,  $t(201) = 11.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that turnover intentions were higher in the conspiracy condition than the control condition.

We then tested whether this effect was sequentially mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. We used the PROCESS macro (Model 6; 10,000 resamples; see Hayes, 2013). Results show that the significant total effect of the organizational conspiracy theories on turnover intentions ( $b = 1.65$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t = 11.36$ ,

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<sup>6</sup> All scenarios were pre-tested on a sample of Prolific Academic workers ( $N = 129$ ) to ensure that they successfully manipulated organizational conspiracy belief. Using the scale from Studies 1 and 2, organizational conspiracy belief was higher in all scenarios ( $M_s = 4.19, 4.07$  and  $4.25$ ) compared to control ( $M = 3.22$ ),  $t_s > 3.5$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . The three scenarios did not differ from each other in terms of organizational conspiracy belief,  $t_s < 1$ , *n.s.*

<sup>7</sup> As in Study 2, we used a brief measure of organizational identification which was not included in the analyses.

<sup>8</sup> As was the case for Study 1, the current study was part of a larger-scale investigation including measures for another project, such as intention to engage in unethical workplace behaviour, and demographic factors. These variables were not analysed as part of the current study.

$p < .001$ , 95% CI 1.36, 1.94) was reduced in the direct model ( $b = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $t = 3.48$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI 0.26, 0.93). In other words, organizational commitment and job satisfaction significantly and sequentially mediated the effect of organizational conspiracy theories on turnover intentions ( $b = 1.06$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ , 95% CI 0.75, 1.44). The specific indirect effect for this path was,  $b = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95% CI 0.26, 0.67, see Figure 4).<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, in support of Studies 1 and 2, exposure to organizational conspiracy theories appears to have a direct effect on people's intention to remain in their workplace – an effect driven by organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

### General discussion

This paper reports three studies that demonstrate the importance of organizational conspiracy theories in predicting turnover intentions. In Study 1, we demonstrated a relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions that was sequentially mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. In Study 2, a negative organizational climate that fosters conspiracy belief (vs. a positive climate) influenced turnover intentions, an effect mediated by organizational conspiracy belief, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. In the final study, we found an effect of exposure to organizational conspiracy theories on turnover intentions that was mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Overall, these studies provide evidence of the potentially detrimental effects of conspiracy theorising in the workplace. Thinking that conspiracies occur in the workplace, being exposed to a negative climate that fosters conspiracy beliefs, and being exposed to the idea of conspiracies in the workplace, have the potential to diminish positive feelings about the working

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<sup>9</sup> As in the previous studies, we tested a different order of the mediation (organizational conspiracy theories → job satisfaction → organizational commitment → turnover intentions). Again, the indirect path was weaker than in the model described above,  $b = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI 0.11, 0.44.

environment, and appear to encourage turnover. These effects were observed when the general tendency to perceive conspiracy theories was adjusted for.

### **Implications**

The present research extends upon a growing body of research examining the social consequences of conspiracy theories (e.g., Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b). Specifically, we develop further on previous work which demonstrates the potential dangers of conspiracy theorising for broader social issues such as politics, health and the environment. For example, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) demonstrated that people who were exposed to climate change conspiracy theories (vs. control) showed less intention to attempt to reduce their carbon footprint. Here, we demonstrate that conspiracies perceived to occur in the specific setting of the workplace may similarly lead to disengagement. We extend upon previous research (van Prooijen & de Vries, in press) by (1) experimentally demonstrating the effect of organizational conspiracies on turnover intentions, and (2) illustrating the psychological processes through which organizational conspiracy theories increase turnover intentions. Considering that the majority of adults spend a great deal of their time at work, organizational conspiracy theories may therefore pose a significant concern for organizations who wish to maintain a high level of commitment and participation in the organization.

More generally, our findings suggest that managers and employees may need to be mindful of the effects that conspiracy theories could have on the workplace. Considering the potential costs of turnover (Cascio, 2006; Weisberg & Kirschenbaum, 1991), and the negative effects of low commitment and job satisfaction on behaviours at the workplace such as organizational citizenship behaviour (e.g., LePine, Erez, Johnson, 2002; Murphy, Athanasou, & King, 2002), it would be a mistake for members of an organization to dismiss organizational conspiracy theories as idle gossip or rumours with little

consequence. On the contrary, the current research suggests that, like broader societal conspiracy theories (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b), organizational conspiracy theories may have clear and detrimental consequences for employees and the organization as a whole. Management especially should be mindful of workplace conspiracy theories that may not only damage their reputation, but force them to lose valuable employees, or even keep disengaged employees on their team.

The present research also contributes to the discussion on the antecedents of turnover intentions, and specifically, the interplay between attachment to the organization and job satisfaction in predicting turnover intentions. There is little consensus on the psychological process through which employees' attachment to their workplace and their satisfaction with their job impact on their willingness to leave the organization. Van Dick et al. (2004) have found support for a mediation process through which organizational identification predicts turnover intentions via job satisfaction. On the other hand, Randsley de Moura et al. (2009) found organizational identification to mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intentions more strongly. Although this was not the primary focus of the current research, we demonstrated that the first order appears most appropriate when organizational commitment is involved.

Practically speaking, the reliable scale of organizational conspiracy belief that we developed for the purposes of the current research could be used within organizations to gauge the extent to which conspiracy theories are rife within the workplace. Future research endeavours could consider potential avenues to intervene on these conspiracy theories where this may be deemed appropriate. Further, given that our experimental manipulation in Study 2 triggered negative organizational outcomes, it is plausible that interventions that would focus on improving specific aspects of the organizational



climate could strengthen employees' commitment to the organization, their satisfaction with their job and, consequently, decrease intentions to leave the organization.

### **Future research**

We note that all of our participants were recruited from crowdsourcing websites (MTurk and Prolific Academic). Whilst efforts were taken to ensure that participants were employees (e.g., excluding student participants specifically), future investigations could replicate our findings in organizational settings. That said, the crowdsourcing method has been considered a viable source of participants in the study of organizational psychology and a good alternative to university samples (Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011) and also has other advantages. Specifically, our participants were a random sample of employees from many different organizations, all of whom would have very different experiences of organizational conspiracies. The consistency of our findings across the studies suggests that conspiracy theories may therefore be common to many different types of workplaces. This again reinforces the idea that conspiracy theories are everywhere and are a fundamental by-product of the way people perceive the world around them (Douglas et al., 2016; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

Another potential issue to address in future research is the contribution of organizational identification in explaining the process presented in this paper. In Study 1, organizational identification was not a significant mediator of the relationship between organizational conspiracy belief and turnover intentions. This result, together with the very high correlation between organizational identification and organizational commitment, led us to focus on organizational commitment. However, previous work has shown that these variables have different psychological meanings (van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Specifically, organizational identification is the sense of psychological oneness with the organization whereas organizational commitment does

not involve the sense of oneness and rather conceives of the individual and the organization as different entities. Therefore, future studies may consider potential differences between these constructs as they relate to conspiracy belief, especially as previous research has mainly focused on one construct or the other in explaining turnover intentions (e.g., Randsley de Moura et al., 2009; Van Dick et al., 2004; Van Prooijen & de Vries, in press). Similarly, Study 1 suggests that normative commitment (vs. affective commitment) is driving the effects we observed in the current research. However, we were unable to confirm this in Studies 2 and 3 because we used an abridged scale of commitment. Even though disentangling the roles of organizational identification and organizational commitment was not the purpose of the current research, future investigations are needed in order to more fully explore the relative contributions of these factors.

Future research would also benefit from further exploring the current findings in naturalistic settings, where people are asked to reflect upon real workplace conspiracies. Longitudinal research would also be advantageous to measure the extent to which conspiracy theorising has lasting effects within the workplace. A workplace where conspiracies are constantly perceived may have ongoing and damaging effects on feelings within the workplace and on employee engagement. The extent to which conspiracy beliefs are shared amongst employees is another important consideration. In our research and in much of the literature on conspiracy beliefs, these beliefs are measured at the level of the individual. However, conspiracy theories are often widely shared (Oliver & Wood, 2014). The extent to which organizational conspiracy beliefs are shared may lead to different consequences for employees and organizations.

It is also important to note some methodological limitations of the current research. First, whilst our results demonstrate a relationship between organizational conspiracy

theories and turnover intentions which is serially mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction, serial mediation models do not provide definitive evidence of causal relations between variables. Further, other variables not measured in the current research might also explain the relationship between organizational conspiracy theories and turnover intentions. Future research could therefore explore more detailed models explaining the relationship between organizational conspiracy theories and turnover intentions, and employ methods that would provide clearer tests of the causal relationships between variables. Another limitation is that in Study 3, the manipulation of organizational conspiracy theories was somewhat confounded with valence (i.e., all conspiracy scenarios were negative whilst the non-conspiracy condition was neutral). Although this type of manipulation has been used in previous research (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, b), future studies should attempt to disentangle the effects of conspiracy theories from any effects that may be determined by valence.

Another important avenue for future research would be to examine the potentially *positive* consequences of organizational conspiracy theories. As we explored briefly in the introduction, some scholars argue that conspiracy theories may allow people to query the actions of those in power, thus encouraging powerful groups to be more transparent (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Fenster, 1999; Swami & Coles, 2010). Conspiracy theories may also reveal inconsistencies or missing pieces of information in official accounts of events, and open up ideas for people to discuss (Miller, 2002). Indeed, over the years, many conspiracy theories have been found to be true and many have also revealed actual inconsistencies in official explanations. Perhaps also therefore, conspiracy theories may have positive consequences for the workplace, allowing workers to keep their bosses accountable for their actions and discouraging management groups from taking advantage of their employees.

Organizational conspiracy theories may also encourage employees to take collective action against ruthless managers. Specifically, when conspiracy beliefs are shared amongst employees they may mobilise the employees to fight injustices in the workplace. Further, although organizational identification did not play a strong role in the relationship between organizational conspiracy theories and turnover intentions, it may come into play when employees consider taking action against alleged conspiring forces within the organization. Strong identification with more specific groups in the workplace (e.g., smaller teams and workgroups) may influence the extent to which employees rally against those who appear to be conspiring against them. Finally, organizational conspiracy theories may also be cathartic for individual employees who feel that they have little power or control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

### **Conclusions**

This research demonstrates that perceived workplace conspiracies may have important and negative effects. In three studies, we have shown that organizational conspiracy theories predict greater intentions to leave the organization. This relationship is serially mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. This research offers important insights for future human capital interventions aimed at improving the organizational climate and employees' experience in the workplace.

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**Table 1.** Correlations between variables measured in Study 1.

| Measures                               | <i>M (SD)</i> | 1. | 2.     | 3.     | 4.      | 5.      | 6.      |
|--|---------------|----|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Organizational conspiracy belief    | 2.79 (1.06)   | -- | .28*** | .39*** | -.29*** | -.40*** | -.41*** |
| 2. Belief in other conspiracy theories | 1.85 (.83)    |    | --     | .14*   | -.04    | -.04    | -.13    |
| 3. Turnover intentions                 | 2.27 (1.46)   |    |        | --     | -.40*** | -.48*** | -.55*** |
| 4. Organizational identification       | 4.32 (1.61)   |    |        |        | --      | .75***  | .63***  |
| 5. Organizational commitment           | 3.86 (1.17)   |    |        |        |         | --      | .57***  |
| 6. Job satisfaction                    | 3.50 (.87)    |    |        |        |         |         | --      |

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

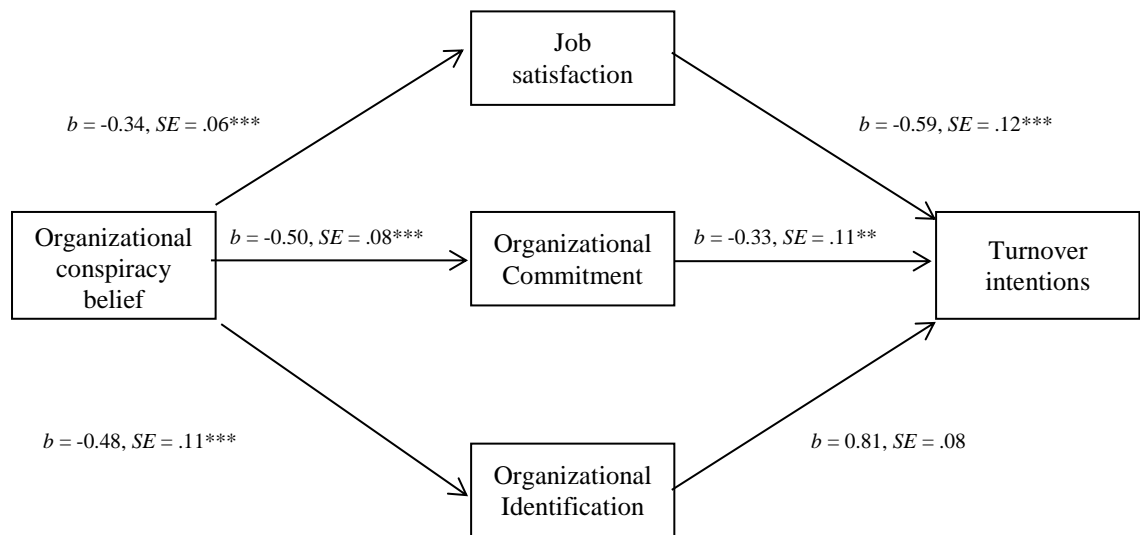
**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations and *t*-test comparisons for variables measured in Study 2.

| Variable               | Positive climate | Negative climate | Total       | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Org. conspiracy belief | 2.17 (.87)       | 4.02 (.65)       | 3.01 (1.20) | -13.14   | < .001   |
| Turnover intentions    | 1.80 (.87)       | 4.27 (.78)       | 3.05 (1.49) | -16.35   | < .001   |
| Org. commitment        | 5.6 (1.26)       | 1.92 (1.25)      | 3.76 (2.25) | 16.13    | < .001   |
| Job satisfaction       | 5.09 (.91)       | 2.16 (.99)       | 3.61 (1.75) | 16.82    | < .001   |

**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations and *t*-test comparisons for variables measured in Study 3.

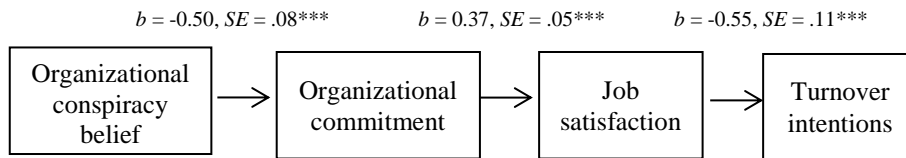
| Variable            | Control     | Conspiracy  | Total       | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Turnover intentions | 2.00 (.96)  | 3.65 (1.10) | 2.82 (1.32) | -11.36   | < .001   |
| Org. commitment     | 5.17 (1.48) | 2.30 (1.53) | 3.75 (2.08) | 13.55    | < .001   |
| Job satisfaction    | 4.76 (1.20) | 2.75 (1.42) | 3.77 (1.65) | 10.90    | < .001   |





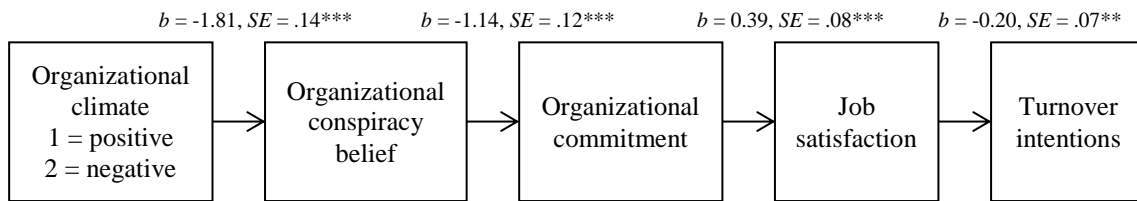
*Figure 1.* Study 1: Unstandardised coefficients for mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 4, 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013), controlling for belief in other conspiracy theories.

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



*Figure 2.* Study 1: Unstandardised coefficients for mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 6, 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013), controlling for belief in other conspiracy theories.

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



*Figure 3.* Study 2: Unstandardised coefficients for mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 6, 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013), controlling for belief in other conspiracy theories.

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

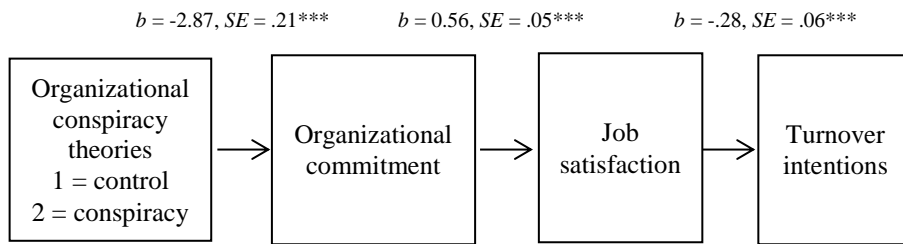


Figure 4. Study 3: Unstandardised coefficients for mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 6, 10,000 bootstraps; Hayes, 2013).

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