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Self-contraction as a response to conspiracy and social mobility

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In this research we are trying to understand the relationship between perceived mobility in a society, conspiracy theories and self- contraction. This is a very new and interesting topic which is also much actual nowadays. We decided to try to find a correlation between these variables because in our opinion they are strongly connected. At the base of this reasoning there is the concept of social mobility. Social mobility is an important feature for the wellbeing of people, in fact when this condition is present people know that they can improve their condition and that their efforts have a purpose. Unfortunately, social mobility is not present in every society and we are interested in understanding the consequences. In fact, we hypothesized that the presence or the absence of social mobility would influence conspiracy thinking and self-contraction. We thought that in a society with low social mobility people would tend to score higher on a conspiracy beliefs level because they would try to obtain an explanation for the society immobilism and, not being able to find an official explanation, they would recur to such theories. In a similar way we hypothesized that in a society with low mobility people would stop acting in a proactive way (go vote, reducing one's carbon footprint) and start relying on their closest affections such as friends and family.

INTRODUCTION

What is a conspiracy theory?

Conspiracy theories offer an explanation on the ultimate causes of significant events and circumstances as the secret actions of powerful groups who cover up information to suit their own interests (Brotherton, 2015; Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). We have many examples of conspiracy theories during the last decades, from the rumors about Lady Diana's death, 9/11 terrorist attack until COVID19 in these last years. To understand these theories and their implications it is first important to understand why these theories exist. "Belief in conspiracy theories is widespread among many citizens because they are rooted in normal psychological processes. Conspiracy theories originate through the same cognitive processes that produce other types of belief they reflect a desire to protect one's own group against a potentially hostile outgroup, and they are often grounded in strong ideologies." (J.W. Van Prooijen, K.M. Douglas, 2018 p. 897-908)

In the wide literature regarding conspiracy theories, we are able to extrapolate three main characteristics which are common to such theories. "The first common element is that they attribute the real reason for events to powerful actors, e.g., the Illuminati, the New World Order, politicians, multinational companies, drug industries, scientists (Kata, 2010; Swami, 2012; Uscinski, Douglas, & Lewandowsky, 2017). A second element is the belief that actors act to intentionally harm common people. Third, it is thought that such actors plot secretly and hidden from the general public." (Salvador Casara et al.,2022)

Another feature of conspiracy is that they are not a modern phenomenon, in fact we have various references to ancient conspiracy theories, such as the fire in Rome for which the Emperor Nero was blamed, as Benedetta Cucci (2023) explains in her article. This helps us understand that this mechanism is common for humans as we can consider it as an attempt to copy with uncertainty. Another reason why conspiracy theories are so common and widespread is that exposure to conspiracy theories changes people's attitudes without their awareness (Douglas & Sutton, 2008).

Compared to the past, instruments such as social media and technology in general led to a very widespread circulation of these theories, possibly influencing a greater portion of the population. If we think about last century, the sources of information were limited (radio, newspapers and newscast) and the available options were considered more authoritative, as reported by Jhonson and Kaye (2004), nowadays we have almost unlimited sources of information. From a certain point of view, this is a better environment in which people

can find an answer to their questions, unfortunately what has become very complicated today is to find a source that is both authoritative and valid. We do not say that to confuse conspiracy theories and fake news but because it is plausible that in the wide melting pot of uncontrolled news people will encounter several conspiracy theories, it is in fact important to remember that even if many fake news have a conspiratorial content, not all conspiracies are fake. People, especially those who are highly involved in politics, tend to perceive media content as being biased against their point of view (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998). This situation leads people to look for alternative sources of information such as social webs, online forums. Despite the advantages provided by social media, the quality of news on social media is lower than traditional news organizations. (Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang & Liu, 2017) The final result is a situation of general confusion in which many people prefer to obtain information through alternative sources believing that they are not hiding the truth in the way typical media do.

Furthermore, as van Proojen and Douglas (2018) explain in their research, it is important to say that conspiracy is not a western-only phenomenon, but it is widespread also in the remaining parts of the globe. One of the reasons of the popularity of these theories is that "most people prefer to believe that they are part of an enduring and moral social group that can be confident and strong in the face of conflict and threat" (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Wohl et al., 2010)

Undoubtedly, many of these theories have been divulged for personal gain. If we think about political propaganda, conspiracy theories may be useful to obtain support from a great portion of the population, for example against a designated enemy. In these cases conspiracy theories are used to create a sense of resentment so that the population will be more likely to comply with the government's perspective. In other circumstances people may recur to the production of such theories because the answers given by science might be too vague or not reassuring enough as in the case of COVID.

As reported by the research of van Proojen, Spadaro, and Wang (2022) institutions have at least two main functions which are: providing people with a sense of safety and offering models for group norm and values. The distrust towards institutions, caused by conspiracy theories, could negatively affect the relationships at interpersonal, within-group and between-group level. Therefore, there is an open debate about the measures to apply in order to limit and expunge conspiracy theories, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) for example

proposed to ban all the conspiracy theories and to fine those who divulge such theories. Unfortunately, as Douglas and Sutton report in their research, this approach is not likely to succeed, instead a proactive approach may be more useful, it is better to address the underlying causes that allow conspiracy theories to be so popular and widespread. Among the condition that allow conspiracy theories to grow there are feeling of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999), political cynicism (Swami, 2012) , magical thinking (Barron et al., 2014), and errors in logical and probabilistic thinking (Brotherton and French, 2014), as cited in Douglas and Sutton (2015).

What is social mobility?

Another important topic for this research is the one of social mobility which is basically the possibility to improve one's condition independently from their origins. For example, in a society with high social mobility, descendants of a low-class family can aim to improve their social and economic conditions while in a society with low social mobility this is not possible, rich people remain reach and the discrepancy with the rest of the population keeps on increasing. As explained by Sorokin (2001) in his book, social mobility can be both vertical and horizontal. Vertical social mobility represents an individual's passage from a position to another at a lower or higher level. Horizontal social mobility represents an individual's passage from a position to another on the same level.

 It is clear that the population of a society with low social mobility is not satisfied, the population has the perception that all their efforts and their sacrifices are pointless and that they are condemned to remain in the same social and economic condition for the rest of their existence because they live in an unfair society as explained by the research of Jetten, Wang, Steffens, Mols, Peters and Verkuyten (2017). Therefore, it is plausible that in such contexts and conditions the population will tend to speculate about the reasons of this social immobility, sometimes using conspiracy theories as a way to understand and also fight this injustice.

What is the process of self-contraction?

The last concept which is important for understanding this research is the one of contraction of the social self. According to the APA one definition of social self is "Those aspects of one's identity or self-concept that are important to or influenced by interpersonal relationships and the reactions of other people."

Every person living in a society is involved in a network of relationships with various entities which are also part of the same society (friends, institutions). What happens during this mechanism of social contraction is that the self becomes disengaged from these relationships and we observe a behavioral change. For example, in a democratic society where people can vote, during the period of elections people should learn about the programs of different parties and then go to vote. During a pandemic people should take precautions such as wearing masks and get vaccinated. When these mechanisms, which are logical and common for the majority of the population, are interrupted we are facing a situation of self-contraction. The reasons for this kind of process may be various, people may feel threatened so changing their usual behavior is seen as a way to protect themselves or people may perceive that their voice is not heard and that all the actions they are perpetuating for a specific reason are actually pointless. If we think about a political outrage such as the manipulation of votes, it is understandable that people will tend to think that their vote is irrelevant. To better understand this threat-response mechanism we can refer to an article by Marie Abscal (2020) where there is an analysis of how white-identified people in the USA (dominant group) respond when their privileged status is threatened. In this case we learn that people tend to restrict the boundaries around whiteness so "White people are less—not more—likely to classify people who are ambiguously White or Latino as "White under threat" (Abascal, M. 2020).

The present research

The goal of this research is trying to understand whether conspiracy theories related to social mobility may elicit a mechanism of contraction of the social-self, in order to do so we decided to use a questionnaire with manipulated conditions to create two different scenarios of social mobility. As brilliantly highlighted by the research of Teymoory, Bastian and Jetten (2016) when people live in a society which does not provide them with satisfaction and meaningfulness, they tend to seek such things in smaller groups such as friends and family. "Tribalized groups may close themselves off from mainstream society in an attempt to protect themselves from anomie (e.g., Amish groups in the United States)." (Teymoori et al., 2016)

Despite the scarcity of material regarding the topic, important research has been developed regarding the effects of conspiracy theories on various social dimensions, such as the research published by Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas (2014) where it is explained how decreased intention to engage in politics and to

reduce one's carbon footprint are effects of conspiracy theories. According to the research both of these behaviors are affected by the presence of conspiracy theories and this is a clear example of self-contraction (common behavior which are influenced and usually negatively affected by the presence of conspiracy thinking). Regarding political intentions, they analyzed four factors that may play an important role in mediating the effect of conspiracy theories: low levels of trust, feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty towards the government and disillusionment. They used different versions of articles to create two groups, one of which received the manipulated article. After this first manipulation they repeated the experiment using the environment and the climate change as a topic.

The present study aims to better understand the relationship among social mobility, conspiracy theory and social contraction. We hypothesize that imagining of living in a society with a perceived low mobility will tend to enhance the level of conspiracy beliefs and the social contraction. On the contrary we expect from those who imagine living in a high-mobility society to show a lower level of conspiracy beliefs and a reduced mechanism of social contraction.

We hypothesized that in a situation of low mobility people will tend have higher levels of conspiracy beliefs and at the same time a higher level of contraction. The idea behind this hypothesis is that if citizens are not satisfied by the society they live in, they will probably try to understand the reason behind that malfunctioning and conspiracy theories are a common way to answer such questions. Furthermore, the trust in authorities who cannot run a functional society will be low. Consequently, people will tend to rely more on their affections rather than on authorities.

In an opposite way, we hypothesized that in a high-mobility society, where citizens are satisfied with their life and with the institutions, there will be a low level of conspiracy beliefs because there is nothing to speculate about. We also hypothesized that the contraction will be minimal because citizens may fell an important part of the society and they will see a purpose in perpetuating their efforts for the community.

METHODS

In order to investigate the correlation between conspiracy theories related to social mobility and the mechanism of contraction of social self, we decided to implement an experimental induction of perceived high vs. low social mobility through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was delivered online, mainly by mean of sharing it on social network such as Instagram, Facebook and Linkedin. This questionnaire was created using a software named Qualtrics. The anonymity of the survey was guaranteed to all the participants and in order to start the survey they had to agree to the informed consent. We also decided to insert another informed consent at the end of the survey, in which we explained the manipulation we performed with the two different scenarios. We decided to consider only the results from people who agreed with both the informed consents.

Participants

Initially the participants were 724 in total, but after analyzing the results only 227 of them were valid. All the participants who refused to agree with the informed consent, those who did not entirely complete the questionnaire and those who took too much or not enough time were removed from the sample. Of these 227 participants 76 were male, 168 female and 3 non-binary. The age of participants was comprised between 18 and 90 years old. (age M=32.5, SD= 14.3) We also investigated other personal features such as origins, the level of instruction, current occupation, and the political preferences. The questionnaire was in Italian, so all the participants were fluent in Italian. 218 of them were Italian, 19 Europeans, 3 Americans, 3 Asians and one person from Africa.

Experimental Manipulation1

To investigate whether the level of social mobility in a society has an effect on the level of conspiracy beliefs, we created two different conditions in which people were randomly assigned to two different conditions. After the presentation of these two scenarios, we used different scales to assess both the level of conspiracy and the level of contraction of participants. In the first condition we presented the situation of a

town called Tramezzo. This society was characterized by low social mobility. (see figure I)

Tramezzo1

Tramezzo è una società occidentale all'interno della quale la mobilità sociale è minima, per non dire nulla. Infatti, chi nasce all'interno di un ceto basso difficilmente può aspirare ad elevare la sua condizione. A Tramezzo tutte le professioni sono tramandate di generazione in generazione rendendo di fatto impossibile per coloro che appartengono ad un ceto sociale basso elevare la propria condizione e per coloro che appartengono ad un ceto sociale alto perdere il loro potere. Di conseguenza il potere politico è detenuto ormai da decenni dalla solita cerchia di persone che non fa altro che accrescere il proprio potere nel tempo.

Figure I, Low-mobility scenario

In the second scenario the society was characterized by high social mobility, an opposite situation compared to the first scenario. (see figure II)

Tramezzo2

Tramezzo è una società occidentale caratterizzata da grande mobilità sociale. Chi, infatti, nasce all'interno di un ceto basso ha molte possibilità di elevare la sua condizione. Il mercato del lavoro è basato sul merito quindi le persone meno abbienti possono ambire a migliorare la loro condizione con impegno e lavoro e al contrario, persone abbienti ma poco meritevoli possono perdere i loro privilegi. Il potere politico è stabilito da elezioni regolari ed è controllato in modo che nessun leader possa accrescere esageratamente il proprio potere.

Figure II, High-mobility scenario

After the presentation of these two scenarios, we used different scales to assess both the level of conspiracy and the level of contraction of participants.

Conspiracy beliefs

The first scale was aimed to measure the level of conspiracy, we presented participants with a 4-items scale, after that participants had to report how much they agreed with every single item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It included questions regarding politics, medicine, and science and specifically regarding their conduct in terms of doing the best for the citizens and always report the truth to them. For this scale we used the one present in Salvador Casara et al., (2022).

Social contraction

A second scale was then presented with questions regarding the mechanism of social contraction, in this case participants were presented a scale with 8 items. This scale has been specifically adapted for this research They had to report how much they agreed with very single item on a scale from 1 (strongly

disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It included items used to assess whether they relied more on affections or institutions. This scale was arranged ad hoc for this research.

The objective of these manipulation is to demonstrate whether the perceived mobility of a society can affect the level of conspiracy and the social behavior of hypothetical citizens.

It is important to report that there is a very limited amount of literature on the topic, the one of social contraction is a quite unexplored subject, especially when it is related to the concept of conspiracy.

RESULTS

High and low mobility

As it is shown in the t-test reported in Table I we can observe an influence of the manipulation on the level of conspiracy, considering the value of p (<0.001) and the value of Cohen's d (-0.471) we can affirm that if we group conspiracy mean for condition there is a significant difference. In fact, the high mobility condition participants attribute more conspiracy ($M=2.299$, $SD=1.156$) to the bogus society than in the low mobility condition ($M=2.874$, $SD=1.286$). (see graph I)
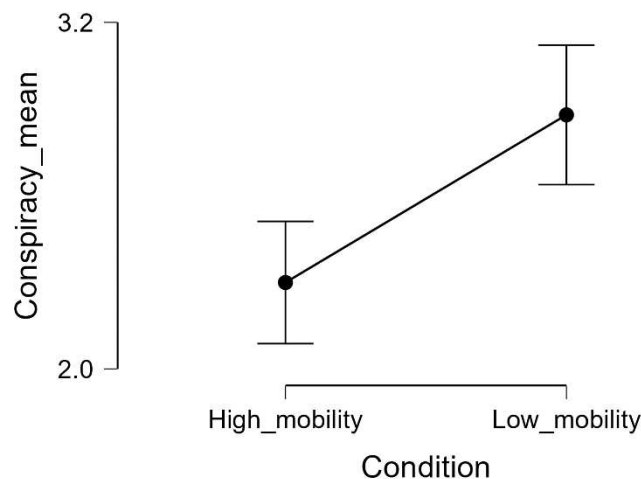
Graph I

Regarding the mechanism of social contraction in relation to the operated manipulation we can see in the table below (Table I) that the p value for both extended self ($p=0.856$) and contracted self ($p=0.080$) which means that there is not a significative difference between the two conditions, so we did not observe any change in social behavior as a consequence of the manipulation. We have descriptive statistics regarding

both the extended self in high mobility (*M*=3.835, *SD*=0.696) and low mobility condition (*M*=3.888, *SD*=0.670) and the contracted self in high (*M*=3,374, *SD*=0.821) and low mobility (*M*=3.374, *SD*=0.831).

Independent Samples T-Test

	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d	95% CI for Cohen's d	
						Lower	Upper
Conspiracy_mean	-3.593	225	< .001	-0.477	0.136	-0.741	-0.213
Extended_Self	-0.181	225	0.856	-0.024	0.133	-0.284	0.236
Contracted self	-1.761	225	0.080	-0.234	0.134	-0.495	0.028

Note. Student's t-test.

Table I

Gender

Another correlation we decided to explore was the presence of an interaction effect between gender and manipulation on conspiracy beliefs. We decided to use an ANCOVA and we created an interaction model. We can notice both a condition effect (*p*<0.001 *F*=15.779) and an effect of interaction with the gender (*p*=0.043 *F*=4.132) From the graph below (graph II), where 1 corresponds to male participants and 2 corresponds to female participants, we can see how the genders interact with situation of low and high mobility. In a context of low mobility males tend to be more prone to conspiracy compared to women. If instead we consider the high mobility condition, we notice that women tend to lean towards conspiracy more than men.
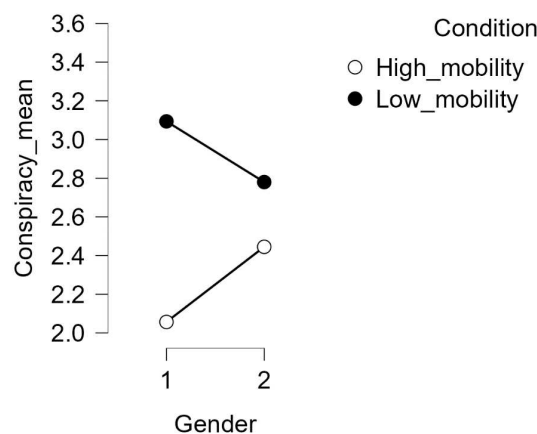
Graph II

Age

Another interaction we decided to investigate is the one between age and manipulation. As we can see from the results in this case only the effect of the experimental conditions is statistically significant ($p=0.015$ $F=6.071$). Differently, there is not evidence for the effect of age nor the interaction between condition and age on conspiracy beliefs ($p=0.257$ $F=1.292$). (see Table II)

ANCOVA - Conspiracy_mean

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Condition	9.054	1	9.054	6.071	0.015
Anni	0.159	1	0.159	0.107	0.744
Condition ✳ Anni	1.926	1	1.926	1.292	0.257
Residuals	328.076	220	1.491		

Note. Type III Sum of Squares

Table II

Political orientation

We also computed some interesting data regarding the correlation between political orientation and conspiracy. In this case we can notice both a condition effect and an interaction effect. It is interesting to notice that in low mobility conditions participants on the left tend to be more triggered by the situation and therefore are higher in conspiracy compared to the participants on the right. (see graph III)
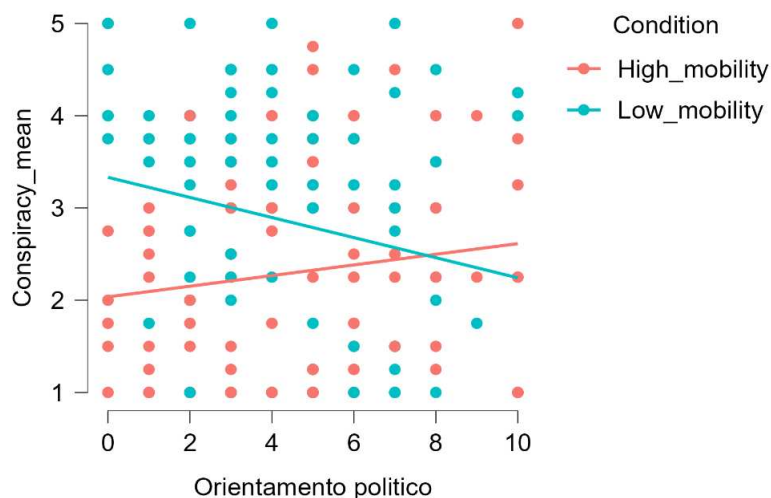

Graph III

To obtain this data we created an ANOVA in which the condition was a predictive factor, the political orientation was its covariate in interaction and the conspiracy was the dependent variable. There is not an effect for political orientation but there is a principal condition effect, as shown by the value of p (<0.001)

Interaction with the level of education

We explored the interaction effect between our social mobility manipulation and the level of education. To do so we ran an Ancova with the social mobility manipulation and the level of education as predictors. We found a main effect for of the social mobility manipulation on conspiracy beliefs, $F(1, 220) = 15.58$; $p < .001$, with participants in the low social mobility condition reporting stronger conspiracy beliefs. Differently, we did not found any effect of level of education on conspiracy beliefs, $F(1, 220) = 2.79$; $p = .10$. Finally, we found an interaction effect, $F(1, 220) = 9.51$; $p = .002$, with participants with at least a bachelor degree being more sensitive to the manipulation compared with participants without a university degree (see Graph IV).

Graph IV
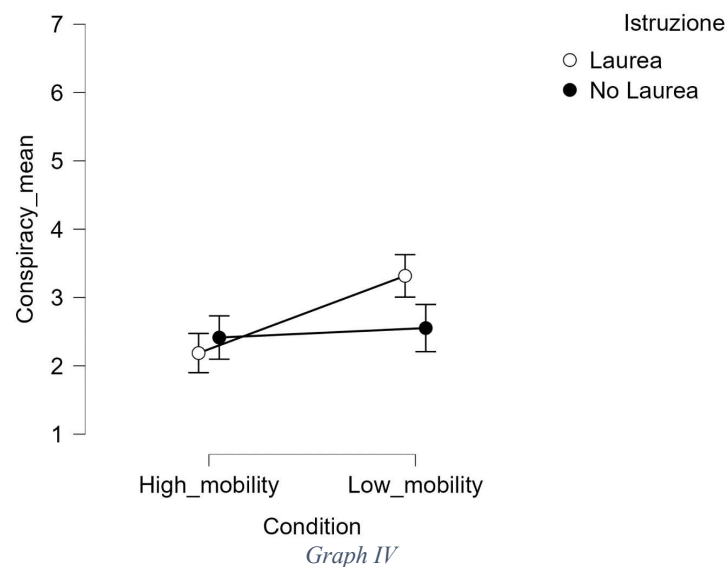
Correlation analysis

In order to have a general overview of the correlation we decided to show this Pearson's r heatmap (see Table III). Among the most interesting correlation we see that right political orientation correlates with a less extended self and with conspiracy, although in general there is not political tendency on conspiracies.

The extended self negatively correlates with political orientation. It is important to notice that there is a 0.6 correlation between conspiracy and extended self, so a statistical significance is almost present.

	Extended_Self	Contracted self	Orientamento politico	Conspiracy_mean	Conspiracy_worldview	Family_Ses	Individual_SES
Extended_Self		0.365***	-0.209**	-0.128	0.037	-0.028	-0.007
Contracted self	0.365***		-0.067	0.06	0.083	0.055	0.04
Orientamento politico	-0.209**	-0.067		-0.042	-0.047	0.235***	0.209**
Conspiracy_mean	-0.128	0.06	-0.042		0.04	-0.006	-0.036
Conspiracy_worldview	0.037	0.083	-0.047	0.04		-0.115	-0.121
Family_Ses	-0.028	0.055	0.235***	-0.006	-0.115		0.754***
Individual_SES	-0.007	0.04	0.209**	-0.036	-0.121	0.754***	

Table III

DISCUSSION

With this research we have been trying to better comprehend the intricate correlation between social mobility and conspiracy theories. The results we obtained through the present experiment are very interesting and promising under different perspectives. There is an important premise to make before proposing a more thorough explanation of the results, the sample that we collected for this experiment was unfortunately quite reduced compared to the number of people who initially started compiling the questionnaire. Consequently, the study might be underpowered. Furthermore, we must consider that, to our knowledge, there are no other published articles which treat such topic so we can only refer and compare to articles regarding conspiracy theories or social mobility but not their relation. We are confident that in the future this path will be thoroughly explored and that with a superior quantity of data we can have a better overview of such correlations and its consequences on the society.

Among the results one of the most interesting is the one regarding the correlation between perceived social mobility and level of conspiracy in relation to the political orientation. The general orientation of the participants was slightly towards the left ($M=4,361$ $SD=2.523$). According to what emerges from the tables

and from the graphs, those who identify as right voters, in a situation of low mobility, tend to be less prone to conspiracy, while those who identify as left voters are more likely to be influenced by social mobility and to attribute the causes of such situation to some plots organized, for example, by a group pf powerful people or by the government.

Another interesting result we extrapolated from the questionnaire is the difference between males and females. While women tend to be less incline to conspiracy in low-mobility situation, they also tend to be more inclined to conspiracy compared to men in high-mobility situation.

Regarding the age we did not find any significant correlation with conspiracy and with behavioral changes, nevertheless we noticed an interesting trend revealing that in low mobility conditions older people tend to be more contracted than young people. What we can extrapolate from these results is the tendency of older people to look for close affections and family rather than help by institutions in situations of distress attributed to a perceived low mobility.

We also decided to explore whether participants' level of education could affect their level of conspiracy or contraction after the manipulation. We interestingly notice that people with at least a bachelor's degree tend to be more susceptible to the manipulation rather than those who did not attend university.

In a section of the questionnaire, we asked the participants which were the groups of people they would like to remain in touch with in a hypothetical social network. We also asked them the frequency with which they would like to hear from these groups. From the results we observed that the most popular group to remain in touch with was the one of friends (M=0.853) while the least popular was the one of labor union (M=0.107). In this case again the age of participants may play a role in such results, it is conceivable that with a wider portion of older people "unpopular" groups such as favorite party (M=0.143) and region (M=0.210) could gain more participation. It is interesting to notice that the most popular groups are friends, family, and colleagues, so groups representing affections in the personal sphere, while all the others regarding institution are less popular. This difference may be due to a different way to deal with reality and with modern society, there is more reliance on close affects than on institutions.

CONCLUSION

With the present study we were able to demonstrate that perceived social mobility has an influence on the level of conspiracy. It is interesting that conspiracy is a common response for people in a low mobility context, in our opinion this behavior highlights a tendency for people to try to explain things in a simple way and, most important, in a way that does not damage their self-image. In fact, in a situation of struggle it is always easier to blame the system or a powerful group rather than observe one's own behavior with the risk of finding some flaws.

A particularly unexpected result is the one related to the level of instruction. Participants with at least a bachelor's degree, in fact, were more sensitive to the manipulation, therefore in a condition of low mobility they were more prone to conspiracy compared to the participants without a degree. We did not expect this result because we think that education is an important detractor of conspiracy, as explained by van Prooijen (2016) so we did not expect people with a higher level of instruction to score higher on the level of conspiracy.

A data that did not surprise us was the fact that right wing voters were less incline to conspiracy compared to left wing voters in a low mobility context. Of course, there are different perspective and points of view but, if we consider right voters as more conservatives, their support of institutions, which are conservative structures, as explained by Art Caden (2008), does not come as a surprise, even in difficult contexts such as one of low mobility.

As we stated previously, the results we obtained from this research are promising but not exhaustive. Being the one of this thesis a relatively unexplored topic, we are confident that in the future always more studies will emerge. Probably the two bigger limits of this research are both related to the sample. The first limit, as we already explained before, consists in the low number of participants. Many of our results or speculation did not reach statistical significance even if the trend was leaning towards that because of the insufficient number of participants. Probably with a higher number of responses we would have been able to obtain more thorough results.

Another limitation of this research is that the sample was mainly European and Italian, the questionnaire in fact was delivered in Italian. For future research it could be interesting trying to translate the entire

questionnaire, at least in English, in order to submit it in other continents with the purpose of having a more worldwide sample and possibly investigate the role of actual social mobility. Indeed, our evidence is limited to the appraisal of a fictitious scenario. Another limit we encountered was the fact that the sample was not gender balanced.

In general, we are studying a very actual and developing topic, in fact, we are in the era of fake news which lead to conspiracies in almost every field, and we live in a historical time in which the discrepancy between classes is widening, fueling the perception of low mobility. This kind of research can be very important for understanding how people react to an always more common condition giving us important insights on what is the general perception of society and institutions in a world that is in continuously and rapidly changing.

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