

Title: People who endorse conspiracy theories don't necessarily believe them: Implications for survey research

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Survey research on conspiracy theories has grown markedly over the past several decades. This work has produced estimates of the prevalence of belief in conspiracy theories and of numerous correlates, causes, and consequences of these beliefs. A critical assumption underpinning much of this research is that if someone endorses a conspiracy theory in a survey study they sincerely believe it. However, this assumption is rarely tested.

In this presentation, I will summarise the results of two survey studies of belief in conspiracy theories that directly challenge this sincerity assumption (Ross et al., 2026; Williams et al., 2026). In addition, I will argue that these results raise serious questions about how surveys have been used to study beliefs and attitudes more broadly, particularly in contexts where participants might be tempted to respond insincerely to troll researchers or to signal support for their group.

References:

- Ross, R. M., Ashton, L., Wilson, S., Gleeson, K., & Levy, N. (2026). Do people sincerely believe conspiracy theories that they endorse? *Collabra: Psychology*, 12(1), 159253. <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.159253>
- Williams, M., Marques, M. D., Ling, M., Hill, S., Kerr, J., Clarke, E. J. R., Martin, A., & Ross, R. M. (2026). Do you really believe that? Examining the prevalence and predictors of belief in conspiracy theories when accounting for insincerity. *Royal Society Open Science*, 13(5), 260163. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.260163>