

# Sharing responsibility for conspiracy beliefs: The agency-in-context model

*Compartiendo la responsabilidad sobre las creencias conspirativas:  
el modelo de la agencia en contexto*

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I borrow Neil Levy's account of *bad beliefs* as a starting point to discuss how the social turn in epistemology affects our understanding of the formation, persistence, and spreading of conspiracy beliefs. Despite the recent convergence of philosophers and psychologists on the importance of studying the social dimensions of cognition, current models of conspiracy beliefs differ substantially as to the role that agents have in adopting and maintaining conspiracy beliefs. As a result, the proposals also differ in the remedial strategies they recommend. Here I endorse an integrative approach, which I call "agency in context", combining explanations of bad believing in terms of the agent's cognitive habits and information processing with societal failures in providing the support agents need to recognize marks of epistemic authority in sources of information and acquire the critical skills for the evaluation of competing explanations.

**Keywords:** responsibility; conspiracy beliefs; bad beliefs; social epistemology; social cognition; agency.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo, tomo prestado el relato de Neil Levy sobre las malas creencias como punto de partida para discutir cómo el giro social en la epistemología afecta a nuestra comprensión de la formación, persistencia y difusión de las creencias conspirativas. A pesar de la reciente convergencia de filósofos y psicólogos sobre la importancia de estudiar las dimensiones sociales de la cognición, los modelos actuales de creencias conspirativas difieren sustancialmente en cuanto al papel que tienen los agentes en la adopción y el mantenimiento de las creencias conspirativas. Como resultado, las propuestas también difieren en las estrategias de corrección que recomiendan. Aquí apoyo un enfoque integrador, que denomino "agencia en contexto", que combina las explicaciones de las malas creencias en términos de los hábitos cognitivos del agente y el procesamiento de la información con los fallos de la sociedad a la hora de proporcionar el apoyo que los agentes necesitan para reconocer las marcas de autoridad epistémica en las fuentes de información y adquirir las habilidades críticas para la evaluación de las explicaciones en competencia.

**Palabras clave:** responsabilidad; creencias conspirativas; malas creencias; epistemología social; cognición social; agencia.



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## NOTES

This paper is not a product of previous research, thesis, project, etc.

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## 1. What are bad beliefs?

In his recent book, *Bad Beliefs*, Neil Levy explores a phenomenon we have all witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic: how agents are tempted by beliefs that conflict with the beliefs “held by the relevant epistemic authorities [...] despite the widespread public availability either of the evidence that supports more accurate beliefs or of the knowledge that the relevant authorities believe as they do” (Levy 2021, p. x).

What causes bad beliefs? An influential answer is that bad beliefs are caused by the irrationality, ignorance, and epistemic vices of individual agents: explanations focus on reasoning deficits, cognitive biases, and motivational factors preventing people from processing information accurately; people’s failure to exercise virtues such as epistemic humility and intellectual curiosity; the need to reform education to increase scientific literacy, critical thinking, and analytical skills. Levy rejects such a picture where the responsibility for the adoption and maintenance of bad beliefs is attributed to the individual agent. Levy argues that, contrary to appearances, violations of ecological or epistemic rationality are not necessary for the formation and diffusion of bad beliefs. Levy’s own take is that the beliefs may be bad when they diverge from what epistemic authorities recommend, but the processes leading agents to endorse bad beliefs are “wholly rational” in that they are responsive to evidence.

Levy uses the map analogy: if I am given an inaccurate map to navigate an unknown city, I am not at fault for losing my way. Even if I follow the map, I may end up in the wrong place. So, when I am lost, it is not because I was a bad map reader but because the map was misleading me. Similarly, there does not need to be anything wrong in how agents process information. Even if they process the available information correctly, they may end up with a bad belief. That is because the input for the process is information that may come from an unreliable source and lead them astray. All agents need to defer to others when forming beliefs—that is part of society’s division of epistemic labour—and those who end up with bad beliefs have deferred to sources of information that are not epistemically authoritative. This picture of rationally formed bad beliefs has important implications for the remedial action we may want to take when we want to limit the spreading and influence of bad beliefs, as individuals and as a society. To prevent me from losing my way, you may want to teach me how to be a better map reader—and that can’t hurt. However, if you really want to help me navigate an unknown city, you should ensure that my map has not been tampered with. That’s because competence is not sufficient: if the map is inaccurate, I may still be unable to find my way. Levy concludes that our best shot at stopping bad beliefs is to epistemically engineer our social environment so that unreliable sources cannot claim epistemic authority.

Levy’s view in *Bad Beliefs* is unique in many ways, especially in holding onto traditional notions of belief and rationality and yet insist that bad beliefs are arrived at via rational processes and have group-level epistemic benefits. For Levy, bad beliefs are not acts of imagination or wishful thinking, hopes or aspirations disguised as beliefs, but doxastic states *proper*: alien abduction tales, Trumpism, anti-vaccination attitudes, climate change and COVID-19 denialism, etc. are responsive to evidence, are expressions of agents’ genuine commitments, and are reflected in agents’ verbal and nonverbal behavior. When Levy calls such beliefs rational, he also understands rationality as rationality *proper*: it is not just a weakened form of ecological rationality ensuring that people survive and reproduce. It is the legitimate demanding notion of doing the right thing for the right reasons.

Beliefs are proper beliefs, rationality is proper rationality, but evidence gets the ‘social’ treatment. Evidence is broadened to include not just the information that agents get themselves by observation and inference but also the information they get from others and the beliefs they borrow—or, using Levy’s phrase, *outsources*. No agent can do all the required believing by themselves, because they may lack relevant specialist knowledge or expertise on technical subjects such as immunology, epidemiology, or climate science. It is paramount to recognize that knowledge is a team’s effort: without a division of epistemic labour not even science itself could make progress. So, what other people believe about aliens, Trump, vaccines, and the climate is for us evidence about what to believe about aliens, Trump, vaccines, and the climate. We just need to choose the right people to borrow beliefs from.

Notwithstanding its stark originality, Levy’s take is consistent with a general tendency in epistemology emphasizing the importance of the social context in which people believe, decide, and act. The field has been experiencing a social turn for some time, where the interaction between agents has become as important as the relationship between an agent and the world, and the information-gathering processes underlying testimony are investigated with the same level of scrutiny as those underlying perception and inference. Predictably, although many philosophers and psychologists have placed the social context at the center of their research into good and bad beliefs, the resulting accounts differ considerably.

Accounts such as Levy’s are social through and through, from considerations about how agents form beliefs to considerations about how the beliefs should be evaluated. Human agents have evolved to adopt and maintain beliefs that serve them well epistemically, but the benefits can be best appreciated at the group level and not at the individual level. So, it may be adaptive and even rational for the social group where I belong that I have a bad belief about the risks of anti-COVID vaccination. This means that in the social group where I belong someone has a belief that contrasts with the consensus that anti-COVID vaccination is safe and efficacious. The presence of a dissenter is beneficial for the whole group because the rest of the group is incentivized to provide arguments for the consensus position and review the evidence regularly.

Following this line of thought, one may be tempted to go revisionist and claim that, ultimately, there are no *genuine* bad beliefs, just *apparent* bad beliefs (Sullivan-Bissett, 2022). What is wrong is not how individual agents form their beliefs but how society evaluates those beliefs. Beliefs are evaluated based on their contribution to *the individual’s epistemic success* whereas they should be evaluated instead based on their contribution to *the group’s epistemic success*. The clearest example of this offered in Levy’s book is the confirmation bias: it is epistemically problematic for me to remain convinced of the truth of my belief when the belief is repeatedly disconfirmed by the evidence. But the fact that I only seem to register evidence confirming my belief is important for the group dynamics: as a result, I hang onto my minority belief. A variety of conflicting views is represented in the group and the failure to update my belief and consider evidence against it contributes to the success of the group as a whole.

## 2. Explaining conspiracy beliefs

In this paper, I am interested in thinking about different ways of applying models inspired by the social turn in epistemology to conspiracy beliefs. Levy's broad characterization of bad beliefs does not rule out conspiracy beliefs and indeed many of the examples of bad beliefs in the book are effectively examples of conspiracy beliefs. As I said at the start, for Levy bad beliefs are beliefs that conflict with those "held by the relevant epistemic authorities [...] despite the widespread public availability either of the evidence that supports more accurate beliefs or of the knowledge that the relevant authorities believe as they do" (Levy 2021, p. x). Some of the conspiracy beliefs that were rife during the COVID-19 pandemic could be described in that way, such as the beliefs that the Chinese had created the coronavirus in a lab in Wuhan and that Bill Gates was using the anti-COVID vaccination to insert chips in citizens' bodies to control their behavior.

Conspiracy beliefs are epistemically problematic, at least at the individual level. They are explanations of significant events that are not typically well supported by evidence and that become unshakeable, resisting counterevidence and counterarguments (Bortolotti et al., 2021). Due to their fixity, when they present a misleading account of the events, they compromise our understanding of the situation, potentially leading to decisions that are not in our interests. Although it may be beneficial for the sensible members of my group to be kept on their toes about the safety and efficacy of anti-COVID vaccination, it is not at all clear that I benefit from hanging onto a belief which may motivate me to take unnecessary health risks and may also cause me to be excluded and ridiculed in certain social contexts. So, if we agree that conspiracy beliefs are at least in some ways epistemically problematic, we should be interested in how to avoid endorsing them. One important distinction between the models for explaining and addressing bad beliefs is whether there is something wrong with the individual and this "fault" explains the formation and maintenance of conspiracy beliefs or whether the problem lies in the epistemic structuring of the social environment, e.g. how social media work makes it difficult for agent to identify sources of epistemic authority.

In this section, as a way of illustration, I am going to present two models of how the problem of conspiracy beliefs can be explained and addressed, examining suggestions about how to deal practically with the conspiracy beliefs in our lives. I am presenting the two models as extremes, but I am aware most models we find in the literature will be somewhere between these two extremes.

In what I am calling an *agent-centred* model, conspiracy beliefs are pathological states of our minds that are fundamentally thought to be caused by something wrong within us. So, something about us must be changed to address the problem. Having conspiracy beliefs can be compared to another condition that is seemingly undesirable and potentially costly—I have chosen being overweight, but I could have chosen other conditions with similar characteristics, that is, with the potential of being both disabling and stigmatized. The comparison will help us see how the conditions are explained, assessed, and addressed.

**Agent-centred model**—Being overweight is bad for you: your cardiovascular health is at risk, and you may have a shorter life than people of normal weight. Your genes, lifestyle, and personality, etc. are the key causal factors. Maybe not much can be done about your genes, but your lifestyle and personality need to change, and you must follow medical advice to implement those changes: eat less and better, exercise more, have surgery, and so on. The responsibility for being overweight is yours, and so what needs to change is you.

**Agent-centred model**—Having a conspiracy belief is bad for you: your understanding of the world is compromised and, as a result, you can make decisions that expose you to health risks and exert a negative influence on other people. Your education, cognitive habits, and personality are key causal factors. Maybe not much can be done about your genes, but your education, cognitive habits, and personality need to be enhanced so you can form beliefs that do not conflict with the beliefs of the relevant epistemic authorities. To avoid conspiracy beliefs, you can learn critical thinking, listen to experts, be more open minded, etc. The responsibility for having conspiracy beliefs is yours, and so what needs to change is you.

In the *social* model, conspiracy beliefs are the result of our gathering and exchanging information in an epistemically polluted environment. Conspiracy beliefs are not thought to be caused by something wrong within us but by what happens around us. Once again, we can compare having conspiracy beliefs to being overweight and see how the conditions are explained, assessed, and addressed.

**Social model**—Being overweight is bad for you: your cardiovascular health is at risk, and you may have a shorter life than people of normal weight. Society has actively contributed to your being overweight: you have a sedentary job; ads on TV invited you to consume cheap, unhealthy food; eating healthy food and subscribing to a gym are expensive; there is no comprehensive information about nutrition in school and during the life course, health risks were not explained to you, etc. Society needs to change to ensure that in your environment information about healthy food and the benefit of exercise is available and accessible, throughout the life course, and it is easier for people like you to take up and maintain good habits. Society is responsible for your being overweight, and what needs to change is society.

**Social model**—Having a conspiracy belief is bad for you: your understanding of the world is compromised and, as a result, you can make decisions that expose you to health risks, exert a negative influence on other people, etc. Your environment has actively contributed to conspiracy beliefs being attractive to you. You did not receive adequate support when you had adverse experiences and you were made to feel inadequate, isolated, and marginalized. The institutions that should have safeguarded your interests and rights have not been trustworthy. The environment is polluted with misleading cues of epistemic authority that led you to trust unreliable sources. The responsibility for having conspiracy beliefs is not yours, and what needs to change is society.

### 3. Agency in context

In the previous section, I sketched caricatures of two rival accounts (agent-centred and social) of where responsibility should lie for conspiracy beliefs and what remedial strategies would be more likely to work. What's the best model? Are conspiracy beliefs a bit like delusions in the common perception of delusions, that is, the outcome of a cognitive deficit or an epistemic vice that the individual needs to counteract or relinquish? Or are they truly bad beliefs, seen as an unfortunate outcome of a rational process that operates on the misleading information polluting the social environment?

Quassim Cassam's model of conspiracy beliefs (Cassam, 2019), according to which epistemic vices are largely responsible for conspiracist, fits the agent-centred framework although it is of course much more nuanced and sophisticated than my caricature of the model: there are epistemic vices that the person needs to overcome to be rid of conspiracy beliefs. Neil Levy's work on bad beliefs is a shining example of the social model (Levy, 2021). The problem is that we live in an epistemically polluted environment where individuals (and members of minority groups in particular) are not supported and beliefs cannot be reliably outsourced. The solutions need to be systemic, and Levy recommends engineering the social environment by using nudges.

Are there models that recognize the importance of the social turn without entirely removing responsibility from the individual agent? Dan Williams recognizes that some beliefs have both adaptive and maladaptive features, encompassing epistemic faults at the level of the individual's representation of the environment, and epistemic benefits at the level of the individual's interaction with the social context (Williams, 2021).

I am going to propose a hybrid model of responsibility for conspiracy beliefs that attempts to integrate some insights of the agent-centred model with insights of the social model. I shall call this the *agency-in-context* model because it is central to the model that we can exercise our agency in ways that can be more or less rational and advantageous to us, but the exercise of our agency is constrained and influenced by our social context. The focus is on the *interaction between agents and their environment* because agents do not believe or act in isolation and to pursue and fulfil the goals, they set for themselves they need the support of the physical and social environment in which they operate. For the third time, we can compare having conspiracy beliefs to being overweight and see how the conditions are explained, assessed, and addressed.

***Agency-in-context model***—Being overweight is bad for you: your cardiovascular health is at risk, and you may have a shorter life than people of normal weight. There are a number of causal factors contributing to your being overweight including your genes and lifestyle and features of your social environment. To change your being overweight, both you and society need to change. You need to take responsibility for what you can change, and take action, with adequate support—for instance, you can be supported to eat more healthily and exercise more consistently. But society has an important part to play too: it needs to be engineered to promote education about healthy food and exercise throughout the life course, making it easier for people like you to take up and maintain good habits.



***Agency-in-context model***—Having a conspiracy belief is bad for you: your understanding of the world is compromised and, as a result, you can make decisions that expose you to health risks, exert a negative influence on other people, etc. There are a number of causal factors contributing to your having conspiracy beliefs: education, reasoning tendencies, habits, personality, but also features of the environment such as the occasional untrustworthiness of epistemically authoritative institutions and the fact that unreliable sources of information are associated with cues of epistemic authority. To stop your having conspiracy beliefs, both you and society need to change. You need to take responsibility for what you can change, and take action, with adequate support—for instance, you can become aware of, and compensate for, your cognitive biases; practice epistemic virtues; learn critical thinking. But society has an important part to play too: the epistemic environment needs to be engineered to promote good belief outsourcing and ensure that institutions are more accountable and trustworthy, making it easier for you to access reliable sources and take up and maintain good epistemic habits.

In the agency-in-context model the proposed solution is complex: we may need to improve the way we process information and become less intellectually arrogant and more open minded, but society needs to change too, for instance by incentivizing the exercise of epistemic virtues and making epistemically authoritative sources of information more trustworthy. Are there any real-life theories or explanations of conspiracy beliefs that adopt an agency-in-context model? Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent's model of conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski and Parent, 2014, chapter 6) offers a distinctive “blame the system” social approach. The authors recognize that when we are attracted to conspiracy beliefs it is because we have developed suspicion towards official sources of information and mainstream accounts of significant events, but the suspicion we exhibit is something that we have been socialized into. There is also a distinctive agent-centred dimension in the consideration of the role of individual differences: the appeal of conspiracism is out there, and when we have a certain history and a certain personality, we are more likely to embrace it. After all, it is adaptive for us to think the worst of powerful elites if past conflicts and elections have never gone in our favour and we have felt, as individuals and groups, under threat for a long time.

Joe Pierre's two-factor account of conspiracy beliefs can also be seen as an instance of the agency-in-context model. Pierre (2020), identifies two main factors responsible for the formation of the conspiracy beliefs:

- The first factor is a form of epistemic mistrust we have towards official sources of information which should account for why we reject the explanation of the significant events that is produced by the epistemically authoritative sources;
- The second factor is a set of cognitive biases, motivational factors, and other individual differences (such need for closure, confirmation bias, and science illiteracy) which should account for why we endorse the alternative (conspiracy) explanation of the significant events.

Whereas epistemic mistrust has social causes, because the mistrust is likely to be associated with power dynamics in society and motivated by social factors, the second factor points to individual differences in how people process information and is more agent-centred—in that domain several potential interventions target the individual.

#### 4. The Swiss cheese model

The picture emerging from the empirical research on conspiracy theories is that conspiracy beliefs are means by which we respond to uncertainty, manage negative emotions, and express our identity, so they are part and parcel of the way in which we exercise our agency. They are means by which we exercise agency because, by offering us a more desirable reality to deal with than the actual reality, they defuse the paralyzing effect of threatening or distressing events and restore a sense of control. At the same time, conspiracy beliefs also compromise our agency by undermining our understanding of significant event that impact our lives, inviting risk taking behavior, and transforming our social world into a battle between good and evil that is both inaccurate and unnecessarily divisive. In so far as conspiracy beliefs are a response to a threat, they are a suboptimal response (Bortolotti, 2020).

So how should we tackle conspiracy beliefs? I think there are two potentially conflicting tendencies. First, as in the agent-centred approaches, we may be tempted to place the burden of the adverse effects of conspiracy beliefs on the individual. This has positive and negative consequences: the positives are that in a situation where agents risk feeling helpless, being told that they can do something to improve themselves and society helps restore a sense of control which drives motivation and engagement; the negatives are that by seeing conspiracy beliefs as the individual's fault the risk is that people with conspiracy beliefs are unduly sanctioned and stigmatized—as a result of which they may also be excluded from public discourse.

Second, as in the social models, we may be tempted to exonerate individuals entirely and place the burden of the adverse effects of conspiracy beliefs on social structures and institutions. This approach also has positive and negative consequences: the positives are that individual agents are not demonized for their beliefs and their behavior is less likely to be pathologized (they are not citizens with sub-par reasoning capacities but citizens vulnerable to existing traps); the negatives are that by exonerating them entirely we take them away both the blame and the power that comes from responsibility—citizens are perceived as passive victims of environmental epistemic pollution.

In talking about the different ways to attempt to stop infection during the COVID-19 pandemic, some have advocated the Swiss cheese model of respiratory pandemic defense, inspired by Reason (2020). The model also made it to the *New York Times* (Roberts, 2020). This is how the model is explained by Roberts:

Multiple layers of protection, imagined as cheese slices, block the spread of the new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19. No one layer is perfect; each has holes, and when the holes align, the risk of infection increases. But several layers combined — social distancing, plus masks, plus handwashing, plus testing and tracing, plus ventilation, plus government messaging — significantly reduce the overall risk. Vaccination will add one more protective layer. (par. 2)

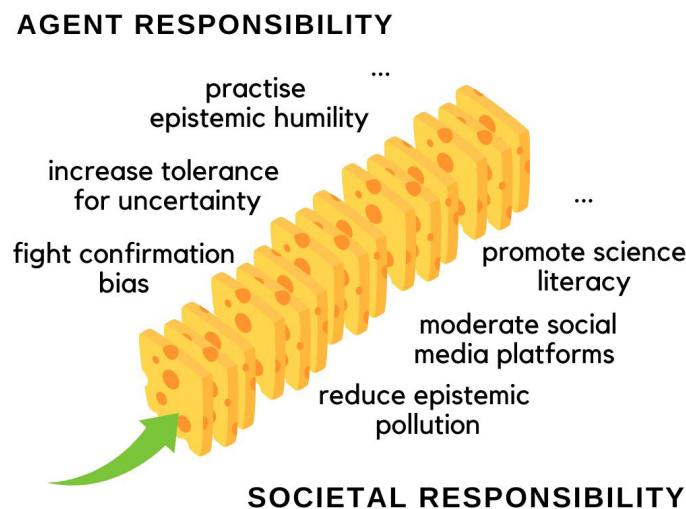
What is especially interesting for us is that the different factors are divided into two broad categories: *personal responsibility* (such as keeping physical distance) and *shared responsibility* (such as government's messaging and vaccination campaigns).



Leticia Bode and Emily Varga (2021), have applied the Swiss cheese model to the problem of mitigating the effects of misinformation on social media. They observe how problem is multifaceted, due to illiteracy and epistemic pollution, and so the solution to the problem is also multifaceted. Not one intervention may work on its own but adopting various strategies simultaneously can make a difference. The problem/solution they consider involve public health officials, social media platforms, and educators (operating at the social / shared responsibility level) but also involve the average social media user (operating at the agent-centred / personal responsibility level). As in the case of the respiratory pandemic, also in the case of the infodemic, the claim is that to have the best chances of success, we should fruitfully engage both institutions and individuals and distribute remedial strategies across solutions resting on personal and shared responsibility.

Inspired by Bode and Varga, my proposal is that we look at the agency-in-context model as a Swiss cheese model. How does the agency-in-context model help us *in practice* to tackle conspiracy beliefs? It does not add anything new to the previous approaches but combines them. If it is plausible to think that the causes of the spreading of conspiracy beliefs can be analyzed in terms of agents' behavior (e.g., as a response to psychological and epistemic needs) and in terms of systemic issues (e.g., as there being misleading markers of epistemic authority in the space dedicated to public debate), then it is also plausible that remedial strategies should operate at those two levels.

Graphic 1. Agency-in-context model.



Own source.

At the social, systemic level more support can be put in place to enable all agents to make better epistemic choices, cultivate good habits, reward in others and model themselves the virtues of integrity, open mindedness, and humility, and acquire practical skills such as critical thinking and bullshit detection. But more important still, the epistemic environment can be structured in a way that does not make it so hard to navigate information, where markers of credibility and authority and clear and consistent, and guidance is offered in an accessible and engaging way. This is very easy to say and very

hard to achieve because when agents adopt an explanation for a significant event and reject alternative explanations, the credibility of the sources is not all they care about: they rely on methodological commitments that are congruent with their identity to sift good from bad evidence and their boredom-averse minds will be attracted to explanations with higher entertainment value.

## 5. Conclusions

Although there is evidence in other domains that Swiss cheese approaches to problems that might have complex solutions are effective, what I am proposing here is just a plausible speculation. But apart from whether an agency-in-context model is the most suitable to drive interventions, which is something that ultimately needs to be investigated empirically, there are both philosophical and psychological reasons to prefer it to a social model like the bad-belief one where the agent responsibility is seriously downplayed.

The philosophical reason is that it may be difficult to justify placing the burden of the spread of conspiracy beliefs on society if individual agents are completely absolved of irrationality. If individuals are completely rational in processing information, why is the environment where they operate (which is made of individual agents) so vulnerable to epistemic pollution? I am not suggesting that there is no satisfactory answer, but that the bad-belief models need to address the question.

The psychological reason concerns agent motivation. The bad-belief model absolves but also disempowers agents, because their rationality is not challenged but their epistemic success is hostage to the structure of their environment, which they cannot really control. This may lead agents who want to resist conspiracy beliefs to feel that there is nothing they can do to stop the spreading and reduce the adverse effects of conspiracy theories. And lacking motivation, agents may refrain from engaging in those practices that according to Bode and Vraga (2021), are so efficacious in limiting the influence of misinformation on social media, such as correcting other users on the basis of credible sources.

In conclusion, the agency-in-context model seems to be plausible explanation for the phenomenon of conspiracy beliefs, integrating individual and societal factors whose contribution has been empirically studied and confirmed. The model supports a Swiss cheese model of interventions, preserving the sense that both individual agents and institutions are responsible for the crises that strike them and can do something to tackle them. We need both accurate maps and good map-reading skills to find our way in new place.

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