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## Foreign Country Conspiracy Beliefs in Separatist Conflicts: Their Role in Fueling Blame Attribution, Delegitimization of Separatist Group, and Symbolic Racism

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**Supplementary Materials:** Code, Data, Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



### Abstract

Across 4 correlational studies, using currently unresolved separatist conflicts in West Papua, Indonesia as a contextual background, our work aimed to examine the role of beliefs in foreign country conspiracies in igniting negative reactions of members of a non-separatist society when responding to a political issue. Study 1 ( $N = 88$ ) constitutes a preliminary investigation revealing that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies, referring to the extent to which non-separatist members believe that foreign countries have clandestinely backed up the separatist group, positively corresponded to the legitimization of the separatist group as a terrorist organization. In Study 2 ( $N = 325$ ), results showed that more beliefs in foreign country conspiracies, in line with Study 1, corresponded to more endorsement of the Indonesian government's decision to judge the West Papuan separatist group as a terrorist organization. Study 2 also demonstrated that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies translated into generalized negative attitudes towards West Papuan society, manifested in symbolic racism. Study 3 ( $N = 497$ ) extended Study 2, showing how blaming the separatist group mediated the role of beliefs in foreign conspiracies as positive antecedents of support for the terrorist label and symbolic racism. Study 4 ( $N = 550$ ) replicated Study 3 and additionally found that the positive relationship between beliefs in foreign country conspiracies



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and symbolic racism was more prominent among high national glorifiers. These findings suggest that negative attitudes toward the separatist movement can be rooted in people's attribution of the independence movement to a distal, international factor.

## Keywords

foreign country conspiracies, separatist conflicts, symbolic racism, delegitimization of a separatist group, outgroup blame, national glorification

### Highlights

- Social-psychological research on beliefs in conspiracy theories has grown, underscoring the multifarious adverse impacts on the suspected outgroups. Despite the relevance and urgency of investigating the topic in the context of separatist conflict, research in this area is lacking.
- To fill the gap, we conducted four empirical studies among a sample of non-separatist group members in Indonesia (a total of  $N = 1,469$ ), to assess their beliefs in theories that foreign countries have clandestinely collaborated to engineer successionist demands in West Papua, the easternmost province of the Republic.
- Empirical findings revealed that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies consistently give rise to symbolic racism against the West Papuans and delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists.
- Our research contributes to a new understanding of people's tendencies to attribute separatist conflicts to external instead of domestic causes that exacerbate discriminative attitudes against the separatist society, which remains understudied in social-psychological research.

Among multifarious collective conflicts, separatism is still ubiquitous and currently unresolved. Its emergence bears no geographical boundaries, with a presence in developed countries (e.g., Canada, the United Kingdom) and developing countries (e.g., Indonesia, Thailand). One factor that makes separatist conflicts intractable is the involvement of foreign countries, given their interests in geopolitics, historical ties, or international advocacy (Caspersen & Stansfield, 2012; Pan & Xiao, 2023). When separatism escalates, more often than not, the neighbouring countries also intervene to mediate peace or impose sanctions, thereby influencing the course of the conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Such external forces in separatist conflicts become a fertile ground for the development of foreign conspiracy theories, portraying how they have surreptitiously collaborated to back up a separatist group and threaten the unity of a nation.

Social-psychological research on beliefs in intergroup conspiracy theories has been growing (Hornsey et al., 2023). However, extant work that examines the dynamics of conspiratorial beliefs in separatist conflicts remains understudied. Indeed, few studies have investigated the topic. However, those studies have focused on the psychologi-

cal impacts of beliefs in foreign country conspiracies among separatist societies (i.e., [Chayinska & Minesscu, 2018](#); [Šrol & Čavojová, 2025](#)). Moreover, the existing work has predominantly focused on conspiratorial beliefs in Western countries. This confinement leaves gaps in insights into how the dynamics of conspiratorial beliefs in separatist conflicts unfold in non-Western contexts.

Our work seeks to fill these research voids by investigating the role of foreign conspiracy beliefs in determining non-separatist society's reactions to separatist conflicts in West Papua, Indonesia. Specifically, in four studies, we examined how such beliefs paved the way for delegitimization of the separatist movement and broader negative attitudes toward West Papuan society taking shape via symbolic racism. Likewise, we also examined the mediating role of blaming the separatist group and the moderating role of national glorification in augmenting such negative outcomes on intergroup relations. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which beliefs in foreign country conspiracies fuel unfavorable attitudes toward separatism.

## The Research Context

We conducted this research in Indonesia, where the separatist conflict between the Indonesian government and West Papuans is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical, political, and cultural factors. The Indonesian government used the Act of Free Choice in 1969, besides controversies surrounding the vote, as the legitimization of integrating West Papua as part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Since then, however, some Indigenous West Papuans have aspired for independence because of the grievances over economic and political marginalization they have subjectively experienced from the central government ([Wangge & Lawson, 2023](#)).

Overlooking the grievances, the Indonesian government has relied on military measures in responding to West Papua's calls for self-determination ([Widjojo, 2006](#)). Accentuating this 'hard approach', in 2021, the Indonesian government officially labelled the West Papua separatist group as terrorists ([Arnaz & Andriyanto, 2021](#)). These conflicts become increasingly sensitive as foreign forces, especially those from Pacific Island nations, have advocated for the separation of West Papua from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia ([Pan & Xiao, 2023](#)). Against this backdrop, the Indonesian government once accused foreign powers of conspiring to instigate the upheaval of movements in West Papua ([Tehusjarana, 2019](#)).

## Theoretical Rationales

### Foreign Country Conspiracies in Separatist Conflicts

Social-psychological literature differentiates between trait and state-based conspiratorial beliefs. The first is also dubbed a conspiracy mentality, denoting people's predisposition,

which is relatively stable across time and contexts, to believe that major events, from natural disasters to the death of prominent figures, do not happen naturally but deliberately by secret collaborations of powerful actors. The second is also called specific conspiracy theories, denoting how much people believe that powerful actors have been accountable for clandestinely masterminding certain events, such as the outbreak of COVID-19, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales (Stewart, 2024). Within such specific conspiratorial beliefs, powerful actors can be attributed to ingroups (e.g., the elites, the ruling government; Cookson et al., 2021) or outgroups (e.g., superpower agents such as the U.S., the West, and Jews; Jolley et al., 2024).

Belief in foreign country conspiracies, which our work focuses on, constitutes one form of outgroup conspiratorial belief. Applied to the context of our work, such beliefs attribute separatist movements to external forces with a malevolent aim to destabilize a nation. Construed as such, belief in foreign country conspiracies frames separatist groups as puppets of foreign powers (Mashuri, 2019). For example, the "Sèvres syndrome" mirrors a widespread belief among Turkish people that foreign countries are conspiring to support separatism fought by the Kurdish ethnic minority, to weaken the Republic of Turkey (Jung, 2001). In Pakistan, people believe that Indian leaders have conspired to back up separatist groups to destabilize their country. Other examples are abundant, including in Russia, where anti-Western conspiratorial beliefs are common, accusing the West of being behind separatist demands among some ethnic groups in the federal state (Kragh et al., 2022).

Psychological research has indicated that outgroup conspiratorial beliefs can exacerbate intergroup conflicts, due to their role in augmenting hostility and attenuating intergroup trust (Hebel-Sela et al., 2022). Even in societies where internal conflicts become the focus of historical reflection, under such post-conflict situations, conspiratorial beliefs enhance people's adherence to conflict-related narratives (Petrović et al., 2019). Outgroup conspiratorial beliefs and intergroup conflicts reciprocally reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle that hinders intergroup peace (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015; Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Kofta et al., 2020; Nawata et al., 2024; Petrović et al., 2019). Applying these insights to the context of our work, we contend that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies trigger negative intergroup attitudes that take shape via the non-separatist group members' delegitimization of separatism and symbolic racism against the separatist society.

### Delegitimization of Separatist Movements

In separatist conflicts, the disputing parties, i.e., the non-separatist groups and the separatist group, consider their actions and goals legitimate. Non-separatist groups view their opposition to the secessionist movements as justified reactions and, at the same time, delegitimize separatist demands (Lehning, 2005; Wellman, 2005). Delegitimization, according to Bar-Tal (2000), occurs when groups are categorized as deviating from

normative social groups. A corollary of this mechanism is pejorative characterizations imposed against the delegitimized outgroup.

Moral exclusion theory (Opotow, 1990) suggests that delegitimized groups are placed beyond moral concern boundaries. Characterized as such, people may have no moral burdens to treat delegitimized groups negatively. In this regard, delegitimization functions as a justification for extreme, negative actions towards the implicated group (Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). In the context of separatist conflicts, delegitimization in part manifests through labelling the separatist group as a terrorist organization (Barrinha, 2011). Examples are the Turkish government against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK; Deewanee, 2018; Seloom, 2017), the Chinese government against Uyghurs (Roberts, 2018), and so forth including the Morocco Government against Polisario Front (Bésenyő, 2018).

Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999) describes how people construe harmful actions as right or justifiable. Some psychological research (e.g., Maftai & Holman, 2022; Remondi et al., 2022) has demonstrated that conspiratorial beliefs trigger moral disengagement that enables people to see normatively immoral behaviors (e.g., dehumanization, discrimination, and violence) as morally righteous. Using this theoretical lens, by conceiving separatist groups as puppets of foreign countries, people view the separatist groups and their grievances as artificial rather than genuine. This unilateral claim reinforces people's approval of harsh government policies, including classifying separatist groups as terrorists. Building upon these rationales, we predicted that more beliefs in foreign country conspiracies would explain more delegitimization of a separatist group as terrorists (*Hypothesis 1*).

## Symbolic Racism

From the perspectives of non-separatist groups, separatism can pose both realistic and symbolic threats (for a distinction between the two forms of threat, see Stephan et al., 2009). Realistic threats may take the form of territory loss (Hjerm & Schnabel, 2010), domestic security (Clarke, 2007), and the national economy (van Leeuwen & Mashuri, 2013). In terms of symbolic threats, separatist movements undermine national identity by urging the establishment of their own, unique ideology (Mashuri, 2019).

Extant social-psychological research has documented that, in various contexts from societal crises to intergroup conflicts, threat perceptions fuel outgroup conspiratorial beliefs. This is the case, as literature (van Prooijen, 2020; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018) suggests because threat perceptions motivate people to make sense of the situations that may harm their group by believing in a conspiracy orchestrated by the despised outgroup. Furthermore, research on intergroup conflicts shows that identity-related threats shape symbolic racism, reflecting prejudice against an outgroup stemming from the perception that the outgroup has violated societal norms and cultural values. Different from blatant racism, which is expressed openly and causes direct harm such as discrimination

and violence, symbolic racism is expressed subtly and leads to indirect harm such as support for systemic inequalities.

Applying these arguments to the context of this research, foreign conspiracy beliefs may also ignite symbolic racism held by non-separatist groups against the separatist society. Symbolic racism emerges when non-separatist groups feel that national unity is threatened by separatist movements. The presence of beliefs in foreign conspiracies arguably exacerbates these attitudes by reinforcing suspicions that separatists are extensions of external adversaries. This mechanism leads non-separatist groups to deem the separatist society as a subversive threat to national unity, which breeds symbolic racism of the first group against the latter group. It should be particularly noted that foreign country conspiratorial beliefs drive generalized symbolic racism. In this regard, the beliefs implicate a broader target of symbolic racism, aimed at the separatist society the secessionist group presumably represents. In line with this notion, the research by [Jolley et al. \(2020\)](#) reported that conspiratorial beliefs evoked prejudice not only against the alleged conspirators but also against the associated outgroups. Using these rationales, we predicted that high levels of belief in foreign conspiracies would be related to high levels of symbolic racism against the separatist society (*Hypothesis 2*).

### Blaming the Separatist Movements

One factor fueling separatist conflicts is outgroup blame. It is generally defined as group members' tendency to attribute problems to another group beyond their own ideological, cultural, or social group. On one side, separatist groups blame their grievances on the central government or the non-separatist groups it represents. On another side, non-separatist groups blame the separatist groups for undermining the continuity of national unity ([Mashuri, 2019](#)).

Previous research ([Jolley et al., 2018](#)) has observed how beliefs in outgroup conspiracies drive people to bolster the status quo, fostering them to blame a malignant few instead of the existing societal system for the problems they deal with. Moreover, other research ([Putra et al., 2015](#)) has demonstrated that majority groups blame the victimized minority group when they believe that foreign forces have conspired to back up the latter group. Applying these insights to the present work, beliefs in foreign country conspiracies can augment the non-separatist group's accusation that the separatist group is part of a larger conspiracy of external actors. This perception intensifies blame toward the separatist group, as the non-separatist group may view the latter group not just as political dissenters but also as an integral part of a vicious external plot. Accordingly, we predicted that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies would motivate non-separatist groups to blame the separatist group in conflicts pitting both groups against each other (*Hypothesis 3*).

Outgroup blame, taking into account the ultimate attribution error ([Pettigrew, 1979](#)), may mediate the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in leading to the non-sepa-

ratist group's delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists. Pettigrew explained that the ultimate attribution error refers to people's proclivity to assign the inherent rather than situational cause of negative behaviors of the outgroup. The relevance of such bias in separatist conflicts is evidenced when non-separatist groups blame the separatists for instability and violence while upholding the government's actions as defensive. For example, in the course of the Basque conflict that pitted the ETA (English: Basque Homeland and Liberty) against Spain, a significant number of Spaniards considered Basques to be inherently rebellious, while Spanish government oppression was construed as defensive in nature (Molina, 2010). Applying these rationales to the context of this research, when members of the non-separatist group believed that foreign entities have conspired to endorse separatist movements, they may view the latter group as inherently traitorous and malicious, leading to its delegitimization as a terrorist. Considering these rationales, we predicted that blaming the separatist group would mediate the role of beliefs in foreign country conspiracies in igniting the delegitimization of the separatist group as a terrorist (*Hypothesis 4*).

We also posit that outgroup blame may mediate the positive relationship between belief in foreign country conspiracies and symbolic racism. Previous work has revealed that when majority group members believe in conspiracies involving minority groups, they are more likely to blame the minority group, which ultimately heightens prejudicial attitudes (Kofta et al., 2020). In addition, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) posited that the dominant, majority group often uses outgroup blame as an ideological narrative to bolster the perceived superiority of its own group over the minority group. Synthesizing these notions, blaming the minority group may act as a psychological mechanism that transforms external, outgroup conspiracy beliefs into symbolic racism. Contextualizing this synthesis within our work, it makes sense to posit that the non-separatist group's belief in foreign country conspiracies leads members of this group to blame the separatist group, which in turn evokes symbolic racism. We accordingly predicted that blaming the separatist group would mediate the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in evoking symbolic racism (*Hypothesis 5*).

## Study 1

Study 1 served as an initial exploration to test the psychometric properties of belief in foreign country conspiracies. In doing so, we examined the dimensionality of the measure and how much this new scale correlated with the non-separatist majority group's support for delegitimizing the separatist movement. When individuals believe that foreign powers are secretly backing a separatist group, they are more likely to justify opposition to the movement, leading to decreased support for separatist activities (Cichocka et al., 2016). Indeed, the Indonesian government formally designated the West Papuan separatist movement as a terrorist organization in April 2021, following escalat-

ing violent clashes between separatist groups and Indonesian security forces (Chauvel, 2021).

## Method

### Participants and Design

Participants were 88 Indonesian citizens aged 17 years or above ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.84$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.99$ ). They self-reported as ethnically non-Papuans (50% [i.e., 44] were female, 50% [i.e., 44] male). We recruited participants voluntarily, in return for no reward, via convenience sampling. The study was designed as a correlational survey through which a questionnaire was distributed to participants to assess variables under investigation.

### Procedure and Measures

Using *Google Forms*, the questionnaire commenced with informed consent. After confirming their agreement, participants were asked to respond to items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Scores were tabulated by averaging the items of each variable.

The first variable is belief in foreign country conspiracies in separatist conflict, assessed with 6 items (e.g., “Foreign countries are conspiring to mastermind separatism or demands for Papua to separate from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia [Indonesian: NKRI]”;  $\alpha = .93$ ), adapted from previous research in Indonesia (Mashuri & Osteen, 2023; Mashuri et al., 2016). The subsequent variables were the perceived passive roles of Papuans in separatist conflict (6 items; e.g., “Secretly, foreign countries started and played an active role in conspiring with some indigenous Papuans so that Papua could separate from the Republic of Indonesia.”;  $\alpha = .94$ ), self-developed by the authors. Delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists was assessed with 5 items (e.g., “Designating the Papuan Armed Criminal Group (KKB) as Terrorists is the right action”;  $\alpha = .90$ ), adapted from research by Mashuri et al. (2021). Empowerment was assessed with 5 items (e.g., “It is important for the Indonesian government to take actions that can make indigenous Papuans feel strong or empowered in this country.”;  $\alpha = .91$ ), adapted from research by Zaduqisti et al. (2020).<sup>1</sup>

After answering each question, participants were asked to self-report their gender and age. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.<sup>2</sup>

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1) Raw data, Supplementary Materials, and Additional Supplementary Materials can be openly accessed at Open Science Framework (see Mashuri, 2025).

2) The complete lists of item wording of each variable across Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4 are presented in Supplementary Materials A

## Results and Discussion

Inspection of EFA with Promax rotation demonstrated that the six items measuring belief in foreign country conspiracies loaded to a single factor or dimension (factor loading varied from .83 to .91), with the percentage of total variance explained exceeding 50 (i.e., 74.34).<sup>3</sup> As shown in Table 1, a partial correlation revealed that belief in foreign country conspiracies positively and significantly corresponded with the perceived passive role of West Papuans and delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists in successionist conflicts. This analysis also showed that belief in foreign country conspiracies did not significantly relate to support for empowering West Papuans.

**Table 1**

*Results of Partial Correlations Among Variables in Study 1*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Belief in foreign country conspiracies	4.18	1.24	—	.83***	.37***	-.02 <sup>ns</sup>
2. Passive roles of West Papuans	4.18	1.18		—	—	—
3. Delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists	4.24	1.34			—	—
4. Empowerment of West Papuans	5.28	1.02				—

*Note.* *M* = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation. Correlations were two-tailed, obtained by controlling other variables.

\*\*\**p* < .001. <sup>ns</sup> = not significant.

The findings suggest that belief in foreign country conspiracies form a unified psychological construct, reinforcing the idea that conspiracy beliefs are structured and interconnected (Brotherton et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). These beliefs also reduce perceived local agency in separatist conflicts (Douglas et al., 2017; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). They do not significantly predict support for empowering West Papuans, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs shape perceptions of conflict (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010). Moreover, members of the non-separatist group's belief in foreign country conspiracies fostered delegitimization of the separatist group. This denotes that such a suspicion may elicit moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990), which propels the first group towards labelling the latter as terrorists.

3) In Supplementary Materials B, see Table 5 for the results of EFA in Study 1, and Tables 6, 7, and 8 for the results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in Study 2, Study 3, and Study 4, respectively.

## Study 2

Study 2 aimed to test the ideas derived from empirical findings in Study 1 that foreign country conspiracy narratives may undermine local peacebuilding efforts by fostering intergroup distrust and conflict. In particular, in Study 2, we complemented belief in foreign country conspiracies and delegitimization of a separatist group as terrorists with symbolic racism. Characterized by subtle and indirect prejudices that manifest through moral and cultural justifications rather than overt hostility, symbolic racism can play a significant role in fuelling separatist conflicts. This form of racism delegitimizes separatist grievances, portraying them as threats rather than as groups with legitimate political aspirations (Henry & Sears, 2002). Symbolic racism can also shape public narratives, influencing media portrayals and political rhetoric that reinforce exclusionary policies, further marginalizing separatist movements and exacerbating hostilities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Based on these arguments, we predicted that beliefs in foreign country conspiracies would positively correspond with both delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists (*Hypothesis 1*) and symbolic racism (*Hypothesis 2*).

## Method

### Participants and Design

We recruited 325 participants in Study 2 who represent a sample of Indonesian citizens with ages ranging between 17 and 51 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.56$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.14$ ). All participants were ethnically non-Papuans (72% [i.e., 233] were female, 28% [i.e., 93] male). Using convenience sampling, we approached participants in return for no reward. We conducted a correlational survey to assess each variable under investigation through a series of questions compiled in a questionnaire.

### Procedure and Measures

The procedure in Study 2 was identical to Study 1, wherein the questionnaire was administered using *Google Forms* to assess each variable. The first variable is belief in foreign country conspiracies in separatist conflict, adopted from Study 1 (6 items;  $\alpha = .93$ ). The second variable is symbolic racism, assessed with 16 items (e.g., “The indigenous Papuans are less able to work hard and are therefore left behind by other Indonesians”;  $\alpha = .93$ ), adapted from research by Henry and Sears (2002). The third variable is the delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists (5 items;  $\alpha = .95$ ), adopted from Study 1. We thanked and debriefed participants at the end of the questionnaire after they indicated their gender and age.

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analyses

CFA with Promax rotation (see Table 6 in the Supplementary Materials) revealed the one-dimension solution resulted in the total variance explained exceeding 50% (factor loading varied from .82 to .88). In addition, as shown in Table 2, inspection of bivariate correlation revealed that belief in foreign country conspiracies significantly and positively correlated with symbolic racism and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists.

**Table 2**

*Results of Bivariate Correlations Among Variables in Study 2*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Belief in foreign country conspiracies	3.69	1.09	—	.15**	.26**
2. Symbolic racism	2.99	.92		—	.02 <sup>ns</sup>
3. Delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists	3.77	1.35			—

*Note.* *M* = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation.

\*\**p* < .01. <sup>ns</sup> = not significant.

### Hypothesis Testing

To test each hypothesis in Study 2—as well as those in Study 3 and Study 4—we used Structural Equation Modelling (SEM; Wang & Wang, 2012) by transforming observed scores into latent scores. We implemented item parcels to create indicators of latent scores. Item parcels relative to individual items minimize error variance and, as a result, better represent the construct (Little et al., 2013). Parcels were derived from the item-to-construct balance method for unidimensional constructs (Little et al., 2002) and the domain-representative method for multidimensional constructs (Kishton & Widaman, 1994). This procedure was done after assessing the dimensionality of the construct with an exploratory factor analysis using oblique rotation (Little et al., 2002) and ensuring at least three parcels per dimension (Matsunaga, 2008). For unidimensional constructs, the item-to-construct balance approach combined the highest-loading item with the lowest-loading one, followed by the next highest with the next lowest items (Little et al., 2002). For multidimensional constructs, we paired the first item of one dimension with the first item of another dimension, then the second items of each dimension, and so on to make each of the parcels represent all dimensions (Kishton & Widaman, 1994; Little et al., 2002).<sup>4</sup>

4) Exceptions were made for the variable delegitimization of a separatist group as terrorists in which across Studies 2, 3, and 4, latent scores were derived from each of its items as indicators. The complete item parcels for each variable across the three studies are presented in Tables 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the Supplementary Materials C.

The data were analyzed using Mplus Version 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015) with an MLM estimator, which is recommended to handle data that contain no missing values and do not meet the assumption of multivariate normality. Some indexes of the goodness of fit, including RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation), CFI (comparative fit index), and TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index), were used to examine the extent to which the hypothesized SEM model adequately explains the data. The value of RMSEA should be less than 0.08, and that of CFI and TLI should be greater than 0.90 (Hair et al., 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 presents the results of the hypothesized structural model in Study 2, which adequately explained the data (RMSEA = .04, 90% confidence interval [CI] = [0.022, 0.058], CFI = .99 TLI = .99). The hypothesized structural model explained 7.2% variance in delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists and 1.9% variance in symbolic racism. As shown in Figure 1, corroborating Hypothesis 1, a higher belief in foreign country conspiracies significantly related to more symbolic racism (standardized path coefficient [ $\beta$ ] = .14, standardized error [SE] = .06,  $p$  = .022, 95% CI = [.019, .255]). Supporting Hypothesis 2, belief in foreign country conspiracies positively predicted delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $\beta$  = .27, SE = .06,  $p$  < .001, 95% CI = [.151, .388]).<sup>6</sup>

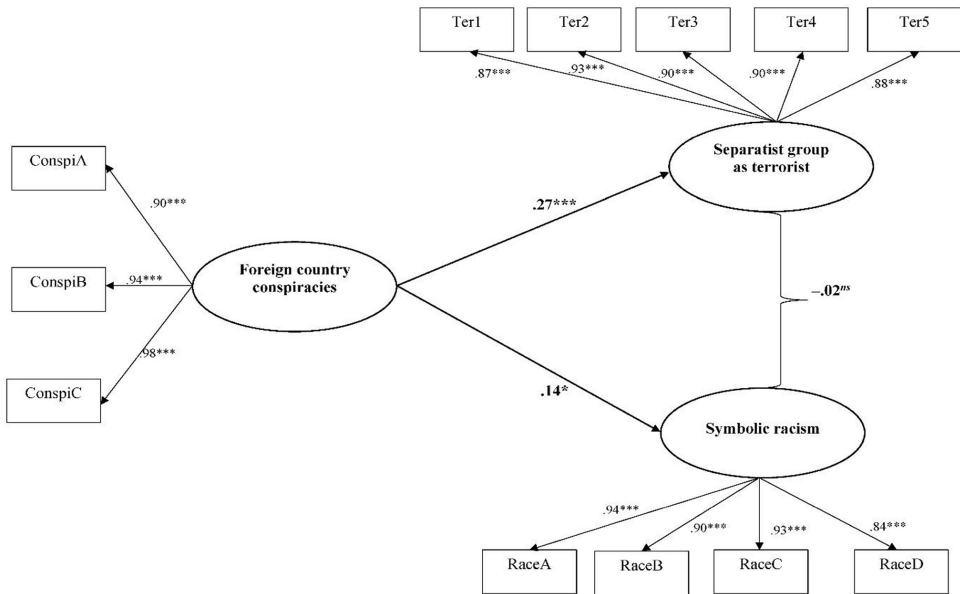
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5) The results revealed that the data in Study 2 (Skewness: sample value = 31.84,  $M$  = 6.646,  $SD$  = 0.523,  $p$  < .001; Kurtosis: sample value = 260.967,  $M$  = 167.087,  $SD$  = 1.955,  $p$  < .001), Study 3 (Skewness: sample value = 34.801,  $M$  = 8.128,  $SD$  = 0.475,  $p$  < .001; Kurtosis: sample value = 387.996,  $M$  = 254.037,  $SD$  = 2.035,  $p$  < .001), and Study 4 (Skewness: sample value = 36.916,  $M$  = 7.421,  $SD$  = 0.429,  $p$  < .001; Kurtosis: sample value = 403.229,  $M$  = 254.292,  $SD$  = 1.766,  $p$  < .001) did not meet the assumption of multivariate normality. The Mplus syntaxes for testing this assumption are presented in Supplementary Materials D.

6) The Mplus syntaxes for running the hypothesized structural model in Studies 2, 3, and 4 are presented in Supplementary Materials E.

**Figure 1**

Results of the Hypothesized Structural Model in Study 2



Note. ConspiA – ConspiC = Item Parcels of Belief in Foreign Country Conspiracies; Ter1 – Ter45 = Items of Delegitimization of Separatist Group as Terrorists; RaceA – Race D = Item Parcels of Symbolic Racism.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $^{ns}$  = not significant.

The findings in Study 2 suggest that belief in foreign country conspiracies play a crucial role in reinforcing symbolic racism against separatist groups and delegitimizing them as terrorists. Conspiratorial narratives serve as a justification for symbolic racism by framing separatist movements as foreign-controlled rather than legitimate political actors, aligning with Symbolic Racism Theory (Kinder & Sears, 1981) and delegitimization frameworks (Bar-Tal, 1990). Governments and media often exploit these narratives to justify counterinsurgency measures, consistent with Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1997), which links fear-driven narratives to authoritarian responses (Bale, 2007; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Overall, these findings suggest that conspiracy beliefs act as an ideological tool to mask ethnic and political prejudices with national security concerns, exacerbating conflict and reducing opportunities for peaceful resolution.

## Study 3

Extending Study 2, the goal of Study 3 was to examine the psychological mechanism of why belief in foreign conspiracies fuels symbolic racism and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists. To this end, we proposed blaming the separatist group as the new variable. Blaming the separatist group may mediate the relationship between belief in foreign country conspiracies and both symbolic racism and the delegitimization of the separatist group as terrorists by shaping perceptions of threat and cultural incompatibility. Conspiracy beliefs provide a cognitive framework that fosters suspicion, leading individuals to attribute blame to separatists as foreign agents rather than legitimate actors (Kofta et al., 2020). This blame reinforces symbolic racism by portraying separatists as threats to national identity and social order (Kinder & Sears, 1981), while also facilitating their delegitimization as terrorists, justifying harsh countermeasures (Bar-Tal, 1990). As blame attribution acts as a psychological bridge between conspiracy thinking and out-group hostility, its assessment as a mediator is crucial to understanding how conspiracy beliefs justify discrimination and political repression. Building upon these arguments, we predicted that blaming the separatist group would mediate the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in augmenting symbolic racism (*Hypothesis 3*). We also predicted that blaming the separatist group would mediate the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in augmenting delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (*Hypothesis 4*).

## Method

### Participants and Design

In Study 3, a sample of 497 Indonesian citizens participated in an online survey (ages ranged from 17 to 69;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.14$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.50$ ; 67% [i.e., 334] were female, 33% [i.e., 163] male). In line with the criteria, all participants self-reported as ethnically non-Papuans. They were recruited voluntarily in return for no reward using convenience sampling. Designed as correlational research, the survey consisted of a questionnaire to assess all variables, including beliefs in foreign country conspiracies, blaming the separatist group, symbolic racism, and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists.

### Procedure and Measures

The procedure to administer the survey was identical to Study 2. Belief in foreign country conspiracies (6 items;  $\alpha = .94$ ), symbolic racism (16 items;  $\alpha = .94$ ), and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (5 items;  $\alpha = .95$ ) were adopted from Studies 1 and 2. Blaming the separatist group was assessed with five items (e.g., “The Armed Criminal Group [KKK] deserves to be blamed for the complicated problems in Papua”;  $\alpha = .95$ ), self-developed by the authors based on the theoretical rationales of Lickel et

al. (2006) and the specific context of the present research. We thanked and debriefed participants after they completed the questionnaire.

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analyses

Consistent with Study 2, CFA with Promax rotation (see Table 7 in the Supplementary Materials) showed that the one-dimension solution for belief in foreign country conspiracies resulted in the total variance explained exceeding 50%, with factor loading varying from .82 to .90. As shown in Table 3, bivariate correlations revealed that belief in foreign country conspiracies significantly and positively correlated with symbolic racism, delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists, and blaming the separatist group.

**Table 3**

*Results of Bivariate Correlations Among Variables in Study 3*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Belief in foreign country conspiracies	3.57	1.24	—	.33**	.24**	.22**
2. Blaming the separatist group	3.99	.980		—	.35**	.44**
3. Symbolic racism	3.18	.96			—	.12**
4. Delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists	4.19	1.26				—

*Note.* *M* = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

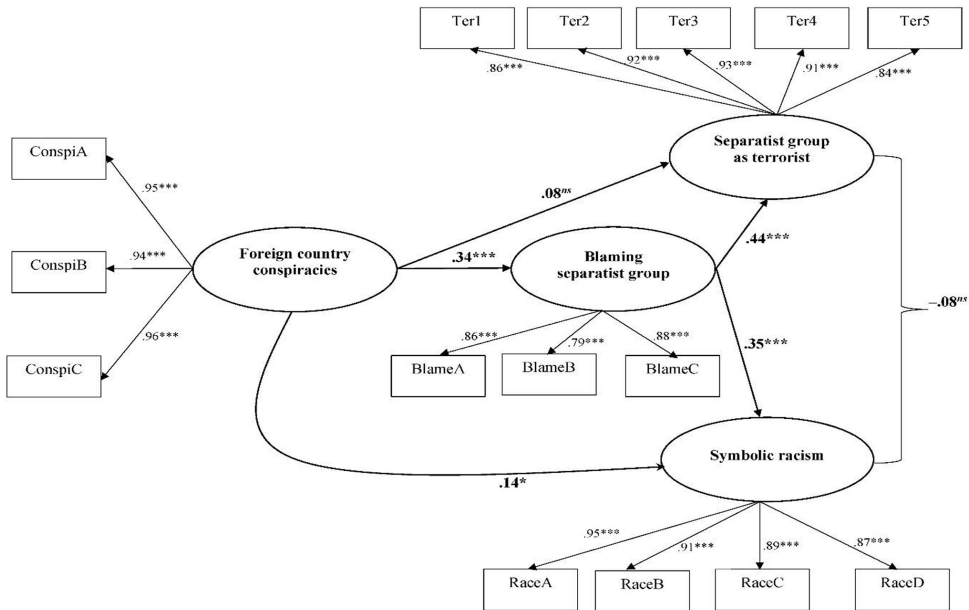
### Hypothesis Testing

**The Hypothesized Structural Model** — Figure 2 presents the results of the hypothesized structural model in Study 3, which adequately fitted to the data (RMSEA = .05, 90% CI = [0.036, 0.056], CFI = .98, TLI = .98). The hypothesized structural model explained 11.5% variance in blaming the separatist groups, 22.5% variance in delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists, and 17.7% variance in symbolic racism. As shown in Figure 2, belief in foreign country conspiracies positively predicted blaming the separatist groups ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.231, 0.446]) and symbolic racism ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI = [0.033, 0.240]) but did not significantly explain delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .130$ , 95% CI = [-0.022, 0.550]). Blaming the separatist groups positively predicted symbolic racism ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.246, 0.462]) and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.337, 0.550]). Within these relationships, substantiating Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 consecutively, blaming the separatist groups significantly mediated the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in fostering both symbolic racism (Indirect effect:  $\beta = .12$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI =

[0.065, 0.175]) and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (Indirect effect:  $\beta = .15$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.088, 0.212]).

**Figure 2**

Results of the Hypothesized Structural Model in Study 3



Note. ConspiA – ConspiC = Item Parcels of Belief in Foreign Country Conspiracies; Ter1 - Ter45 = Items of Delegitimization of Separatist Group as Terrorists; RaceA – Race D = Item Parcels of Symbolic Racism.  
 $*p < .05$ .  $***p < .001$ .  $ns$  = not significant.

**The Alternative Structural Model** – The literature (e.g., Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015; Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Kofta et al., 2020; Nawata et al., 2024; Petrović et al., 2019) suggests that outgroup hostility and belief in conspiracy theories may reinforce each other, escalating conflict and hindering intergroup reconciliation and peace. Applying this argument to the context of our work, blame may serve as a form of outgroup hostility, given that it attributes intentional harm and malicious motives to the successionist group. Such hostility may ultimately evoke conspiracy beliefs, accusing powerful foreign countries of clandestinely supporting the separatist group. Once adopted, such conspiratorial beliefs further intensify a motivation to cast the separatist group as culturally incompatible or politically disloyal, reflecting the main characteristic of symbolic racism (Sears & Henry, 2003). Moreover, conspiracies depicting the separatist group as foreign-backed may also foster delegitimization, the mechanism through which the separatist group is categorized as dangerous. It, thus, makes sense theoretically to reverse the logic,

wherein blaming the separatist group precedes belief in foreign country conspiracies from which symbolic racism and delegitimization against such a particular group then arise.

Given that such an alternative structural model is not nested within the hypothesized structural model, to compare the goodness of fit of the two models, we used Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC). The goodness of fit of the two models is significantly different when the value of  $\Delta AIC$  and  $\Delta BIC$  is 4 or greater, with a smaller AIC and BIC demonstrating a better fit to the data (Burnham & Anderson, 2004). We found that the AIC (= 26315.442) and BIC (= 26530.080) of the alternative structural model are identical to those of the hypothesized structural model ( $\Delta AIC = 0$ ,  $\Delta BIC = 0$ ). However, inspection of a multi-group analysis revealed that the first indirect effect of the hypothesized structural model (i.e., the path from foreign country conspiracy beliefs to symbolic racism via blaming the separatist group) is significantly higher than that of the alternative structural model (i.e., the path from blaming the separatist group to symbolic racism via foreign country conspiracy beliefs;  $\beta = .046$ ,  $SE = 0.019$ ,  $p = .018$ , 95%  $LLCI = .016$ , 95%  $ULCI = .075$ , Wald test = 6.103,  $p = .014$ ). Likewise, the second indirect effect of the hypothesized structural model (i.e., the path from foreign country conspiracy beliefs to delegitimization of the separatist group via blaming the separatist group) is significantly higher than that of the alternative structural model (i.e., the path from blaming the separatist group to delegitimization of the separatist group via foreign country conspiracy beliefs;  $\beta = .026$ ,  $SE = .017$ ,  $p = .139$ , 95%  $LLCI = -.008$ , 95%  $ULCI = .060$ , Wald test = 10.070,  $p = .002$ ).

The findings in Study 3 suggest that belief in foreign country conspiracies fosters symbolic racism and the delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists through the mediating role of blame attribution. This supports intergroup threat theory, which posits that perceived external threats amplify in-group favoritism and out-group hostility (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Additionally, it aligns with research on conspiracy beliefs as identity-protective mechanisms that justify prejudice and political delegitimization (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). These results highlight how conspiracy beliefs have tangible social and political consequences, reinforcing negative intergroup attitudes through cognitive and emotional biases. Finally, Study 3 revealed that the indirect effects of the hypothesized structural model were significantly stronger than those of the alternative structural model. These findings suggest that, relative to the alternative structural model, the hypothesized structural model in Study 3 is theoretically sounder in explaining the data.

## Study 4

The aims of Study 4 were two-fold. The first was to replicate Study 3 by examining blame toward the separatist group as the mediator on the positive paths from belief in

foreign country conspiracies to symbolic racism and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists. The second was to extend Study 3 by examining national glorification as the moderator of the role of belief in foreign country conspiracies in augmenting symbolic racism and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists.

National glorification, defined as an unwavering and uncritical allegiance to one's nation, can moderate the impact of foreign conspiracy beliefs in separatist conflicts by amplifying symbolic racism against separatist groups. This phenomenon aligns with social identity theory, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, leading them to favor their ingroup over outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When individuals with high national glorification encounter conspiracy beliefs suggesting foreign support for separatist movements, they may perceive these groups as threats to national unity and identity, thereby intensifying negative attitudes toward them. This process can manifest as symbolic racism, characterized by subtle, indirect forms of prejudice justified by appeals to traditional values or the belief that minority groups violate societal norms (Sears & Henry, 2005).

Empirical research supports this moderating role of national glorification. For instance, studies have shown that individuals with strong nationalistic tendencies are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories that portray outgroups negatively, reinforcing existing prejudices (Swami, 2012). Moreover, research indicates that national identification can influence the extent to which individuals believe in conspiracy theories, with higher national glorification associated with increased conspiratorial thinking about outgroups (van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). This suggests that national glorification not only strengthens the relationship between foreign conspiracy beliefs and symbolic racism but also contributes to the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes toward separatist groups. Predicated upon these arguments, we hypothesized that among high national glorifiers rather than low national glorifiers the role of beliefs in foreign country conspiracies in positively predicting symbolic racism (*Hypothesis 6*) and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (*Hypothesis 7*) would be more prominent.

## Method

### Participants and Design

Of 550 participants in Study 4, sixty-three percent (i.e., 347) were female, and thirty-seven percent (i.e., 203) were male (ages varied between 17 and 56;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.90$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.13$ ). They were ethnically non-Papuans whom we approached based on convenience sampling via an online survey. The survey assessed variables that are identical to Study 2 and Study 3, except for national glorification.

### Procedure and Measures

Using a procedure identical to Studies 2 and 3, items to assess belief in foreign country conspiracies (6 items;  $\alpha = .93$ ), blaming the separatist groups (6 items;  $\alpha = .89$ ), symbolic

racism (16 items;  $\alpha = .93$ ), and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (5 items;  $\alpha = .94$ ) were adopted from Study 3. National glorification was a new variable (8 items; e.g., “In today’s world, the only way to know what to do is to rely on the Indonesian leaders”;  $\alpha = .83$ ), adapted from Roccas et al. (2006).

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analysis

The CFA with Promax rotation (see Table 8 in the Supplementary Materials) showed that—similar to the findings in Studies 2 and 3—a one-dimension solution for belief in foreign country conspiracies explained more than 50% of the total variance (i.e., 75.17%), with factor loading varied from .75 to .90. As shown in Table 4, bivariate correlations revealed that belief in foreign country conspiracies significantly and positively correlated with symbolic racism, delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists, and blaming the separatist group, but were unrelated to national glorification.

**Table 4**

*Results of Bivariate Correlations Among Variables in Study 4*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. National glorification	3.72	.90	—	.04 <sup>ns</sup>	.39**	.53**	.10*
2. Belief in foreign country conspiracies	3.55	1.19		—	.17**	.14**	.20**
3. Blaming the separatist group	4.06	.90			—	.29**	.35**
4. Symbolic racism	3.22	.91				—	.07
5. Delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists	4.10	1.24					—

*Note.* *M* = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . <sup>ns</sup> = not significant.

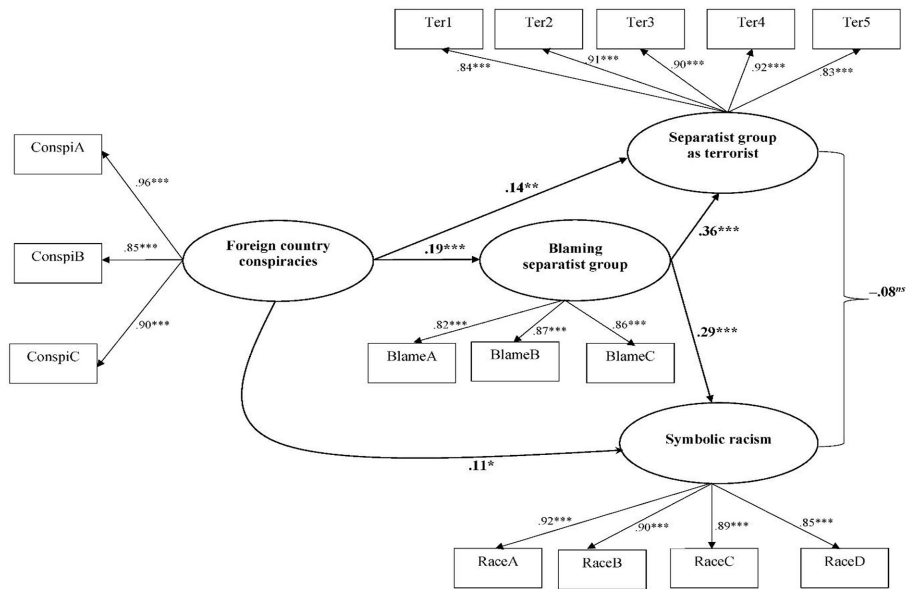
### Hypothesis Testing

**Hypothesized Structural Model** — Figure 3 presents the results of the hypothesized structural model in Study 4, which explains the data well (RMSEA = .05, 90% CI = [0.046, 0.063], CFI = .97, TLI = .97). The hypothesized structural model explained 3.5% variance in blaming the separatist groups, 17.2% variance in delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists, and 10.9% variance in symbolic racism. As shown in Figure 3, beliefs in foreign country conspiracies were a significant positive predictor of symbolic racism ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .023$ , 95% CI = [0.015, 0.205]), delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI = [0.050, 0.233]), and blaming the separatist groups ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.086, 0.295]). In turn, blaming the separatist groups positively predicted symbolic racism ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI = [0.188, 0.395]) and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI = [0.262, 0.465]). Consistent with the findings in Study 3, the roles of

belief in foreign country conspiracies in fostering symbolic racism (Indirect effect:  $\beta = .06$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .004$ , 95% CI = [0.018, 0.093]) and delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists (Indirect effect:  $\beta = .07$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI = [0.027, 0.112]) were significantly mediated by blaming the separatist groups.

**Figure 3**

Results of the Hypothesized Structural Model in Study 4



Note. ConspiA – ConspiC = Item Parcels of Belief in Foreign Country Conspiracies; Ter1 – Ter45 = Items of Delegitimization of Separatist Group as Terrorists; RaceA – Race D = Item Parcels of Symbolic Racism.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . *ns* = not significant.

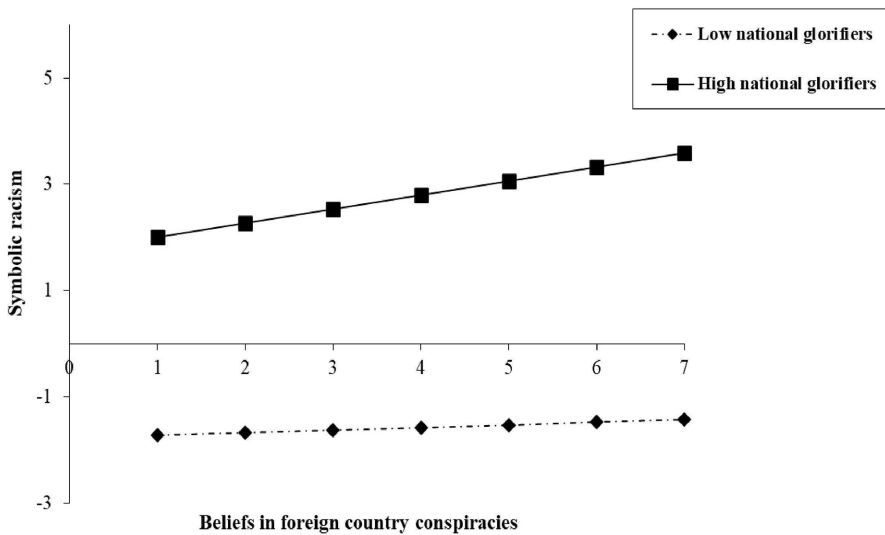
To test Hypotheses 5 and 6, except for national glorification, all variables were transformed into latent scores.<sup>7</sup> Using MODPROBE for Windows by Hayes (2018), we first entered symbolic racism as the dependent variable (*Y*), belief in foreign country conspiracies as the focal predictor (*F*), national glorification as the moderator (*M*), and blaming separatist groups as the additional predictor. The results revealed that national glorification significantly interacted with belief in foreign country conspiracies in fostering symbolic racism ( $B = .12$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = 2.28$ ,  $p = .023$ , lower limit of confidence interval

7) The Mplus syntax for generating the latent scores is presented in Supplementary Materials F. Table 17 in Supplementary Materials G presents the regression analysis to assess the interaction of national glorification and beliefs in foreign country conspiracies in explaining delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists and symbolic racism.

[*LLCI*] = .017, upper limit of confidence interval [*ULCI*] = .230). As shown in Figure 4, supporting Hypotheses 5, the positive relationship between belief in foreign country conspiracies and symbolic racism was significantly stronger among high national glorifiers ( $B = .28$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = 3.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $LLCI = .141$ ,  $ULCI = .418$ ) than low national glorifiers ( $B = .06$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 0.71$ ,  $p = .479$ ,  $LLCI = -.104$ ,  $ULCI = .222$ ).

**Figure 4**

*Relationship Between Beliefs in Foreign Country Conspiracies and Symbolic Racism among High National Identifiers and Low National Identifiers in Study 4*



Second, we entered delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists as the dependent variable ( $Y$ ), belief in foreign country conspiracies as the focal predictor ( $F$ ), national glorification as the moderator ( $M$ ), and blaming the separatist group as the additional predictor. The results revealed that, contrary to Hypothesis 6, national glorification did not significantly interact with belief in foreign country conspiracies in fostering delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists ( $B = -.01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $t = -0.56$ ,  $p = .577$ ,  $LLCI = -.047$ ,  $ULCI = .026$ ).

**Alternative Structural Model** — Similar to Study 3, we compared the hypothesized structural model in Study 4 with the alternative structural model specifying the reverse indirect path from blaming the separatist group to symbolic racism and delegitimization against the separatist group via belief in foreign country conspiracies. The results showed that the AIC (29758.197) and BIC (29978.002) of the alternative structural model

are the same as those of the hypothesized structural model,  $\Delta AIC = 0$ ,  $\Delta BIC = 0$ . In addition, the first indirect effect (i.e., the path from foreign country conspiracy beliefs to symbolic racism via blaming the separatist group;  $\beta = .021$ ,  $SE = .010$ ,  $p = .041$ , 95%  $LLCI = .001$ , 95%  $ULCI = .041$ , Wald test = 0.780,  $p = .377$ ) and the second indirect effect (i.e., the path from foreign country conspiracy beliefs to delegitimization of the separatist group via blaming the separatist group;  $\beta = .027$ ,  $SE = .012$ ,  $p = .022$ , 95%  $LLCI = 0.004$ , 95%  $ULCI = 0.050$ , Wald test = 0.762,  $p = .383$ ) of the alternative structural model did not significantly differ from the hypothesized structural model.<sup>8</sup>

Study 4 provided empirical evidence for a psychological mechanism via which conspiracy beliefs may fuel intergroup hostility. Aligned with research demonstrating that conspiracy theories intensify prejudice (Jolley et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2024), more foreign-country conspiracy beliefs significantly corresponded with more blame, symbolic racism, and delegitimization against the separatist group. In these relationships, the mediating role of blaming the separatist group is in line with delegitimization theories proposed by Bar-Tal and Avrahamzon (2016), suggesting that moral accusation can be a conduit for viewing a group as dangerous. The finding that blaming the separatist group further fostered symbolic racism and terrorist-based delegitimization against the group indicates a progression from cognitive suspicion to moral condemnation. This notion supports the existing literature (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2023) on how conspiratorial worldviews can translate into moralized exclusion and prejudice.

Another finding in Study 4 also supports research on national glorification as a precursor of defensive ingroup positivity (Roccas et al., 2006). In this regard, high glorifiers than low glorifiers are more motivated to transform conspiracy beliefs into symbolic racism. This argument implies that national glorification intensifies unfavorable moral judgments towards the separatist group. Finally, Study 4 revealed a comparable fit between the hypothesized structural model and the alternative structural model. This observation indicates that within the context of a separatist conflict, conspiracy beliefs, blame, and racism may reinforce one another, pointing to vicious cycles between intergroup hostility and conspiracy thinking (Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Nawata et al., 2024; Petrović et al., 2019).

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8) Additional supplementary materials H present Mplus syntaxes for testing the alternative structural models in Studies 3 and 4, respectively. Figure 5 in the additional supplementary materials presents the results of the alternative structural model in Study 3. Figure 6 in the additional supplementary materials presents the results of the alternative structural model in Study 4. Additional supplementary materials I present Mplus Syntaxes of the multi-group analysis for testing indirect effects in hypothesized versus alternative structural models in Study 3. Additional supplementary materials J present Mplus Syntaxes of the multi-group analysis for testing indirect effects in hypothesized versus alternative structural models in Study 4. Table 18 in the additional supplementary materials presents comparisons of the goodness of fit and indirect effects of the hypothesized structural model and the alternative structural model in Study 3 and Study 4.

## General Discussion

In this research, across four correlational studies using the ongoing separatist conflicts in West Papua, Indonesia as a contextual background, we investigated how negative reactions toward separatist movements are rooted in a belief in foreign country conspiracies. In Study 1, we found empirical evidence that a stronger belief in foreign conspiracies was related to delegitimization of the separatist movement as a terrorist group. Study 2 replicated Study 1 and extended it by showing that such conspiracy beliefs positively predicted symbolic racism toward West Papuans. Study 3 revealed that blaming the separatist group mediated the positive relationship between foreign country conspiracy beliefs and both delegitimization of the separatist group and symbolic racism. Study 4 replicated findings in Study 3 while verifying national glorification as a moderator, showing that a positive association between conspiracy beliefs and symbolic racism was more prominent among high national glorifiers.

### Theoretical Implications

In this research, foreign country conspiracy beliefs consistently augmented the delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists. These findings advance the integration of conspiracy theory research and system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994), showing that conspiratorial beliefs may function as a psychological mechanism for bolstering intergroup hostility. System justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) postulates that people support the status quo by rationalizing the existing political and social systems even by victimizing marginalized groups. Conspiratorial beliefs about foreign interference in this context serve to reinforce the status quo by construing that separatist demands are illegitimate and driven by external plots instead of genuine grievances. This mechanism justifies punitive responses, including criminalization of the separatist group as terrorists.

Foreign country conspiracy beliefs in this research also consistently fostered symbolic racism against the separatist society. These findings suggest that foreign country conspiracy beliefs generalize symbolic racism to the wider separatist society, not merely to the separatist group itself. This observation may extend existing theories on intergroup prejudice by demonstrating that the perceptions of external threats broaden the scope of discrimination. Indeed, traditional research on symbolic racism underscores its roots in perceived violations of societal norms and values by particular outgroups (Sears & Henry, 2003). However, the findings in our work imply that conspiratorial beliefs can culminate in prejudice beyond the separatist group to the entire society connected to it. This empirical pattern may extend the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT; Stephan & Renfro, 2002) by demonstrating that when threats are construed as foreign-orchestrated, the target of hostility widens from the political actors to the civilians. Additionally, unlike previous research that primarily relates conspiracy beliefs to hostility toward political

elites (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), our work pinpoints a spillover effect, denoting how conspiratorial beliefs can generalize symbolic racism from the specific separatist group to an entire ethnic community.

Other theoretical implications pertain to the findings of how blaming the separatist group significantly mediated the role of foreign conspiracy beliefs in explaining the delegitimization of separatist groups as terrorists. These findings align with research on conflict narratives that has observed a pattern in which groups accused of being foreign-backed, such as Muslim minorities in Europe (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), encounter increased public delegitimization. Compared to this research, however, the findings in our work suggest that the separatist group is susceptible to such attributions, as their perceived disloyalty to the nation may provide an additional justification for pejoratively accusing them of being terrorists. Furthermore, the findings may also extend moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999), especially about the justification of violent acts. Existing research demonstrates that moral disengagement mechanisms, such as shifting blame, are instrumental in justifying political violence (Haslam, 2006). In comparison, the findings in our work highlight that blaming the separatist groups serves as a medium through which to justify their delegitimization as terrorists, strengthening the idea that such secessionists are not legitimate political actors but existential threats deserving oppression.

The final finding in this research showed the role of national glorification in moderating the impact of foreign country conspiracy beliefs on symbolic racism against the separatist group. This observation may extend existing theories on nationalism and intergroup bias by showing how extreme national loyalty strengthens the psychological effects of conspiratorial beliefs. In this regard, national glorification, which refers to an unquestioning belief in the superiority and purity of a nation (Roccas et al., 2006), may amplify the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and symbolic racism by reinforcing the dichotomous mentality of us-versus-them. However, differing from previous work that associated national glorification with general outgroup hostility (Kende et al., 2019), the present research highlights the role of national glorification as a moderator, investigating when and for whom conspiratorial beliefs most strongly drive symbolic racism in the context of separatist conflicts. This research avenue advances our understanding of the conditions under which conspiratorial beliefs translate into exclusionary attitudes, particularly in nationalist contexts wherein non-separatist group members respond to a separatist movement and its demands.

## Practical Implications

Building upon the empirical findings described above, the first practical implication concerns the need to solve conspiracy-driven misinformation that provokes intergroup hostility. When members of the non-separatist society accuse foreign countries of secretly supporting the separatist group, they are prone to perceive the group as illegitimate

and associate it with external threats instead of internal grievances. This bias is accountable for fueling symbolic racism and legitimization of military policies against separatist communities. To prevent such bias, governments should collaborate with media organizations and civil society actors to implement digital literacy and counter-narrative programs, in an attempt to challenge conspiratorial beliefs before they escalate into widespread societal misinformation (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Likewise, social media platforms should also design and implement content moderation programs aimed at limiting the spread of conspiracy theories that portray a separatist group as foreign proxies.

Second, governments should implement conflict de-escalation policies, focusing on dialogue-based approaches rather than militaristic solutions, to counteract symbolic racism against the separatist society. Social-psychological literature on intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) suggests the importance of building positive interactions between conflicting groups to overcome prejudice and promote mutual understanding. Intergroup contact that facilitates the direct engagement of non-separatist citizens with separatist communities may humanize the separatist society. Vice versa, if governments implement a hardline approach based on foreign conspiracy beliefs by, for example, criminalizing a separatist group as a terrorist organization, then this measure can otherwise legitimize the use of state violence and oppression of political dissent. This further radicalizes members of the separatist society, sharpening the divide between the separatist and non-separatist communities.

The third implication relates to counterterrorism strategies. Labelling the separatist group as a terrorist group that relies on foreign country conspiracy narratives instead of empirical evidence can decrease state legitimacy. Counterterrorism policies should therefore be evidence-based, and not ideologically driven (Freese, 2014), to ensure that security measures do not arbitrarily target the separatist group without adequate justification. Counterterrorism policies that overly criminalize entire communities risk escalating resentment (Friedman et al., 2010), rendering reconciliation in separatist conflicts more challenging to achieve. In brief, governments should implement interventions that accurately differentiate between legitimate and extremist demands.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Some limitations deserve explaining, so that future research can overcome. First, our work that examined the mediating role of blaming the separatist group did not explore why members of the non-separatist society attributed responsibility to separatists instead of historical, structural, or political causes. To address this limitation, follow-up studies may investigate how structural inequalities and cognitive biases shape attribution patterns (Amemiya et al., 2023). For example, experimental research could manipulate the different framing of separatist conflicts to verify the extent to which exposure to different narratives (e.g., the oppressed separatist group versus the foreign-backed sepa-

ratist group) may shift non-separatist group members' blame attribution and intergroup hostility.

Future studies should aim to overcome correlational designs in our work that limit claims of causality of the variables under investigation. Indeed, we found mixed findings. In Study 3, where the hypothesized indirect paths from belief in foreign country conspiracies to symbolic racism and delegitimization of the separatist group passing through blaming the separatist group were significantly stronger vis-à-vis the alternative indirect paths from the blaming to the racism and delegitimization passing through the conspiratorial beliefs. However, Study 4 revealed that the significance of the two competing indirect effects was similar. To verify whether beliefs in foreign country conspiracies cause blaming the separatist or vice versa, follow-up experimental studies may manipulate each of the variables.

Second, our work only focuses on the separatist conflicts in West Papua, an easternmost provincial region in Indonesia with a typical historical and political context. Future research could examine whether the empirical findings in our work apply to other separatist conflicts such as those in Scotland, Catalonia, Tibet, or Kashmir (Mukerjee, 2023). This recommendation is important because national identity, geopolitical contexts, and historical narratives may influence attitudes toward separatist groups (Bukhari et al., 2024). By examining more diverse separatist conflicts, future research can evaluate how much the empirical findings in our work reflect universal psychological mechanisms or are dependent on confined national ideologies and historical grievances.

Furthermore, subsequent studies may investigate the role of international actors and transnational narratives in fueling conspiratorial beliefs, which may crucially shape conspiracy-driven delegitimization of a separatist group. This research direction is relevant given increasing digital misinformation and state-sponsored propaganda in conflict narratives as they occur in the Russia-Ukraine war and China-Taiwan disputes (Huang, 2023; Marigliano et al., 2024). In doing so, future research could conduct experiments to look at the effect of exposure to foreign disinformation campaigns in amplifying anti-separatist attitudes, to contextualize the role of foreign country conspiracy beliefs in shaping political perceptions.

Previous studies have placed their focus on members of the separatist society in investigating people's reactions to successionist conflicts (e.g., Sarigil & Karakoc, 2016; Sorens, 2005). By focusing on members of non-separatist groups, our work, thus, has filled the research gap in the area of such a political issue. However, convenience samples in our work who are predominantly female may limit the generalizability of the empirical findings. Moreover, Indonesia is home to estimated 1,331 ethnic groups, with Javanese constituting an ethnic majority (Anggriyani & Dartanto, 2019). Members of the non-separatist majority group and those of the non-separatist minority groups may react differently to successionist demands. This is because the majority group, compared to the minority groups, more strongly identify with a superordinate nation (Dovidio et

al., 2007), which renders the former more likely to feel more threatened by a separatist movement (Mashuri, 2019). Future studies, hence, may recruit a more balanced sample in terms of gender and a more diverse sample in terms of ethnicity. This step is important to get a more representative sample and new insights into how different patterns of the relationships among belief in foreign country conspiracies, blaming the separatist group, symbolic racism, delegitimization of the separatist group, and national glorification may emerge among members of the non-separatist majority and minority groups.

## Conclusion

Our research emphasizes that belief in foreign country conspiracies shapes generalized negative responses to separatist movements. When suspecting other countries of orchestrating separatist demands, people are not only motivated to label the separatist group as terrorists but also engage in symbolic racism against the separatist society. People do so more strongly when they unilaterally claim that their country is superior to other countries. These findings imply that integrating perceptions of international dynamics and modes of national attachment is needed to investigate people's attitudes towards separatist conflicts.

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**Ethics Statement:** Each of the studies followed American Psychological Association (APA) ethical standards and guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to their participation in the research. Our funding institution did not specifically require that our research get clearance from the ethical committees.

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**Data Availability:** The authors confirm that the data supporting the empirical findings of this research are available (see Mashuri, 2025).

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## Supplementary Materials

The following Supplementary Materials are available for this article: The raw data, complete lists of scale item wording, Mplus syntaxes, and results of Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4 (see Mashuri, 2025).

## Index of Supplementary Materials

Mashuri, A. (2025). *Beliefs in foreign country consiracies in separarist conflicts* [Data, code, additional materials]. OSF. <https://osf.io/n28fx>

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