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"It Looked Like I Was Going Through a Breakup": Extinction-Based Sleep Training and the Cultural Dilemmas of Mothering

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Abstract: This article explores extinction-based sleep training as a case study of the lived tensions of contemporary motherhood in the United States. Extinction-based sleep training is an umbrella term for techniques used to teach an infant or young child to sleep without parental intervention, often by ignoring a child's cries. On the one hand, extinction-based sleep training is sanctioned by medical institutions and has been commonly cited in parenting advice over the last century. On the other hand, mothering today is influenced by a culture that heralds "attachment" or "responsive" parenting as the best forms of mothering, often contradicting the very practice of extinction-based sleep training. Drawing on 30 interviews with mothers of children under the age of five, this research explores how mothers who engage in extinction-based sleep training grapple with this tension. First, mothers engage in emotion work to abide by the feeling rules of innate responsiveness. Second, mothers professionalize their sleep decisions, using expert permission, scientific language, and personal qualifications to justify their choices. Finally, mothers engage in a highly rationalized approach to sleep training, in which the practice is measurable and quantifiable.

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Mothering in the United States is a landmine of cultural conflicts (Abetz and Moore 2018), and practices surrounding infant and child sleep are no exception. Decisions about how, where, and when children sleep are embedded in intense cultural debates about what mothers should do with and for their children. Although an infant's sleep typically takes place in private spaces, the meanings attached to these choices are public and political (Harrison 2022). These debates are also deeply consequential for families. Mothers today participate in the paid labor force at higher rates than previous generations (Bauer and Wang 2023), while parental leave policies in the United States continue to lag behind those of other industrialized nations (Livingston and Thomas 2019). As a result, a baby who wakes frequently throughout the night can produce serious sleep deprivation for working parents—particularly mothers, who tend to experience more disrupted sleep (Hislop and Arber 2003; Venn et al. 2008; Maume, Sebastian, and Bardo 2010; Burgard 2011). Regardless of work status, mothers report wanting their young children to sleep better: in a 2019 study of 807 infants and toddlers, nearly 30% of mothers reported that their child had "sleep problems," and more than 90% indicated that they wanted to change their child's sleep patterns (Mindell and Leichman 2019). Beyond the practical challenges, sleep also carries symbolic weight; historically, a sleeping baby has been associated with ideal mothering (Ventura 2023).

Mothers employ a range of techniques to encourage their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers to sleep through the night.[1] These techniques are popularly understood on a spectrum between "extinction-based" strategies at one end and "attachment parenting" at the other (Amrute 2016; Zargari 2024). Extinction-based strategies aim to teach or train an infant to fall asleep and return to sleep with-

1 We focus on the perspective of mothers because, although parents today engage in more egalitarian forms of parenting than in previous generations, research suggests that mothers still conduct most of the "fourth shift," during which sleep training occurs (Venn et al. 2008; Heyes and Tucker 2025). Additionally, mothers are still bound by cultural ideals that make some forms of sleep techniques particularly contentious.

out parental intervention. Etherton, Blunden, and Hauck (2016) categorize extinction-based sleep training into three groups: "unmodified extinction/ Cry-It-Out," where a child's cries are ignored until morning; "graduated extinction," where a child's cries are ignored for a set period before parental response; and "extinction with parent presence," where a parent remains near the child but allows crying while the child falls asleep. In this paper, we use the terms "extinction-based sleep training" and "sleep training" interchangeably, in reference to this umbrella of practices. On the other end of the spectrum, "attachment-based sleep strategies" utilize significant parental intervention to help the infant both fall asleep and stay asleep (Hulen 2021). These strategies include rocking or breastfeeding the infant to sleep, responding quickly to any nighttime wakings, and bedsharing to enable an immediate parental response throughout the night.

Mothers who employ techniques on either end of this spectrum contend with an array of competing cultural messages; however, in this article, we focus solely on mothers' experience with extinction-based sleep training. At its core, extinction-based sleep training requires mothers to ignore the cries of their child. While it may be supported by much—though not all—of the medical community as an evidence-based strategy (Etherton et al. 2016), it runs counter to current cultural ideals that prioritize maternal responsiveness (Moore and Abetz 2016). Within this context, we are interested in the qualitative *experience* of sleep training, which has yet to be explored meaningfully in the literature. We work to reveal mothers' emotional experiences of sleep training and how they are understood, justified, and practiced. We argue that the labor of sleep training, as practiced by mothers in our study, remains aligned with an array of cultural mandates surrounding mothering. In particular, we note three patterns of labor that help mothers to practice extinction-based sleep training within the cultural context: the emotion work of responsiveness, the professionalization of mothering, and the rational use of data and metrics. Mothers' use of these strategies reveals that the labor required in extinction-based sleep training is deeply felt but also strategically managed.

Cultural Support for Extinction-Based Sleep Training

Extinction-based sleep training has been prevalent in American culture for over a century (Amrute 2016; Rosier and Cassels 2020). The methods arose from a variety of cultural shifts in the late 1800s, including cultural fears about spoiling children with overindulgent mothering, the increasing focus on individualism during the Industrial Revolution, the rise of behaviorism in psychology, a new emphasis on the importance of adult sleep, and the medicalization of sleep in general (Rosier and Cassels 2020; Zargari 2024). Extinction-based sleep training was promoted in a range of parenting books throughout the 20th century, and the practice coalesced in more contemporary parenting in the work of several pediatricians in the 1980s, including Marc Weissbluth and Richard Ferber. Weissbluth (1987) helped popularize the "Cry-It-Out" method in his book *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*, in which he instructs mothers to leave their baby crying until the child falls asleep, as a method of teaching sleep habits to the infant. Similarly, Ferber (1985) instructed mothers to engage in a slightly "gentler" form of this extinction-based sleep training by responding to cries at incremental intervals.

By the early 2000s, the medical literature favored extinction-based sleep training and noted its ef-

ficacy in helping infants sleep through the night (Etherton et al. 2016; Mindell and Leichman 2019). Parenting books followed suit, with one study showing that 61% of popular parenting books explicitly promoted extinction-based sleep training (Ramos and Youngclarke 2006). While the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has not explicitly endorsed extinction-based sleep training, its positions on infant sleep steer parents toward these types of interventions. Specifically, in the early 2000s, the AAP started issuing explicit guidelines discouraging bedsharing due to its association with rates of sudden infant death syndrome (Amrute 2016; Harrison 2022). Extinction-based sleep training became implicitly associated with the medical community's guidelines around infant sleep.

At the same time, extinction-based sleep training strategies have proliferated in the marketplace with the rise of the sleep consultation industry (Ingram, Plante, and Matthews 2015; Heyes and Tucker 2025). Sleep consultants offer both virtual and in-person services, often tailored to their unique strategies, to support sleep training. This is a lucrative, but mostly unregulated, industry (Knight 2021). Popular online influencers promote sleep training advice, which is important given that mothers derive much of their information about baby sleep from virtual spaces (Zargari 2024). In sum, extinction-based sleep training permeates many important spaces in parental education. However, the literature on the frequency of parental adoption of these strategies is scant. One study published in 2018 surveyed 586 parents and found that almost a third reported using the "ignoring children's bedtime crying" strategy (Maute and Perren 2018).

The fact that extinction-based sleep training is associated with the medical community and marketplace is important given the cultural context of mothering today. Sharon Hays (1996) introduced the concept of "intensive mothering," which she described as the cultural obligation to mother in ways that were, among other qualities, expert-guided and financially expensive. Similarly, Apple (1995) argued that mothers are obliged to be scientific in their parenting, meaning they should rely on expert knowledge when making decisions. Additionally, scholars have noted that expectations for mothers today increasingly align with ideals of the neoliberal self (McCabe 2016; Ford 2020; Hamilton 2022). Vasallo (2020) sees the neoliberal self broadly as a "specific way of being tied to market prescriptions" (p. 2), which includes the mandate for the individual to "make rational choices to increase value," "organize around an ethic of efficiency and productivity," and "strategically manage choice," among others (p. 1). Neoliberalism also operates as a form of governmentality over mothers, requiring them to individually shoulder much larger social and political burdens (Vandenbeld Giles 2014). In this vein, Howson (2018) argues that sleep practices, particularly sleep training, need to be understood within this neoliberal context. She suggests that sleep training exists in the context of a care deficit: we have not replaced the labor of care when women entered the workforce, and so sleep training is an individual solution to a neoliberal problem.

Illegitimacy of Extinction-Based Sleep Training in Attachment Culture

Extinction-based sleep training dominates parenting advice, the medical establishment, and the marketplace, and it is the authoritative advice on sleep interventions for families (Rosier and Cassels 2020). However, this knowledge is not uncontested. Indeed, while extinction-based sleep training fits into many dominant cultural models of mothering, it is

simultaneously at odds with the emergence of attachment parenting. At the same time that Ferber and Weissbluth were promoting the contemporary wave of extinction-based sleep training, the psychological theory of attachment was being translated into popular parenting advice. Attachment theory was developed from the work of psychologists John Bowlby (1958) and Mary Ainsworth (1989). Attachment parenting emphasizes the importance of brain development through a child's bond with parents. Bowlby's and Ainsworth's ideas were most directly translated into popular parenting advice by William and Martha Sears, a husband-and-wife pediatrician team whose work began in the 1980s. The Sears popularized "attachment parenting," which prioritized bonding between parents and children through several principles, including bed sharing, in direct contradiction to advice on extinction-based sleep training (Sears and Sears 2001). The Sears approach has heavily influenced American parenting culture. Cultural concerns about brain development and parental responsiveness are increasingly invoked in parental education campaigns (Wall 2018). Additionally, phrases such as "attachment parenting," "gentle parenting," "positive parenting," and "conscious parenting" are increasingly common aspects of parental identities (Pezalla and Davidson 2024). These identities align with ideals of mothering as labor-intensive and emotionally absorbing (Hays 1996) and with children being placed at the center of the household (Lankes 2022).

It is in this context of attachment culture that some mothers resist extinction-based sleep training. Indeed, among the reasons parents report for eschewing extinction-based sleep training are their feelings of discomfort and stress with their child's crying, the incongruence of the methods with their personal beliefs, and a sense of wellness (Blunden, Etherton, and Hauck 2016; Etherton et al. 2016). Mothers who undertake extinction-based sleep training must also contend with these cultural ideals.

Emotion Work and Mothering

Despite the robust literature on the efficacy of extinction-based sleep training, there is very little research on the emotional experience of sleep training itself. Indeed, in this article, we bring the literature on sleep training into the sociological conversation on emotion work (Hochschild 1979). Hochschild asserts that there are social expectations regarding the appropriate emotions one should experience, which she calls "feeling rules." Emotion work is "the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feelings in oneself" (Hochschild 1979:561). Emotion work is the management of feeling rules. Hochschild does not see emotion work as a manipulative practice; rather, it is a much deeper process in which people employ cognitive, bodily, and expressive methods to achieve a particular emotion. Garey (2011:177) explains that "emotion work is not simply the display of situation-appropriate feelings; it is the attempt to experience the desired or expected emotion or to create a desired or expected emotion in others."

Although feeling rules permeate social interactions throughout society, they are particularly relevant in intimate relationships, such as those within the home (Wharton and Erickson 1995). In the home, Hochschild argues that emotion work is an essential part of mothering, as mothers must manage children's feelings, absorb emotional stress, and present calmness despite their exhaustion (Hochschild 1989). Scholars have noted a wide array of ways emotion work is employed in the home, from managing strong feelings within a household during times of crisis (Clarke 2006), to navigating bureau-

cracies (Laurin and Andersson 2024), to engaging in the pursuit of education for one's children (Chin 2000), to managing gendered norms of parenting (Björk 2018), and even to dealing with foodwork surrounding childhood allergies (Muñoz and Quirke 2022). Emotion work is often employed to manage contradictions within the household or in a mother's role. DeVault (1999) suggests that it can be used as a tool when mothers are unable to live up to idealized versions of motherhood. Indeed, "contradiction is at the root of emotion work" (Garey 2011:179).

In this research, we bring together the literature on infant sleep practices, ideals of mothering, and emotion work through the case study of extinction-based sleep training. We excavate the emotional experience of sleep training to reveal the forms of labor that otherwise remain hidden.

Methods

For this study, the first author conducted qualitative interviews with 30 mothers who had at least one child under the age of five. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and covered a range of sleep-related topics. Participants were asked to describe the early days, weeks, and months of their children's sleep and to discuss specific practices they used—such as bedsharing or sleep training—as well as the household negotiations surrounding those choices. The researcher also asked about mothers' interactions with doctors, family members, and friends, along with the products they used to facilitate sleep. The interviews concluded with broader reflections on participants' perceptions of baby sleep within the context of American culture.

Recruitment occurred primarily through social media. The researcher distributed digital flyers in a variety of mothering groups on Facebook, including personal networks, local community groups in the Chicago area, and groups for academic mothers. Participants also shared the flyer with others, resulting in minimal snowball sampling (Lofland et al. 2006), though the majority of participants were recruited directly through the flyer. Because the recruitment relied on Facebook, the sample reflected certain demographic patterns. The mothers tended to be older (the youngest participant was 30 at the time of the interview) and highly educated, a pattern influenced by recruitment through academic networks. Even those recruited through community-based groups often held advanced degrees, with several reporting that they were researchers themselves and therefore inclined to participate in academic studies. The sample also skewed toward higher-income households, with 21 of the 30 participants reporting annual household incomes exceeding $100,000 (see Table I [Appendix] for full demographic details).

These demographic patterns influenced the data in meaningful ways. First, age is particularly notable, as Zargari (2024) asserts that parental age affects perceptions of extinction-based sleep training, with older parents (over the age of 34 in her research) showing a preference for more responsive strategies. Similarly, research has noted that individual characteristics, such as "parental cry tolerance," and group characteristics, such as a Western-oriented belief system, can affect parents' experiences when implementing extinction-based sleep training methods (Maute and Perren 2018; Kahn et al. 2020). Additionally, race is an important factor in mediating mothers' feelings about and engagement with parenting strategies, particularly attachment parenting ideals (Hamilton 2021; Hamilton and Faircloth 2025).

Despite these overall patterns, the participants represented a range of professional and personal backgrounds. Eleven mothers worked in academia, eight were stay-at-home parents, and the remaining participants were employed in fields such as philanthropy, medicine, and accounting. Participants had between one and three children, with children ranging in age from four months to ten years at the time of the interview. While the study focused on mothers of children under five, several participants discussed experiences across multiple developmental stages. Most of the mothers were married and lived with their male spouses, although two participants (Paola and Marisol) were not married and resided with their parents. In both cases, the child's father remained involved in parenting. Neither of these participants attempted extinction-based sleep training.

Of the 30 participants, 21 self-identified as White, including three born outside the United States (in Australia and Germany). The remaining participants included five Latina mothers, one Black mother, two Asian mothers, and one who identified as Middle Eastern and Sicilian. Six participants were born outside the US, but all had spent their adult lives in the country. Because the flyer circulated primarily in the Chicago area, nearly half of the participants were based in Illinois. The remaining participants resided across the United States, including on the East Coast, in the Pacific Northwest, and in other parts of the Midwest. While the sample leaned urban, it also included mothers from suburban and rural areas.

This sample offers a valuable snapshot of American mothers' experiences with sleep, though it does not capture the full spectrum of mothering practices. The research was capped at 30 participants because, within the particular demographics of participants and the context of an exploratory study, the researchers achieved qualitative saturation of the data (Lofland et al. 2006). However, mothers from more diverse demographic groups would likely offer new ways of thinking about this research, and future research could broaden this work by incorporating younger mothers, lower-income families, and a more racially and ethnically diverse population.

All interviews were conducted on Zoom. The researchers used Zoom transcripts, which were verified against the recordings for accuracy. The researchers then used the Taguette platform to conduct several rounds of coding, following grounded theory methods outlined by Charmaz (1983). The first round of coding produced categories including "labor," "emotion work," and "shame." Using Taguette allowed the researchers to view all text within a particular category and to conduct a second round of focused coding on that text. Throughout both data collection and analysis, the researchers engaged in memo writing, following Charmaz's approach to document developing insights and deepen the analytic framework. Charmaz's inductive approach was useful for developing an analysis that broadened the initial expectations and presuppositions of the researchers. There were several themes that the researchers expected to find—such as rationality—but ideas about emotion work and feeling rules emerged more organically from this coding process.

Analysis

Of the 30 mothers in the sample, 19 had attempted some form of extinction-based sleep training. Some intended to use this approach and did so successfully, while others vacillated between extinction-based

sleep training and attachment-based sleep arrangements, reporting limited success with sleep training. Only 11 mothers reported using strictly attachment-based sleep methods or not needing to engage in any intentional sleep methods at all. Regardless of the techniques they used, nearly all mothers indicated that extinction-based sleep training was the preferred method within the medical establishment and broader culture; the majority also reported engagement with attachment parenting narratives.

Mothers in this study encountered information about extinction-based sleep training through a range of sources, including pediatricians, child-rearing books, online communities, and in-person peer groups. Yet despite its prevalence, mothers often described feeling stigmatized for participating in this practice, even when it was sanctioned by respected institutions. Kristin, a White clinical scientist with a nine-month-old boy, explained:

> It's just so crazy because there's these two really polarized camps of attachment theory versus evidence, like sleep training…It's just such a forbidden topic. You don't really talk about sleep too much with your friends because I feel like if I would tell them, "Oh, you know, I sleep trained [my child] and now he's sleeping great," my friends who co-sleep or do all these other things, their baby, sleeps horrible, so I don't want to rub it in. But then, they're like, "Well, we're responding to my baby's needs, whereas your baby is laying there, and he's probably traumatized."…It feels a bit like a forbidden topic among mothers.

Similarly, Stephanie, a professor who was living with her mother-in-law when her oldest child was born, described significant household tension stemming from her mother-in-law's opposition to sleep training:

> She was mad at us and calling us cruel for trying to sleep train, and then would sabotage it. So then I guess we had to have a really serious talk with her. Like, we need to do this for everyone's sanity.

These two accounts demonstrate a pattern in the interviews: many mothers simultaneously felt that extinction-based sleep training was evidence-based, yet felt compelled to justify it to those around them. Our analysis identified three practices mothers used to navigate this tension. First, mothers referenced an innate desire to respond to their children's cries and described anguish when they did not. We see the innate desire to respond as a feeling rule and the emotional anguish itself as the emotion work in response to that rule. Second, mothers used scientific and expert language, often referencing their credentials, when discussing sleep training. We call this the "professionalization" of mothering. Third, mothers engaged in the rationalization of sleep, practicing sleep training as a highly formalized, labor-intensive, and time-bound method. This process allows mothers to continue to enact intensive mothering even when they are not responding to their child's cries.

Emotion Work of Innate Responsiveness

The first strategy mothers employed to deal with the cultural tension of sleep training was to abide by the feeling rule of innate responsiveness. Indeed, the idea that responsiveness is innate is foundational to many mothers' understandings of attachment theory and, as such, is an important cultural narrative that upholds good mothering (Hamilton 2021; 2022). In this vein, mothers in the study who engaged in extinction-based sleep training indicated that they were *supposed* to feel guilt and experience suffering when their child cried. The emotion

work to respond to this rule included both the actual experience of suffering and the communication of that suffering to others. For example, Gabriela, a Latina mother who was trained in psychotherapy, described the act of sleep training her son at eleven months:

> I'm in the other room, like the guest room next to [the baby's room], and I'm just… almost sobbing. I make my husband go in most of the time. I'm like, "I'm an awful monster!" My husband's like, "We can't survive anymore! We have to sleep!"

Gabriela's feelings of monstrousness demonstrate the core of the cultural tension. She had experienced a range of competing messages about sleep training from her pediatrician and hospital—institutions that favored sleep training—and her peer groups, who she described as "crunchy" and opposed to it. When she finally found herself needing to enact sleep training, she had to grapple with these contradictory messages. Her use of "monster" demonstrates both the contradiction of sleep training and the feeling rule. By calling herself an "awful monster," she identified the feeling rule of innate responsiveness and enacted the emotion work of suffering to deal with the dilemma.

Mothers often located the emotional anguish of sleep training in what they understood as a biological imperative to respond to their children. For example, Danielle, a White mother of two who worked in philanthropy, described the act of sleep training when her son was around four months old:

> We did the whole gradual cry-it-out. Every five minutes, you go in and calm down, and then every ten minutes, and so on. And, oh my God, it was just awful. It probably took a week. And it was a lot of crying, on both parts…[Mothers] are biologically wired to respond to our children when they cry, in a way that I don't think men are. So, every time I hear my baby cry, I have a biological hormonal reaction to that. And it's extremely hard because my instinct is to go in and soothe the baby and nurse him back to sleep, if that's what it's going to take. So, it was really hard to really not act on that instinct.

Danielle, like many other mothers, saw her anguish as being biologically rooted. That is to say, the feeling rule as a social rule is understood as a biological truth. She understood this as a "hormonal reaction" and noted that she was going against her "instinct" when she decided not to respond to her son's cries. In doing so, she subtly demonstrated her ability to use logic to supersede her emotions. Her emotions mattered—they were an indicator of her innate ability to nurture and, indeed, a feeling rule around sleep training, but she was able to override those emotions to engage in the work of sleep training. Similarly, Ling, an Asian professor in the Midwest who had an 8-year-old and a 2-year-old, made the same reference to her biological need to respond to her children. She also explained that the logic of sleep superseded her emotions:

> I think I had to leave the house because it looked like I was going through a breakup. I went to the grocery store to get out of the house… I bought ice cream and pizza, and I was just sobbing and sobbing. I was like, why is this awful? And anytime I heard him cry, I could feel in my body that I was missing him, even though I was, like, I need to sleep. I need to sleep. We all need to sleep.

While she had a physical reaction to her child's crying, she saw the logic of sleep superseding her emotional guilt.

While some mothers, like Ling, would physically remove themselves from the home as a way to deal with the anguish, others talked about focusing on their baby's cries to ensure that they continued to be an emotionally responsive mother from a distance.

> [My husband] bought me some noise-canceling headphones, not necessarily for the intent of sleep training, but just for… I don't know, sanity. But I never used them because I wanted to be able to hear [the babies] if they were crying, and… so I knew if they needed something. [Andrea, White nurse practitioner, mother of three]

> It would be either me or my mother-in-law sitting next to the monitor, basically timing how long it would take [the baby] to fall asleep. And one of us would go on a walk so we didn't have to hear her cry. [Stephanie, Sicilian/Middle Eastern professor, mother of two]

> I remember just sitting outside [the baby's] door, waiting, and trying to hear, like, if the sound of the cry was changing, or whatever, so I could step in. [Hannah, Asian attorney, mother of two]

In each of these cases, mothers described emotionally engaging with sleep training, even when they were not directly engaging with their babies. Listening to the cries—and suffering during that listening—was a form of emotion work.

Interestingly, only one interviewee acknowledged that she did not have a strong emotional reaction to her child's cries during sleep training. Lisa was an Australian-born stay-at-home mother living in the US. Midwest with her husband and 3-year-old daughter. Her narrative diverged notably from other moms' by explaining that her daughter's cries during sleep training did not bother her. She described having a friend come and visit while the friend sleep trained her daughter, referring to the friend as "the weakest link" and needing to be sent out of the house while the father did the sleep training. Lisa, however, explained that in her household's experience of sleep training, there was no "weakest link." "I don't mean we were cruel," she emphasized. "I think some people struggle with it more." In her assurances that she was not cruel, Lisa noted a cultural "feeling rule" that surrounds sleep training. While Lisa's emotional experience may have differed, her thought process is similar to that of other mothers who see sleep training as a logical intervention. Lisa may not have performed the "emotion work" of guilt and anguish, but she still saw sleep training as a logical intervention that ultimately needed to supersede a mother's emotional response.

Aside from Lisa, nearly every mother interviewed who used sleep training described it as an intense emotional experience. We understand this anguish as the emotion work of sleep training. It is not to say that it was entirely performative—mothers appeared to genuinely express anguish. Instead, our argument is two-fold: first, mothers' emotional distress serves, in the moment, as a form of labor that responds to the tension inherent in extinction-based sleep training in modern society. The anguish *is* the labor. Second, the storytelling of the emotional anguish acts as a protective rhetorical strategy, so that the listener understands the mother's care, her adherence to the feeling rule of innate responsiveness, and her ensuing decision to use logic to supersede her sometimes irrational emotions. In this way, mothers enact a neoliberal version of motherhood, in making rational decisions guided by logic while still demonstrating a core feeling of care.

The Professionalization of Mothering

The second strategy mothers in the study used to navigate the cultural tension of sleep training is what we refer to as the professionalization of motherhood. We define the professionalization of motherhood as the use of expert knowledge, scientific language, and one's professional qualifications to justify parenting decisions. The professionalization of mothering is closely linked to scientific mothering (Apple 1995) and the expert-guided mandate of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), but it also includes the additional element of referencing one's personal credentials when making decisions. In the case study of sleep training, the professionalization of mothering is a strategy that justifies practices that are culturally contested.

For example, Patricia, a 36-year-old Black professor on the East Coast, talked about getting "permission" from her doctor to sleep train. She used this expert knowledge to justify her use of sleep training:

> [At] the two-month appointment or something, [the pediatrician said], "Okay, he's feeding well… he's formed his attachment, if he cries for a few minutes, it's not gonna kill him. You can start to kind of, like, just give it a minute, see if he settles." And I remember feeling like, oh, great. I'm glad I got this permission from someone because I'm tired, and I want to [sleep train].

Similarly, Ling, the Asian professor mentioned previously, also received "permission" from an expert source to try sleep training:

> One of my friends from childhood, she's a child behavioral expert, and she had been a nanny for years, and she's like, "Every kid's different, but [sleep training] has been generally effective. You can try different things. Just keep me posted." So she's like, "Don't worry, the kid's not going to remember how awful you feel or how awful they feel at the time because they're so little. This is what's going to help you, even though it's going to be a difficult week or two. Just do it in the long run… everyone's going to be able to sleep more, and then you're not going to have these nighttime wakes as much."

Interestingly, Ling's friend both provided expert permission to Ling and also referenced the emotion work of sleep training itself.

Some mothers described a significant commitment to researching their decision to sleep train, referencing multiple sources that informed it.

> So I did a bunch of reading. I think I have read all the books. I read the Harvey Karp one. I read *Precious Little Sleep*…I read them all, and then I distilled all the information. And I was like, it seems like it's just Cry-It-Out…they're all versions of Cry-It-Out. It's just, like, do you want to check on them or not? [Hannah, Asian attorney, mother of two]

Other mothers referenced more informal sources ("the internet" or "mom groups") but still used scientific language when talking through their decision.

> I may have even seen it on [an online group], something about how there was research that showed that there were no attachment implications for sleep training, and then the research was just showing that kids who are sleep trained sleep better. And so I was pretty convinced that it was safe. [Stephanie, Sicilian/Middle Eastern professor, mother of two]

> We're very much like… pay for the sleep training guide, pay for the fancy bassinet, you know, whatever. I don't think that it damages, like I've seen people's… assertions, I guess that research suggests that sleep training does not damage attachment between parent and child, and that sort of thing. I know that I give my kids plenty of flipping love during the day, that they're not going to be like, "Oh my God, wait, does she still like me?" [Rachel, White stay-at-home mother of two]

Both Stephanie and Rachel used the scientific language of attachment and referenced research to justify their decisions. They also grappled directly with the cultural contradictions of sleep training in attachment culture. Rachel's case is particularly notable, as she referenced the commercialization of sleep training information. Indeed, knowledge about sleep training has become commodified, and Rachel's case suggests that its commercialization might, in fact, further entrench it as an expert source.

Finally, mothers also referenced their professional qualifications when making parenting decisions. For example, Rebecca, a White stay-at-home mother of two, chose to sleep train her two sons based on her professional experience as a dog trainer.

> As a dog trainer, I implemented some of the psychological approaches with [sleep training], at least when it comes to the self-soothing approach and how I used to help my dogs. This sounds terrible, but how I would help [dogs] cope with their new environments, be it in a kennel, in the house, or even just housebreaking. I like to utilize, in my mind, empowerment—teaching them how to do things on their own. So I kind of knew that I was going to approach [sleep training] in that sense. Probably starting off with independence a little bit younger, just because it's all I really knew.

While professional qualifications often guided mothers' decision-making, this did not necessarily mean they chose to sleep train. For example, Gabriela, a Latina mother living in the Northwest, did not initially intend to sleep train her son. When she discussed this matter, she referenced her work as a psychotherapist and her concerns about attachment. However, she eventually changed her mind on sleep training, and again, referenced professional qualifications in this decision-making: "I'm gonna follow medical guidelines because they exist for a reason. I have a background where I have done research before, so I understand this." Similarly, Ramona, a German-born mother living in the Southeast, reported a decision not to sleep train, and in fact, to bedshare with her children, by referencing her experiences and qualifications, having worked in child protection and law enforcement.

There was a wide range of personal career qualifications that mothers relied on to justify their parenting decisions broadly and their sleep training decisions specifically. These included medical fields, where mothers learned about medical recommendations; a Bachelor's degree in psychology, which provided training in child development; a current Ph.D. program in child psychology, in which the mother was able to consult her professors; experience as a social worker who had worked in a group home that had prioritized safe sleep arrangements; and experience as a nanny, which provided familiarity with different sleep training techniques. It is important to note that the demographics of this study surely influenced this particular strategy; the professionalization of mothering is, at its core, a class-based strategy

that relies on a certain level of educational or professional attainment. Yet, there is some evidence in this limited study that the professionalization of mothering exists outside of the middle and upper-middle class context; although most of the mothers that utilized the strategy had advanced degrees or prestigious careers to reference, even the few mothers in the study who had less prestigious careers (nanny and dog trainer, for example) noted their work experience as a part of their decision-making.

Rational Management of Sleep Training

The third strategy mothers employed was to create highly rationalized systems around baby sleep. Rationalization impacted mothers' practices around sleep broadly, through sleep tracking, and, in particular, around sleep training through strict temporal boundaries.

Broadly, one of the dominant forms of rationalization around sleep was the use of sleep tracking. Mothers used phone apps, computer spreadsheets, and pen and paper to track the amount of time their children slept at night and during naps, the quality of that sleep, and the number of wake-ups. For many families, it was the pediatrician who suggested tracking in the early days and weeks of childhood. However, some families tracked upwards of a year, despite there being no particular medical use for the data. For example, Elizabeth, a White Ph.D. student with two children, had tracked her son's sleep for over five years, explaining that she was a "data nerd," although the data were not being put to any notable use. Kristen, a White clinical scientist who had a 9-month-old at the time of the interview, had purchased an app and was still tracking sleep data. Often, the hope was that the data would identify a particular pattern that could clue mothers in to the right combination of bedtime and naptime to maximize the child's sleep.

When it came to sleep training in particular, rationalization and systematization helped mothers grapple with cultural tensions by creating very specific rules around sleep training. Many gentle methods of sleep training encouraged parents to set timers that would be used for incremental responses to their children's cries. Mothers reported following this timing in exact detail:

> We went with this, you know, holding for three hundred seconds, and then five minutes out [of the bedroom]…I can't see the clock in her baby room, and so I approximate. Count 300 seconds, to me, is about five minutes. And so it's me cuddling her for five minutes, and then… putting her down, and I walk out, and then I have my phone. Like, I don't take the phone into the baby's room with me. But I walk out, have the phone for five minutes, set the timer, go back in, and count to three hundred again if I need to. [Monica, White university librarian, mother of one]

Many mothers who discussed these methods could readily report how many minutes, precisely, it took for their child to settle.

> We say, "Okay, you're gonna go to sleep now. You're safe," and we leave… then [the baby] cries, obviously, and we leave for a minute. And so then we go back in, and we rub his back, and after a minute we say, "Okay, it's time for us to go, you're gonna go to sleep now." And we leave. And we end up increasing. And so you keep doing that, and you increase the amount of time and intervals, and go back and soothe. I think the longest he ever cried total was… I think we totaled it up, and it was twenty-three minutes. [Gabriela, Latina, self-employed, mother of two]

This precise tracking reflects how many guides today discuss sleep training. However, we argue that it also serves as a cultural strategy by clearly delineating the amount of time that is appropriate to remain non-responsive to a child's cries. It both helps mothers cope with the emotional tension in the moment of sleep training and offers a rhetorical strategy to demonstrate intensive mothering to the listener.

Another way in which mothers rationalized sleep training was through extensive logging of the work. For example, Hannah (Asian attorney, mother of two) discussed her strategy, which she called "pick-up put down":

> I logged it all. I was on Huckleberry [a parenting app], and I logged it all. It was seventy pickup put-downs. Between, like, 2:00 am and 3:30. He would cry, and I would pick him up, I would hush him, I would put him down. He'd start crying immediately, pick up. Calm, calm, calm, put him down. Cry immediately. For seventy times. The next night, it was forty-ish times? And then it was under ten. And then, like, two times, and then he slept for five hours. So, within less than a week, we went from waking up every hour to sleeping for five hours.

Hannah's commitment to counting and tracking her sleep training method demonstrates her commitment to intensive parenting. While her baby might be crying, she was busy attending to his needs in the form of data tracking. The rationalization of sleep training does several things. First, it gives a temporal limit to unresponsiveness. The mother is not simply ignoring her child, but adhering to a precise, evidence-based protocol with a defined endpoint. Second, it demonstrates a high commitment to the child, even while being unresponsive to the child's cries. The data become proof of care.

Discussion and Conclusion

Extinction-based sleep training is a cultural dilemma. On the one hand, it is upheld as a legitimate parenting strategy by the medical establishment and the market, has a long history in American cultural understandings of infancy, and can provide mothers with a useful technique for encouraging their children to sleep through the night. Yet it also sits in direct tension with modern conceptions of intensive mothering and attachment parenting, which prioritize responsiveness and children's emotional well-being, sometimes at the expense of mothers' well-being. In this paper, we have shown how mothers grapple with this cultural tension when engaging in sleep training techniques. They engage in emotion work around guilt as a display of responsive mothering; they professionalize their decision-making through expert permission, scientific language, and personal qualifications; and they systematize practices around sleep to engage in intensive mothering, even while momentarily ignoring their child's cries.

This research reveals several important insights with both theoretical and practical implications. First, this research continues the conversation of emotion work, the labor of mothering, and cultural ideals of motherhood. Motherhood ideals today are shaped by an array of competing mandates that span from neoliberal ideals of market logic, self-regulation, and emotional control; to child-centered directives of emotionally intensive and attachment-based parenting; to expert-guided and medically-informed practices. The labor of motherhood must contend with these mandates, and the experience of sleep training is no exception. Extinction-based sleep training is caught between these competing directives, and it is the strategies of emo-

tion work, professionalization, and rationalization that help mothers cope with these tensions. These findings demonstrate the hidden labor required to navigate the cultural tensions around motherhood.

Next, this work may provide important insights for medical providers and policymakers who want to better understand how mothers use and experience the sleep techniques promoted by many medical establishments. Extinction-based sleep training is often positioned as an evidence-based technique, with little regard for the emotional experience of mothers who employ it (Blunden, Thompson, and Dawson 2011; Blunden et al. 2016). Our work shifts attention to the mother. We show how mothers' stress during extinction-based sleep training is experienced, understood, and managed by those mothers. Indeed, we engage here with Howson (2018), who argues that the cultural conversation about sleep training has long failed to recognize mothers and babies as subjects, dismissing their affective experiences as contrary to their best interests. We similarly see the affective experience of sleep training as central to the conversation; it should not be dismissed as an inconsequential part of the decision to sleep train. This has implications for pediatric and public health conversations, which often view maternal well-being only as it correlates to sleep quality, and not as it correlates to mothers' emotional experiences with sleep training.

Although sleep training and other labor that occurs during the night are an incredibly important element of mothers' well-being, there is minimal social scientific literature in this domain. This article is part of the growing body of qualitative work around the experiences of nighttime family labor. However, our research is limited by the population of mothers interviewed. The mothers were highly educated, which may influence the particularities of the strategies noted in this research. Future research could examine additional demographic characteristics to determine whether these strategies are unique to a subset of mothers or represent a broader cultural shift. Similarly, our sample had minimal racial and class diversity. This diversity is particularly important, as the experience of mothering and the experience of sleep decisions are shaped in significant ways by these social locations (Hamilton 2021; Harrison 2022; Hamilton and Faircloth 2025). Finally, while our focus on mothers is important for theoretical understanding of motherhood, further research on extinction-based sleep training could provide important insights into patterns around the gendered practices of these techniques and differences in the experience of mothers and fathers.

Ultimately, this research reframes extinction-based sleep training not as a simple parenting choice but as a site where broader cultural contradictions about motherhood are experienced and negotiated. The strategies mothers employ are not idiosyncratic coping mechanisms but patterned responses to a culture that demands responsiveness and tremendous emotional investment *and* rational, efficient, expert-guided self-management. We hope this work helps in the burgeoning literature on nighttime parenting and continues the larger conversation about the contradictions of modern motherhood.

Appendix

Table I: Research Participants and Self-Reported Demographics

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity (Country of Origin, if not US)	Age	Education	Occupation	Children y: years; m: months
Adriana	Latina (Ecuador)	42	BS	Accountant	Girl, 5y; Boy, 2y
Andrea	White	39	MS	Nurse practitioner	Boy, 5y; Boy 5y; Girl, 3y
Courtney	White	39	Ph.D.	Professor	Girl, 5y; Girl, 1.5y
Crystal	White	36	Bachelor's	Unemployed	Girl, 4y; Boy, 1.5y
Danielle	White	39	Bachelor's	Philanthropy	Boy, 3.5y; Boy, 10m
Elizabeth	White	37	MS	Ph.D. student	Boy, 5y; Girl, 2y
Gabriela	Latina	39	Masters	Self-employed	Boy, 7y; Girl, 3y
Hannah	Asian (China)	40	JD	Attorney	Boy, 5y; Girl, 10m
Heather	White	44	Ph.D.	Professor	Boy, 10y; Boy, 6y; Girl, 2y
Holly	White	33	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Girl, 9m
Jill	White	36	Ph.D.	Sociology instructor	Girl, 6y; Girl, 4y; Boy, 3y
Julie	White	31	Bachelor's	Full-time parent	Boy, 10m
Kristin	White (Germany)	33	Ph.D.	Clinical scientist	Boy, 9m
Lauren	White	43	Masters	Instructional coach	Boy, 4m
Leah	White	43	Ph.D.	Professor	Boy, 3y; Girl, 7m
Ling	Asian	45	Ph.D.	Professor	Boy, 8y; Girl, 2.5y
Lisa	White (Australia)	39	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home parent	Girl, 3y
Marisol	Latina	33	Some college	Shift supervisor	Boy 4y; Boy, 9y
Melissa	White	32	Ph.D.	Nuclear engineer	Girl, 5.5y; Boy, 11m
Molly	White	41	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Boy, 4.5y; Girl, 14m
Monica	White	35	Masters	University librarian	Girl, 1 y
Nicole	White	44	Masters	Social worker / Professor	Girl, 5y; Girl, 3y
Paola	Latina	30	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Boy, 2y
Patricia	Black	36	Ph.D.	Assistant professor	Boy, 3y; Boy, 1y
Rachel	White	35	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Girl, 4y; Boy, 10m
Ramona	White (Germany)	39	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Boy, 4y; Girl, 5m
Rebecca	White	35	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mom	Boy, 7y; Boy, 4y
Renee	White	43	Ph.D.	Associate professor	Boy, 3y; Boy, 11m
Sonia	Latina	40	MS	Behavioral therapist	Girl, 7y; Boy 6y; Girl 4y
Stephanie	White/Middle Eastern	39	Ph.D.	Professor	Girl, 5.5y; Boy, 2y

Source: Self-elaboration.

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Choosing a School, Imagining a Childhood. Emotional, Moral, and Social Dimensions of School Choice in Denmark

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Abstract: International studies have shown that concerns about children's academic outcomes and future educational opportunities shape parents' choice of primary school. In Denmark, such concerns are manifested differently due to a less competitive educational system that generally offers broad, flexible pathways. Even so, many Danish parents carefully consider which school will best support their child. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews with 38 parents, this article examines parents' reflections and concerns regarding school choice. A cultural analytical approach that focuses on understanding how parents make choices and set priorities is used to show that, regardless of social class, their primary concern is ensuring their children's well-being and psychological development rather than academic outcomes. However, this emphasis implies awareness of other parents' parenting practices, subtly reflecting but also helping to construct and maintain social distinctions and moral boundaries despite egalitarian ideals and efforts prevalent in Danish society.

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> It has been so demanding and still is…I mean, that you're actually asking yourself: "Can I ruin my child now by choosing the wrong school?"
> [Helle, mother of a 6-year-old girl]

In recent decades, neoliberal reforms in Europe and the United States have given parents greater choice in terms of schools. This shift has sparked a surge in sociological studies examining the relationship between parental preferences, educational options, and broader social structures. However, the conclusions are not clear-cut as education systems vary. Nevertheless, a fairly consistent pattern has emerged—particularly in studies from the UK, US, and France—indicating that the expansion of school choice tends to benefit middle-class parents, who have the time, resources, and cultural capital to navigate the available options (e.g., Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Ball 2003; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007; Goyette and Lareau 2014). In this sense, free school choice is widely regarded as a mechanism that sustains and can even exacerbate existing class divisions and social inequalities.

This article contributes to this debate in two ways. First, by adopting a cultural analytical perspective that foregrounds parents' values and reasoning rather than class-based strategies, and second, by focusing on Denmark, where education is embedded in a universal welfare system. Here, too, school choice has expanded, but under markedly different conditions than in most other countries. Public and private schools are broadly comparable in terms of resources, funding, and quality; there is no shift between primary and lower secondary schools, and students are not systematically tracked or ranked by ability. Primary school choice, therefore, does not, in principle, determine future educational trajectories. Nevertheless, school choice remains a highly salient issue for many parents, raising questions about why they consider it so important and what they take into account when making decisions.

To address these questions, the article draws on interviews with 38 parents from five school districts in Greater Copenhagen, supplemented by ethnographic observations in a neighborhood where 26 of these parents lived. Despite marked differences in class position, participants shared a lack of concern with their children's academic performance and outcomes when considering schools. Instead, they focused on practical matters (such as distance and route safety) but were primarily concerned with their children's emotional and social well-being. This partly reflects the children's young age, 5-6 years (although half of the parents also had older children), but, as I will argue, it first and foremost reflects a cultural awareness of the formative impor-

tance of childhood. This focus places an obligation on parents to make informed and deliberate choices—an obligation shaped by the compulsory nature of school choice and by the growing emotionalization of upbringing, which has become increasingly subject to moral and social judgment (Elias 2012). The article aims to foreground these emotional, moral, and social dimensions, demonstrating that school choice in this context appears driven less by instrumental strategies to secure educational capital than by broader cultural notions of childhood, responsible parenting, and social status.

The next section provides background information on school choice in Denmark, followed by a presentation of the study's methodological design and theoretical framework. The analysis is organized into four parts, each highlighting a distinct dimension of parents' orientations and decision-making processes. The first examines spatial orientations, focusing on perceptions of the social composition of the local area; the second addresses temporal orientations, including ideas about the future and reflections on the parent's own school experiences; the third focuses on parents' emotional involvement and concerns regarding their child's emotional development; and the fourth considers parent's imaginaries on the type of social environment that will best support their child's development and well-being. The concluding section returns to the central question of why school choice is so important to parents in Denmark.

The Danish Case

Critical sociologists studying a wide range of contexts have argued that the liberalization of school choice has reshaped student populations, transforming schools from meeting places for socially diverse groups (where districts allow) into "marketplaces"—thus reinforcing segregation and the reproductive dynamics of society (e.g., Ball 2003; Reay and Lucey 2003; Raveaud and Van Zanten 2007; James et al. 2010; Goyette and Lareau 2014; Gabay-Egozi 2016; Mayer et al. 2020). Research further indicates that the expansion of choice has exacerbated ethnic and class imbalances (e.g., Reay and Ball 1997; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Karsten et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2007; Byrne 2009; van Zanten 2010; Vincent, Braun, and Ball 2010; Cucchiara 2013). While circumstances and conditions may vary, a consistent pattern emerges across different national and regional contexts, with middle-class parents tending to select schools that consolidate their class position or advance their children's social mobility. As shown by Bourdieu and Passeron's classic study (1970), this tendency is nothing new, but evidence suggests it has been amplified by mechanisms such as school rankings and extended choice options linked to the marketization of education and increased competition for skilled labor (Gewirtz et al. 1995; James et al. 2010).

Denmark has also been affected by economic and educational liberalization. Income inequality has risen since the late 1980s, and residential segregation has deepened, particularly in larger cities (Haandrikman et al. 2023). Thus, despite its universal welfare model rooted in egalitarian ideals, Denmark is far from a classless society; significant disparities in resources and opportunities persist, and the link between social background and educational achievement is well-documented (Karlson and Landersø 2025). Over the past two decades, a number of neoliberal measures have been introduced, including expanded school choice. Municipalities are divided into school districts, with school-age children having a right to a place at a specific school

determined by their residential address. Since 2005, however, parents have been able to choose a municipal school outside their school district, but only if there are places available after enrolling children within that school's catchment area. In practice, this means it can be difficult to get a place at certain popular schools if the family does not live in the school district.[1] As in other countries, there is an increasingly pronounced social and ethnic divide between schools, partly because more parents opt for private or so-called "free schools"[2] (Undervisningsministeriet and Epinion 2017; Andersen et al. 2019; Bomholt and Rasmussen 2019), and partly because schools in ethnically mixed and socially deprived areas are avoided by parents who have the resources to seek alternatives (Rangvid 2007; Søndergaard et al. 2021).

However, this pattern of growing segregation is driven by dynamics different from those in countries with more competitive education systems. As Norwegian sociologists have shown, Nordic welfare models have sought to weaken the direct link between financial prosperity and educational success, for example, by guaranteeing access to education at all levels for all, irrespective of income (Barth, Moene, and Wallerstein 2003; Aarseth 2016). Thus, as noted by Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010:227), there is not the same kind of "existential drama—so noticeable in British and American contexts—which relates educational success (so explicitly) to social class." Although attention to individual performances has increased, the Danish school system does not sort students into different tracks; there are no formal divisions based on tests before the end of lower secondary school, primary and lower secondary schools are not ranked, and poor final grades are not an insurmountable obstacle to students' further education. Moreover, there is no substantial financial disparity between the various types of schools, as all receive public funding. Public schools are entirely free for pupils, while private and free schools receive significant state subsidies and are prohibited from generating profits, which keeps tuition fees relatively low. Furthermore, many private and independent schools reserve places for low-income students to promote social diversity, and these parents are eligible for reduced fees. This is not to suggest that financial considerations are irrelevant, as some parents' decisions may be influenced by costs. However, economic factors alone cannot explain the broader pattern of school choice.

If neither structural constraints—such as future educational tracking—nor economic incentives can fully account for parental decisions, attention must turn to the social and cultural dynamics underpinning these choices. It is important to note that while Danish schools—public comprehensive schools (*folkeskolen*) and various types of private and independent schools—do not differ significantly in terms of access to further education, they do vary in their ideological orientations,[3] pedagogical approaches, learning environments, and curricular emphasis. These value-based differences shape the appeal of particular schools to different segments of the par-

1 School choice is not new in the Danish context. Ever since the mid-1800s, parents have been able to homeschool their children and to set up or choose a privately run school rather than a district public school.

2 The proportion of pupils in 1st grade attending a non-municipal primary school (private or free school) increased from 12% in 2007 to around 17% in 2018. By 8th grade, more than one in five children attend a private or free school (Andersen et al. 2019). See also Statistics Denmark for a 2024 update: Hvert femte barn på landet går på en fri- eller privatskole - Danmarks Statistik, retrieved April 28, 2026.

3 Some private and free schools are religious (Christian, Muslim, Jewish), others are secular. The public school system is predominantly non-religious, although it observes Christian holidays.

ent population. Over time, this interplay between institutional characteristics and parental preferences may generate self-reinforcing reputational dynamics, further accentuating perceived distinctions between schools. Such variations are an important feature of the landscape that parents must navigate when choosing a school for their children.

Methodology and Dataset

The study was initially based in a suburban municipality in Greater Copenhagen, referred to here as Lundeby, with approximately 30,000 inhabitants. Over the past 30 years, Lundeby's population has steadily increased as the area's mixed housing stock—comprising rental and owneroccupied apartments of various sizes, terraced houses, and singlefamily homes—has made it relatively affordable for young families looking for housing close to the center of Copenhagen. Although Lundeby has traditionally been a workingclass and lowermiddleclass neighborhood, its demographics have changed in recent years, with an influx of middle-class families with greater financial resources. As a result, the entire municipality is now characterized by considerable ethnic, economic, and generational diversity. One notable exception is a large apartment complex in the northern part of the municipality, which has a somewhat negative reputation for being socially deprived.

This social and ethnic diversity was one of the reasons why I chose to base the study in Lundeby, as I sought to explore whether it would be reflected in parents' school choices. Using ethnographic and interviewbased methods, the aim was to gain insight into parents' considerations and priorities. The ethnographic component followed children and parents in their everyday lives in the months leading up to choosing a school and involved three months of observations at three local daycare centers, combined with daily walks in the local area—sometimes alone, sometimes with parents—as well as ethnographic observations at local events during the winter of 2023-24. Access was granted through the managers of the daycare centers, followed by contact with staff. This enabled observations of daily activities and the recruitment of parents for interviews.

Observations were followed by indepth interviews with six professionals (a principal and viceprincipal at one local school, a daycare manager, two daycare professionals, and a teacher at another school), conducted at their workplaces, and with 26 parents of children attending the daycare centers. They were interviewed in their family homes (17 mothers and 9 fathers, seven of whom were interviewed as couples). Some of them were in the process of choosing, and some knew the result. Among these parents, none had chosen a private or free school, only six had completed a Master'slevel university degree, and only six had a household income above €100,000 per year.[4] To ensure greater socioeconomic variation, I therefore expanded the sample to include an additional 12 parents (11 mothers and 1 father), interviewed individually in their homes in other parts of Greater Copenhagen. Ten of these parents had Master's level university degrees, and half had opted for either private or free schools.

Three of the additional families lived in a deprived area in a southern suburb of Copenhagen, three in a very affluent northern neighborhood, and the remaining six in or near the city center.

4 According to Statistics Denmark, families with children in Denmark had an average annual posttax income of approximately €96,100 in 2024, see Statistics Denmark: Person- og familieindkomster - Danmarks Statistik, retrieved April 28, 2026.

Only seven interviewees had an ethnic background other than Danish, all of whom were first-generation immigrants who had completed or were currently enrolled in higher education. Despite repeated efforts, I was unable to recruit a more educationally diverse group of ethnic minority parents or parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—that is, parents without formal post-secondary education or labormarket affiliation. This social composition may have influenced the strong engagement with school choice observed in the study.

Table 1. Table of interviewees

Number of interviewees / Place of residence	Lundeby	Rich district	Poor district	City-center
Professionals	4	0	0	2
Mothers	17	3	2	6
Fathers	9	0	1	0
Interviewed as couples	7	0	0	0
With an ethnic minority background	3	1	3	0
With a completed university degree	6	3	1	6
Choosing a private or free school	0	1	2	3

Source: Self-elaboration.

All informants—professionals and parents—were informed both orally and in writing about the study's aims, research ethics, and dataprotection procedures. Names, institutions, identifying details, and references to specific locations have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality. All interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and focused on parents' views on school options, their decisionmaking processes, opinions on child-rearing, and sources of information. The interviews also provided insight into participants' working lives, social and educational backgrounds, reasons for moving to their neighborhoods, local social networks, and reflections on their children's lives, friendships, and future opportunities. Interviewees were encouraged to reflect, in their own words, on processes of choice, preference, and boundarydrawing in relation to schools, upbringing, peer groups, and neighborhoods.

In analyzing the interviews, I found no consistent classbased pattern in parents' schoolrelated values, nor was it straightforward to situate most informants within distinct social classes. Couples often differed in educational level, and incomes varied considerably: some unskilled workers earned more than highly educated professionals, while some younger parents were still studying but close to entering highincome professions. Although the sample ranged from families living in large villas with substantial wealth to those in small rented apartments reliant on welfare, these differences did not yield clear patterns of reasoning about school choice. Previous research from Denmark supports this finding. While higher-educated, higher-income parents are somewhat more likely to choose private schools and actively seek information on the various options, support for public and local schools is broadly similar across socioeconomic groups (Undervisningsministeriet and Epinion 2017; Andersen et al. 2019). Similarly, although most parents care about schools' social composition (Andersen et al. 2019; Bomholt and Rasmussen 2019; Søndergaard et al. 2021), views on whether diversity is positive or negative are not clearly linked to socioeconomic position.

A recurring theme in the interviews was a concern with whether different school options would enable

their children to form close friendships and feel included, or whether they might risk marginalization within peer groups. This concern prompted me to draw on theories addressing the social and cultural dimensions of choice.

Analytical Approach

As the educational sociologist Nihad Bunar (2010:13) argues in his discussion of school choice in Sweden, "freedom of choice in education has many layers and affects many other areas than segregation, grades, and educational costs which hitherto have been the main themes in the debates." Using this insight, which is highly relevant to the Danish context, as a jumping-off point, any attempt to explain parents' preoccupation with school choice, despite the seemingly limited impact on long-term outcomes, must examine how they choose and which values they prioritize—in short, recognizing that choice is culturally embedded.

Advocating such a cultural perspective, sociologist Ori Schwarz (2018:851) contends that:

> …choice processes are cultural practices, culturally specific ways of doing grounded in normativity, which rely on both practical knowledge (culturally specific decision-making skills) and abstract representations and epistemologies (since choice always relies on production and manipulation of knowledge of the options)…Culture offers actors not only repertoires of options to choose from, but also repertoires of ways of choosing, culturally specific techniques of choice.

Anthropologists Åsa Boholm, Annette Henning, and Amanda Krzyworzeka (2013) have likewise argued that choices are always made within cultural horizons of meaning that confer epistemological and moral validity. Yet they are also shaped by the individual's life circumstances, prior experiences, and emotional state when making decisions. Consequently, individuals who have access to the same information and share a structural position will not necessarily have identical preferences or make similar choices. Choices are, therefore, simultaneously individual and fundamentally social, informed by common norms and established moralities. However, values and understandings are rarely universal; their significance and relevance are a matter of ongoing negotiation. Individuals test and adjust their preconceptions and align themselves more closely with some people than others—a dynamic that constitutes a core aspect of decision-making (Boholm, Henning, and Krzyworzeka 2013).

To navigate this terrain, individuals must construct an overview of the social space they are part of (Bourdieu 1989), a "social imaginary" (Taylor 2002). Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2006:483) has described such an imaginary as "the way in which we comprehend the unfolding of our social terrain and our position and possibilities of movement in it." Understanding the processes that culminate in a decision, therefore, requires attention not only to people's beliefs and aspirations about future possibilities, but also to their engagements with the world—their anxieties, trust, and perceptions of social distinctions and rightness, all of which are also socially and culturally constituted.

Inspired by these theoretical points, I revisited the interview material to gain a better understanding of how parents approach decisionmaking and prioritize among available school options. While practical considerations such as distance to school, the school's physical learning environment, and the safety of the route to school were clearly part of their

deliberations, parents' concerns were overwhelmingly social and emotional. Their primary aim was to place their children in a social environment experienced as meaningful, reassuring, and conducive to wellbeing—as demonstrated in the following analysis, organized around four dimensions of parental orientation: spatial, temporal, emotional, and social.

Considering Place and the Local School Options

One contextual factor that clearly influences parents' school choice is the specific place they live in, the school options available locally, and the social composition of different areas (Reay 1996). As already mentioned, Lundeby is a socially and ethnically diverse area. Historically, the intersections of several major roads have divided the municipality into five school districts, each with its own local school. The buildings on these sites are still in use, now housing three public schools across five campuses. Due to declining enrolment of children from economically stable, ethnic Danish families at two schools, the local council decided to merge them with two other schools ten years ago. As a result, the school with the highest average parental income, which I call Ellebakkeskolen, remained a standalone school, while the other four schools were merged into two new schools, each split across two campuses: Lundeby Public School (campus Mosegrundsskolen and campus Skovhøjskolen) and Bækkegårdsskolen (campus North and campus West). The student population at these schools is more ethnically and socio-economically diverse than at Ellebakkeskolen, albeit with an unequal distribution across campuses. The municipality is also home to a private school that markets itself as academically ambitious. In addition, there are three free schools located just outside the municipality, and many public and private schools with various pedagogical, ideological, and religious profiles in neighboring municipalities.

I established contact with parents during three months of ethnographic fieldwork at three different daycare centers located in the heart of Lundeby. The centers cater to families from all parts of the municipality; when conducting interviews in family homes, I visited various types of housing and all school districts.

I met Henrik, a chef and father of Niels, in front of his home, adorned with festive Christmas decorations, on his return from work. While still on the doorstep, he exclaimed: "I think we lead a really, really good life for children here…I think a lot of families like ours are moving out of the city. Many of our neighbors are just like us." Henrik was optimistic about the local school, Mosegrundsskolen, which is right next to their terraced house. He and his wife have spoken to others in the area, which, he said:

> …has put our minds at ease. It wouldn't be good for Niels to be in a large class—he just couldn't handle that. But down there, they have small classes, and the teachers just seemed so calm when we visited. Plus, it's so close, so he can go on his own and play with kids he knows from the neighborhood or kindergarten.

Later in the interview, Henrik emphasized the importance of social diversity: "I want my kids to meet children from families different from ours." He said that his wife, who has a university degree and grew up in the area, shared his views on their place of residence and the importance of diversity, but was more skeptical about the local school. Although she has agreed to give it a chance, she insisted that their son remain on the waiting list for a free school in the neighboring municipality. She was concerned

that the school might be overburdened by children "from the [local housing] blocks" who lack parental support, which might mean their child receiving less attention. However, Henrik remained convinced: "I just believe that public schools are good."

Trust in public schools was a common theme in most interviews, with almost all parents emphasizing the value of children learning to be part of a socially diverse setting. Meanwhile, perceptions of the individual schools vary. Susanne and Peter, who moved six months earlier from the same terraced houses where Henrik lives to a singlefamily house in a nearby neighborhood, have a far less positive impression of Mosegrundsskolen. In fact, fear of the school's social—and not least ethnic—composition was their primary reason for relocating. As Susanne explained:

> We used to live in a terraced house and had great neighbors with a daughter just a bit older than ours. Their daughter started at the local school—the same one we planned for our kids—but it quickly became a disappointing experience. So we thought, hmm. They decided to move, and we had the same mindset. What should we do? So, we decided to look for a house elsewhere.

When encouraged to explain the problem, Susanne said, "Well, it was that the parents in that parent group did not have many resources, so to speak. Right from the get-go, they were not actively involved in their children's schooling." Peter added:

> And then there was the number of bilingual children. Our neighbors felt like they had to integrate into the groups of parents rather than the other way around. That was challenging, to say the least. We'd also heard quite a few negative things about the school from [people in] our social circle. Many people said, "Oh, Mosegrundsskolen? Probably not the right fit."

Nevertheless, Susanne and Peter remained committed to public schools and emphasized the value of their children mixing with peers from diverse backgrounds, which would help them develop the social skills needed in contemporary society. As Susanne, a nurse, and Peter, a doctor, are both highly educated, I enquired whether their concerns extended to the school's academic standards. Susanne emphatically responded that "Nothing could worry me less. I don't think the school next to our new house has a good reputation either, but honestly, I don't know," before elaborating:

> The most important thing is that they grow up with good values and become good people… that they do well socially. You can't learn that from a book. You have to experience it. Everything else will follow… Our main priority is for school to be fun and engaging for the child.

Surprisingly, few parents mentioned academic level as a factor in their decision-making process, but all reflected on the social composition of the various schools. Many emphasized the value of children learning to be considerate and open-minded by participating in socially mixed groups, but several—such as Henrik's wife, as mentioned above—also expressed concern that there would be too many children from disadvantaged homes.

Not all parents have detailed knowledge of the local neighborhood. Quite a few are newcomers and do not have a social circle that can help them to distinguish between the different school districts. This is the case for Karin and Anders, a graphic designer and a nurse who recently moved to the area and

have tried hard to find out what characterizes the different schools by asking other parents at the daycare center. Karin talked in detail about their considerations, including the local private school with a strong academic profile:

> Well, we also considered Lundeby private school… But then I heard, well, someone said that it was a bit elitist. It was as if it were the elite who went there. And I don't think we like that at all, that something should be hyped as better…I think my children might as well learn to meet all kinds of people. So now we're going for Mosegrundsskolen, which Erik's [a child's friend from the daycare center] mum has spoken highly of.

Those who have lived in the area for longer are generally more attentive to local differences. For example, Charlotte, a medical secretary, and her husband, Per, a self-employed construction manager, both grew up in a deprived apartment block in the northern part of the municipality. They decided to move from a district close to Mosegrundsskolen, where they had settled when their first child was born, and bought a house near Ellebakkeskolen a year before their children started school. To my question of why, they explained:

> **Per:** Well, it's about people… well, at Ellebakkeskolen, there are more parents who live in detached houses.
> **Charlotte:** Yes, and are educated and have jobs.
> **Per:** Are educated and don't live in social housing. And that's how it is.
> **Charlotte:** It's a class thing!
> **Eva [interviewer]:** It's a class thing?
> **Per:** Yes, at the risk of sounding like an idiot, but that's how it is. Yes, that's 100 percent why.
> **Charlotte:** Yes. There's a difference between being educated and having a job, and not being educated and being on welfare, and wanting to be on welfare or cash benefits. And it's a lot like that, right?
> **Eva:** So, when you've considered the different schools, it has mainly been the catchment area that has been the deciding factor? In other words, who attends the school?
> **Charlotte:** Yes. Well, that's it. It's the catchment area. That's it, 100 percent.
> …
> **Eva:** Well, it sounds like you have given this a lot of thought?
> **Per:** Yes, we have because, of course, I'd rather have my children go to school in a neighborhood where people come from an area with detached houses rather than a ghetto.
> **Charlotte:** Well, you want them to play with someone who has the same values at home as we have at home. That you should go to school, that you should do your homework, that you should get an education. You have to listen to what the teacher says. At other schools, there can be someone who says "fuck you" to the teacher, doesn't listen, and is very disruptive. And we don't want that.

Few of the parents interviewed talked about class and social distinctions as explicitly as this couple, nor did they all assess the schools and their catchment areas the same way, as is apparent from previous excerpts. Some were confident that the assigned school would prove to be good for their child, while others, as illustrated here, went so far as to move house to get access to the right school. However, regardless of what lengths they were willing to go to and class consciousness, most of the parents I interviewed had clearly given considerable thought to choosing a school for their child, with the social composition of the school district emerging as a key concern.

A Prolonged Process

My fieldwork at the three daycare centers was conducted from November to February, when the parents of the oldest children had to inform the municipality of their preferred schools in order of priority. It was, therefore, a period during which they actively sought information by talking to parents of older children and attending open-house events at various schools. The daycare centers were also involved in the process, providing parents with individual consultations on the match between their child and the various school options. At various Christmas events, school choice was a recurring topic of conversation among parents, who eagerly tried to figure out which schools their child's friends would choose and how parents they trusted assessed the various options. By February, everyone had been informed which school their child had been admitted to, and, as one daycare teacher, Mette, remarked while posting an overview, "Now all the considerations and worries are over."

From the perspective of the education system, school choice is a distinct event that takes place within a defined timeframe. In practice, however, it is much harder to determine when the decision is made. For many, it is clearly an extended process. About a third of the parents in the sample, coming from different parts of Greater Copenhagen, recounted registering their children for various private or free schools shortly after birth. "I just thought, you can always say no," explained Frida, an unemployed academic, justifying her decision to register at six different free and private schools within a five-kilometer radius of their city-center home. Many acknowledge that doing so is necessary if one wants to have the option. For example, Mille, a well-educated mother with her own business living in a city-center neighborhood, explained her experiences putting her children on the waiting list for a free school: "We were told, 'Make sure to get on the list.'…So, as a brand-new mother, I realized, okay, this is a game with high stakes, and I turned up before the child was even born. Until then, I had not realized that this was really a game."

It is clearly common practice to register children for alternative school options, even though most parents ultimately choose one of the local public schools. As such, school choice is a process that spans several years. Even after enrolment, the deliberations do not stop. Celeste's father, Poul, an accounting manager in a large company, explained that they had long since put her on the waiting list for two private schools and had now been informed that there was a place for her at one of them. However, after much discussion, he and his partner have decided not to accept the place and let their daughter start at one of the local public schools in Lundeby. Poul explained:

> We think it's too far away. There's something important about being part of the local neighborhood, and several of the children we know from the daycare center are going [to start] there or already go there… And I think that, although it has a somewhat poor academic reputation, we have come to the conclusion that she will reach a sufficient academic level…The concern was perhaps also that the private school—well, it's probably the children of rich parents who go there, and such an environment becomes a bit homogeneous, rather than going to a public school, which is more heterogeneous. You meet people from all walks of life across the entire socio-economic index. So those were probably the considerations…However, if it doesn't work out, we'll move her. I'm not going to let her stay in a class for three months where everything is falling apart.

Similarly, Frida stressed that she would give the public school a chance, but if their son is unhappy, they will move him "right away," which is why he is still on the waiting list for several private schools. Apparently, deciding on a school is a continuous process that, in some cases, can span a child's birth to almost the end of their schooling. It involves ongoing orientations, conversations with others, and deliberations about which school option best suits the child at a given point in time, what experiences the school will provide, and how this will affect the child's development.

Past School Experiences and Imagined Futures

Not only is deciding on a school a prolonged process; it involves a simultaneity of temporalities (Boholm, Henning, and Krzyworzeka 2013:106). In every interview I conducted, parents drew on their own school experiences without prompting to explain their values and priorities. This temporal connection involves reflections on risks, consequences, opportunities, and aspirations. For example, Lene angrily recounted her negative experiences at Ellebakkeskolen, the only school in the municipality with no social housing in its catchment area. The interview took place in a very small two-bedroom apartment where she lived with her two young daughters. At the time, she was studying to become a care assistant and was struggling to make ends meet, which was a recurring theme throughout the conversation. She explained how she felt when some of the teachers at her primary school treated her—as someone living in a rented flat with parents in unskilled jobs—differently from the children living in the detached houses that surround the school: "They spoke to me as if I was stupid." She specifically recalls a math teacher who told her outright, "You'll never amount to anything; you can't even do basic arithmetic." Lene's determination to shield her daughters from such experiences led her to choose Mosegrundsskolen instead of the closer Ellebakkeskolen.

Freddy's father, Morten, likewise drew on his childhood experiences, although they had led him to reject the very school Lene preferred. The interview took place in the modest 1970s terraced house where Morten lived with his wife and two sons, which was located on the outskirts of Lundeby, between a railway line and a motorway. Morten owned a small cleaning business that he had built himself, and he expressed great satisfaction with his family's situation. He contrasted this with his own upbringing on a disadvantaged social housing estate in a nearby municipality that was characterized by "many neglected children and dysfunctional families." While his own family life with a single mother was relatively stable, growing up in that area meant that he "developed a keen eye for socially deprived environments; an eye for signs of deprivation." Explaining why he and his wife had chosen not to send their children to nearby Mosegrundsskolen, he stated: "I just think the majority of kids from more disadvantaged families are at Mosegrundsskolen." He elaborated that he could see it when he was working in the social housing estate adjacent to the school:

> There are certain homes there, aren't there? And you can see it in the way the children behave. That's just the way it is in places like that. I also remember some kids [who lived there] from Freddy's daycare, and I have to say that some of them weren't angels even back then—they were left to their own devices, running around until late at night, just like in my days.

Parents' search for an overview they can use to make an informed choice about a school for their children intertwines the past, present, and future. Memories become maps that can help navigate an alien future landscape and offer a sense of control. These connections do more than link timeframes; they serve as guidelines for distinguishing between who and what is acceptable and who and what is not. This is evident in the quotes above: the link between parents' own childhood experiences and the choices they make for their children—emphasized by both Lene and Morten—also signals an explicit distancing from places and people they do not wish to engage with or expose their children to. It establishes a symbolic boundary that is materialized in the avoidance of schools associated with either a more affluent middle-class segment or with lower social classes and/or other ethnicities.

Parents know that experiences at school have formative consequences for the child. Their orientations oscillate over time, creating intergenerational bonds but also leading them to justify their parental decisions through comparisons to recollections of their own childhood. School choice differs from other decisions because parents must balance their own interests with those of the child, recalling what it was like to be a child while projecting their now-and-here child into an imagined adult. They bear the full responsibility for ensuring a school life aligned with their values and hopes while relinquishing control to others. This intensifies the pressure to acquire sufficient knowledge about each option to evaluate its potential impact on the child's well-being and development. In this process of navigation, childhood memories of school life, interactions with peers, and experiences with teachers serve as reference points, interwoven with impressions formed by school visits and accounts from others. In this way, parents view the various school options through the lens of their own experiences, constructing a set of social scenarios for their child that they can evaluate and choose from.

Emotional Considerations and Concerned Cultivation

It was clear from all the interviews I conducted that school choice involves far more than weighing up objective factors such as academic outcomes, school size, class size, routes to school, or outdoor facilities. It also evokes a wealth of feelings and reflections on the social atmosphere of schools and catchment areas, on what parents themselves enjoyed as children, and on the kind of social and educational environment in which they imagine their child will thrive (cf. Cucchiara 2013). In short, the interviews were bursting with emotions—hopes and concerns, worries and trust, positive and negative impressions, alarming and reassuring stories, and both happy and painful memories. Rooted in past experiences, emotions shape what feels right; they are inseparable from values, revealing what guides people, their criteria for assessments, and their moral standards. This is evident, for example, when Frida explained that her search for an alternative to the nearest school was triggered by hearing negative stories: "I've been really, really nervous about Mads starting over there. It really pains me, because what kind of experiences would that give him?" Another example is when Mille, who had chosen a free school, stated that she did not want her children in the local school "under any circumstances":

> **Mille:** It's too big, and there are kids there who are just completely left to themselves. I don't trust that they have things under control. There are so many scary stories about kids attacking each other. You

> know, when there's no one watching, anything can happen. And I don't want my children to be scared. And I don't want to go around worrying myself either.
> **Eva:** So, it was your worries that decided it?
> **Mille:** Yes, definitely…Then the problem with the free school is that all the kids come from the same environment—the parents are very nice and committed, and they all look alike—it is too much, but it's safe.

As these excerpts indicate, two emotional dimensions are at play: one pertaining to the parents' feelings, the other to the child's. These dimensions are interrelated, requiring parents to simultaneously consider their gut feelings and be mindful of their child's emotional state. Interestingly, the latter extends not only to emotions the child actively expresses but also to those that parents fear the child will experience in the future—a yet-to-occur problematic emotional impact that it is their responsibility to prevent. In other words, they feel they must prevent negative experiences that could potentially change the person the child would become.

European parental studies have extensively documented how engagement with children's emotional well-being has become the norm in contemporary parenthood (e.g., Hays 1996; Elias 2012; Lee et al. 2014). Similarly, Scandinavian family research has highlighted that parenthood today entails constant awareness of, and respect for and support of, children's feelings (Stefansen and Aarseth 2011; Sparrman et al. 2017; Akselvoll 2022; Born and Vasbø 2025). For many parents, the complexity of school choice reflects this broader cultural expectation—what sociologist Helene Aarseth (2016) terms "concerned cultivation." Parents feel compelled to make a decision they believe will prove decisive in shaping their child's emotional life and development. The weight of this responsibility—or in Aarseth's phrasing: "experience of oughtness"—is evident, for example, when Helle (an academic working in a government ministry) almost desperately exclaimed:

> It has been so demanding and still is…All this stuff about young people being unhappy. The whole debate about unhappiness has an impact. You don't dare take any chances with your child and the choice of school…I mean, that you're actually asking yourself: "Can I ruin my child now by choosing the wrong school?" It's crazy that you even have those kinds of thoughts when choosing a school. It's so stressful. There's a lot of stress surrounding it. Because you're simply so afraid to make the wrong choice.

Although Helle appears to be the parent most overwhelmed by the process among my interviewees, many of them—particularly mothers and those with a university degree—describe school choice as time-consuming and difficult, particularly in finding a place where they feel confident their children would thrive. As an imposed obligation, the choice itself generates concern. Not all parents feel equally burdened, but none are entirely indifferent; the situation demands engagement and confidence that the child will end up in an environment allowing them to flourish.

Ensuring the Child's Well-Being

In his now-classic book *Paranoid Parenting* (2001), sociologist Frank Furedi coined the term "parental determinism" to denote that parents are causally linked to and held accountable for their children's development and potential failures. Given the importance of childhood in forming psychologically well-balanced adults, one of the central tasks of contemporary parenthood is to ensure a good childhood through positive engagement and the preven-

tion of negative experiences. Furedi's key point is that this responsibility can be overwhelming, as it is clearly impossible to shield children from all adversity. Nevertheless, most parents I interviewed seemed to hold themselves to this standard. There is widespread concern that negative experiences may undermine a child's social confidence and self-esteem, thereby affecting their future opportunities and life satisfaction (cf. Cucchiara 2013). The child's happiness is seen as a prerequisite for learning and development; therefore, parents focus on ensuring a safe and supportive social environment conducive to happiness rather than on academic success in itself. This prioritization is expressed in various ways, for example, when Morten exclaimed, "The most important thing is that they thrive. As long as they're happy, the rest will follow," or when Poul explained why he had chosen not to send his daughter Celeste to the nearest public school:

> I worry that she will be in a class where the teachers are not able to handle… too many pupils who have difficulty listening and learning, and that it will affect the others. I still think Celeste will make it, but if she leaves school with the experience that everything is uncomfortable and the teachers can't handle it, and she loses interest and respect for others, well, that might concern me…She has a delicate soul; she has a soul that should not be exposed to any wrongdoing. So, we chose Bækkegårdsskolen, which has a good social catchment area.

Across the interviews, parents expressed confidence that their children will learn what they need to learn as long as they "thrive" and "have a good childhood." Such phrases crop up repeatedly, almost like a mantra, regardless of parents' economic or educational background. Of the two fathers quoted above, Morten lives in a modest terraced house next to a motorway, while Poul owns a newly built, architect-designed 200 m² home in a sought-after leafy neighborhood. In a very affluent area at the other end of Copenhagen, I met Andrea, an interior decorator with a Ph.D. in economics and heir to a large family fortune, in her spacious villa. Andrea and her family could easily afford to send their children to a private international school, which her husband, educated at an English boarding school, initially favored. However, Andrea emphasized that she "really likes the priority given to social life in Danish schools" and had, therefore, chosen the nearest public school, Ågårdsskolen, for all three of her children:

> **Andrea:** I'm really not concerned with the academic side of things in terms of what they come out with on the other side…So, what's important to me is that they feel safe and that they have friends living nearby, someone to play with. And the fact that we live close to the school at least makes it possible for us, hopefully, to be allowed to be part of our children's social lives.
> **Eva:** What had you heard about the schools?
> **Andrea:** What I'm told is that they do more homework at Fuglsangskolen than they do at Ågårdsskolen and that there is more structure and a higher academic level. But since I am not concerned with the academic level, this [Ågårdsskolen] suits me very well. I didn't bother, well, I didn't think it was much fun doing homework as a kid either, so the less homework they get, the better…and it all seems very nice and safe.

Regardless of social background and privilege, children's emotional well-being is a recurring theme that most parents[5] see as a prerequisite for learn-

5 A notable exception to this pattern is five of the seven parents with immigrant backgrounds. All five came to Denmark as adults (the other two as young children) and expressed their determination to find an academically ambitious school for their children.

ing. Academic outcomes are not irrelevant, but at this stage, the priority is to ensure a safe environment where children can build relationships, develop social skills, and pursue personal interests. This involves empathic engagement in the child's emotions, interests, and social life, as well as minimizing their exposure to negative influences and bad experiences in the form of "unruly," "neglected," or "selfish" children from "disadvantaged," "vulnerable," or, conversely, "too rich" or "spoiled" families (all terms used by parents during the interviews). In short, it seems to be among parents' main responsibilities to do whatever they can to protect their children from anything that might negatively impact their well-being, self-confidence, and motivation—both here and now and in the long term. Frida described how her concerns about the local school compelled her to take action:

> **Frida:** So already when he was just nine months old, I signed him up for all sorts of private schools…But then I just started hearing more and more about this one [a public school in another district], and it just sounded like a really safe and calm place…So, I called the school secretary there and talked to her.
>
> **Eva:** Yes, because it wasn't a given that you'd get a place there?
>
> **Frida:** No, and we didn't get a place at first, and they don't have a waiting list, so you have to be very pushy, even if that makes you feel uncomfortable. So, I wrote an email every day. And then it happened, she called me up and said, "You're a bit eager, I've got a lot of emails from you already," and then she said, "I've got a place today, and you can have it." It was just such a huge relief…He's just not a child who would thrive in a harsh environment.

Frida's statement illustrates a deep emotional commitment and sense of responsibility to support her children's well-being. At the same time, it conveys an expectation of action—an expectation that schools appear to acknowledge. The study provides several examples of how the most persistent parents, such as Frida, who regularly contacted their preferred school, often succeed in securing a place. Engagement in children's emotional lives functions not only as a normative expectation of good parenting but also as a symbolic marker of respectability—actively used to show and to assess who counts as a responsible parent.

Social Imaginaries and Perceived Divisions

Explicit displays of social hierarchy and putting personal interests ahead of the collective good are generally viewed negatively in this cultural context (Gullestad 1992). In institutions such as daycare centers and schools, emphasis is on the well-being of the whole group rather than individual achievement (Gilliam and Gulløv 2017). This was evident when the preschool teachers, Maria and Tine, sighed and lamented parents "who only have an eye for their own child," or when Lisa dismissed the local academically profiled private school as "for rich people who only care about their own children's success." However, when school choices are justified in terms of a child's emotional needs, they seem to escape such moral criticism. At least, I heard no negative remarks about parents who make an effort to secure their child's access to a particular school; indeed, their efforts appear to be respected by other parents and rewarded by schools.

Reading through interview transcripts, I found that a key concern was what their children's everyday social life would be like. Parents opted out of large schools where "my child can be bul-

lied without anybody noticing," as Sarah said, or "where anything can happen between the children," as Morten explained. Although most of them did not know much about individual schools, they did their best to gain the necessary insight to assess what everyday life would be like so they could send their child off to school with confidence. Perhaps it is precisely because all schools in Denmark offer similar opportunities for further education that parents primarily focus on the social and psychological implications of the various options. The key difference between schools lies in their social composition, prompting parents to reflect on what these differences might mean for their child. Social considerations thus become a legitimate—and almost expected—way for responsible parents to justify their choice of school.

This interpretation involves a social imaginary, a mapping of the social space to ascertain which types of parents send their children to the various schools, which schools have families who share the same parenting values, and which offer potential classmates who can be trusted. In this way, parents seek to prevent their child from experiencing psychological suffering or following an undesirable developmental trajectory. This was evident, for example, when Charlotte explained why she did not want her children to go to Mosegrundsskolen:

> It's about the types of people who live around there and what kind of catchment areas there are. And it might be people like the boy I mentioned that we didn't want our son to have playdates with because he hit [other children] and the parents smoked even though they had a child in a pram, and I think they also smoked cannabis. It's important to me that they become friends with children of parents who are on top of things and engaged in their children's lives.

As this quote illustrates, Charlotte is attentive not only to her children's peers but also to the values and parenting practices within their homes. Although she articulated such social distinctions more explicitly than most participants in my study, parents commonly expressed an awareness of the types of families their children encounter through classmates. A key criterion in these assessments was the perceived level of parental involvement in the child's everyday life, regarded as an indicator of responsibility and stability. This was not driven by competitive logic as much as by a belief in the formative forces that operate within a group of children, for better or worse, where like-minded peers are assumed to provide the child with the most secure psychological foundation. Anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1992) has identified "egalitarian individualism" as something assigned a cultural value in Scandinavia, which resonates strongly with the priorities expressed by these parents. Although many emphasized social and ethnic diversity as contributing positively to their children's development, there was also a fairly consistent concern with placing the child in settings where they were likely to feel included, rather than risking experiences of dominance, distance, or exclusion. With a certain irony, the effort to ensure that children would thrive in their new school entailed a search for imagined sameness, a community of likeminded individuals, which, paradoxically, required close attention to difference. Parents carefully scrutinized other parents to assess whether they appeared to share similar views on children and upbringing and demonstrated a comparable level of commitment to their offspring. In this sense, engagement in school choice follows a logic of distinction: an evaluative process through which parents determine whom they can trust, who may pose a potential risk, and whom they should therefore prevent their children from encountering.

This is demanding work, as it requires investing time and resources to determine whom and what to rely on. Of course, parents have different resources, and the empirical material indicates that this has an impact on school choice in the sense that the most highly educated parents or those with the most time available (who, in this sample, are also the most affluent) explore more options and, if necessary, push to get their child into a particular school. Consequently, parents with the means and resources tend to opt out of schools they believe have an unfavorable social composition. More precisely, they avoid schools attended by children whose parents lack the interest or resources to research the various options, do not have access to the same sources of information, or are unaware that demonstrating commitment to their child's well-being—by attending parent-teacher meetings, information events, or social activities at kindergartens and schools—serves as a public display of engagement and responsibility, a way of positioning themselves within the social space. The material shows that the most highly engaged parents tend to choose the same schools, leaving the schools they reject to children of less dedicated or less knowledgeable parents.

In this sense, as in many international studies in this field, I found that school choice both reflects and helps construct and maintain social distinctions. However, unlike in Bourdieu and Passeron's classic study (1970), the dynamic at play here is not that the school reflects and legitimizes the cultural tastes of the bourgeoisie or regulates access to the next level of the education system. Nor is it clearly linked to fears of academic decline, as the Danish education system—grounded in an inclusive ideal—is not primarily organized around competition. Instead, the material presented here points to a dominant concern with the school's role as a social meeting place. At least initially, what happens academically is less important than how others influence the child's well-being and formative processes. Thus, while social capital and fear of downward mobility are part of the decision-making process, they do not primarily involve securing access to lucrative networks, but rather shield the child from influences considered incompatible with parents' values. School choice is, therefore, driven by a child-sensitive awareness and a protective impulse that nevertheless functions as a moral boundary (Sayer 2005; Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015)—or what Gullestad (2002) terms an "invisible fence"—between people and groups who possess different resources, have other values and priorities, or display varying degrees of engagement in their children's lives.

School Choice as Moral and Emotional Boundary Work

This article has analyzed parental school choice in a Danish context, demonstrating that the process extends well beyond academic and practical concerns to encompass a wide range of reflections and emotions—from parents' own memories of schools and neighborhoods to their experiences as parents of young children and how they envisage the implications of different social scenarios for the child's future. When weighing the options, parents draw on cultural notions of what constitutes a good childhood, navigating across time and social space to decide what to embrace and what to avoid to secure the best possible experiences for their child.

This study's key contribution to international research on school choice is the centrality of childhood and the sensitivity to children's emotional and social needs. Across a range of financial, social, and educational backgrounds, parents prioritize ensur-

ing a happy and safe childhood above all else. This means tailoring choices to the child's personality and needs while shielding them from influences perceived as negative—particularly peers whose parents are seen as insufficiently involved. Such "concerned cultivation" differs from the existential drama of securing academic success reported in more competitive systems (Skarpenes and Sakslind 2010; Aarseth 2016). Yet the strong emotional engagement shows that, even in this seemingly lower-stakes context, school choice can be a dramatic event. Protecting a child's psychological well-being is not only a core expectation of good parenthood, but it is also part of a status game. Choosing a school involves drawing symbolic boundaries—distancing oneself from parents perceived as having different views on upbringing or as lacking control and insufficiently engaged in their children's social and emotional lives. Such engagement thus functions as a hallmark of moral respectability, legitimizing social distance from those who fall short.

This moral distinction comes to the fore when choosing schools. The choice itself intensifies doubts and concerns about how best to ensure the child's well-being. It triggers a symbolic escalation of assessments—not only of schools but also of people—of who can be trusted and who is worthy of respect. As such, it reinforces cultural distinctions and social boundaries by serving as a broader guideline for evaluating not only individual parents and their interactions with their children but also groups, places, and neighborhoods. In this way, school choice becomes integral to a social imaginary, providing a means of understanding what is up and down in social space and determining which social circles one should align oneself with. School choice does not in itself create segregation, but it can contribute to systematizing and institutionalizing divisions between children, families, neighborhoods, and schools.

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Reviewing the Stigma: A Critical Analysis of Conspiracy Belief in Social Science Research

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Keywords:
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Abstract: The analysis shows that empirical social science studies examining psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy belief are characterized by a persistent deficit orientation, with a strong tendency to pathologize or stigmatize individuals. The core of this research is an empirical content analysis of 25 social sciences studies published between 2020 and 2025.

The analysis identifies a set of recurring patterns in the academic representation of conspiracy believers, including associations with cognitive, social, and psychological deficits, emotional instability, and maladaptive personality traits. The dynamics of marginalization become particularly evident through the examination of discursive practices of delegitimization, which are further sustained by the selective interpretation of research findings.

While some studies acknowledge structural or societal factors that may foster conspiracy beliefs, the narrative remains predominantly individualizing and negative. The findings highlight an ambivalence in the scholarly discourse: although conspiracy beliefs are recognized as complex, multidimensional, and sometimes rooted in legitimate grievances, they are frequently reduced to markers of irrationality or deviance. This suggests the need for greater reflexivity within the scientific community, particularly regarding language, methodological choices, and the balance between critique and stigmatization.

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Background

Individuals who believe in conspiracy theories, often referred to as "conspiracy theorists," are frequently associated with a specific image or stereotype. A closer examination of empirical social science studies published from 2020 to 2025 that focus on the psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers reveals a more nuanced portrayal within this body of academic research.

In the literature, people who believe in conspiracy theories are often portrayed as unable to comprehend the societal complexity of power dynamics and as exhibiting paranoid traits (Fenster 2008). Various negative attributes are used to describe these individuals, such as increased stress, anxiety, avoidant attachment, anomie, political alienation, and low external control (Biddlestone et al. 2025). "This 'misguided' perception of truth forms the basis of most debates surrounding this topic" (Barzen 2024:30).

Recognizing that some conspiracy theories might turn out to be true (e.g., Operation Mockingbird, Watergate, NSA Surveillance scandal) is a crucial step toward developing a more differentiated view of those who consider such theories as potentially plausible (Dentith 2012; Barzen 2024). In this light, belief in specific conspiracy theories may be grounded in real social and political events. As Pigden (1995:1) asks: *"History appears to be littered with conspiracies successful and otherwise […] So why is it naive to believe in conspiracy theories?"*

The following definitions allow for a neutral perspective that acknowledges the possibility that such theories could, in fact, be true. According to Dentith (2012:37), a conspiracy theory is *"an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause."* Similarly, Pigden (1995:4) defines a conspiracy as *"a secret plan on the part of a group to influence events partly by covert action."*

In the literature, critical voices have repeatedly questioned the stigmatization of conspiracy beliefs. Sociological and psychological research often adopts a dismissive, pathologizing stance toward conspiracy thinking (Dentith 2012), despite empirical evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is not

limited to individuals with pathological traits (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). These debates indicate that theories of stigmatization (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001) offer a useful interpretive background for contextualizing the findings discussed later in this article.

Current research shows that conspiracy theories are not believed by a small, marginalized minority, but rather span across a wide range of demographic groups, including age, gender, political orientation, and educational background (Min 2021). Other studies similarly highlight the importance of individual variability in conspiracy beliefs (Oliver and Wood 2014). The value of identifying psychological characteristics associated with conspiracy belief is questionable (Barzen 2025), particularly because it is empirically challenging to distinguish between general conspiracist ideation and belief in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bertlich, and Frenken 2022). Additional limitations in identifying psychological characteristics underlying conspiracy belief arise from the predominant focus on Western countries (Douglas and Sutton 2023), mainstream social media platforms, English-language communication, and individual conspiracy theories (Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng 2023).

Overall, the existing body of research is marked by a high degree of inconsistency and contradiction. This is partly due to the surge in spontaneous scholarly interest in the topic following the emergence of COVID-19 containment measures, often without a shared or consistent definition of conspiracy theories (Mahl, Schäfer, and Zeng 2023). Snagovsky and Stockemer (2024) demonstrate that how conspiracy beliefs are measured strongly depends on the survey format: in an experiment with over 3,500 participants, Likert scales yielded much higher agreement than binary or trichotomous response options. These methodological differences help explain contradictory findings in conspiracy belief research, as different survey formats capture different aspects of agreement and skepticism.

Barzen (2025) summarizes several of the contradictory findings in the literature. For example, while some studies report a relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and right-wing authoritarianism (Bruder et al. 2013), others find no such association (Oliver and Wood 2014). Similarly, the suggested link between conspiracy beliefs and anxiety (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017) is challenged by other research (Adam-Troian et al. 2021). Concerning anxiety, it is also worth critically questioning whether such feelings might stem from knowledge of actual, confirmed conspiracies (Faulkner and Cheney 2013). In addition, the assumption that conspiracy belief is associated with a lack of analytical thinking or low levels of education (Swami et al. 2014) has been disputed by other studies as well (Galliford and Furnham 2017).

Even the widely cited theories of Popper (1945) and Hofstadter (1965) regarding belief in conspiracy theories are inherently pathologizing. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper (1945) criticized the tendency to reduce complex social processes to the actions of a hidden elite, a simplification he regarded as an expression of disturbed perception. In contrast, Pigden (1995) critiques oversimplification and neglect of context in Popper's arguments. Hofstadter (1965), in his essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, coined the term "paranoid style" to describe a mode of thinking characterized by excessive mistrust and emotional exaggeration, which undermines rational political discourse. Both perspectives contribute to interpreting conspiracy be-

liefs as an expression of a pathological mindset, a framing that has profoundly influenced the scientific investigation of conspiracy beliefs. It is important to note that both theories are philosophical reflections rather than empirically grounded studies (Barzen 2025).

Research Interest and Relevance

The current state of research and existing theories suggest that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories may be subject to stigmatization. Despite the large number of studies on conspiracy beliefs, there is currently no systematic investigation of how conspiracy beliefs are portrayed in scientific research. The way a social group is represented in the specific body of empirical research focusing on their psychological and social characteristics can have far-reaching consequences. It not only shapes academic discussions within this field but also societal perceptions and potential political responses toward this "group."

This study addresses this research gap by empirically examining how individuals with conspiracy beliefs are portrayed in empirical literature. A particular focus is placed on whether and in what form stigmatization is evident in these portrayals. The following research question will guide the data collection and analysis: *How do empirical studies describe people who believe in conspiracy theories?*

Although this study draws on a large body of predominantly quantitative studies, the analysis itself takes the form of an in-depth qualitative content analysis. The results of this analysis aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how conspiracy belief is represented in the presented discourse.

Methods

Sampling Strategy and Data Corpus

The data corpus consists of empirical articles, as they reflect current scientific discourses. To reflect the current scientific perspective, this study includes only articles published between 2020 and February 2025. This period also marks an increase in research following debates over conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 measures.

Focusing on peer-reviewed articles as an inclusion criterion ensures the academic quality of the sample. To accommodate diverse methodological approaches, articles employing either qualitative or quantitative research designs were included. The search strategy included identifying empirical studies that describe the psychological and social characteristics of individuals who endorse conspiracy theories. No restriction was imposed on the type of conspiracy theories (e.g., medical or climate-related) to adequately capture the breadth of the topic and enable comparative analysis across different domains.

Reviews, opinion pieces, essays, and theoretical works were excluded to maintain a focus on primary research. Studies addressing conspiracy theories without considering their adherents were excluded, for example, those focusing only on algorithms, dissemination, or media representation.

The data corpus was compiled using Web of Science, chosen for its broad interdisciplinary coverage of social science literature. Web of Science provides precise search and filtering functions that support the selection of relevant sources and ensure transparency in the data collection process (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016).

The *search term* was designed to capture diverse perspectives and ensure broad coverage of empirical studies:

("conspiracy theory" OR "conspiracy belief" OR "conspiracy worldview" OR "conspiracy* mindset" OR "conspiracy* thinking") AND ("research" OR "empiric*" OR "study" OR "qualitative" OR "quantitative") AND ("psychology*" OR "sociological" OR "social" OR "characteristics") not ("review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "essay")*

Figure 1. Sampling strategy

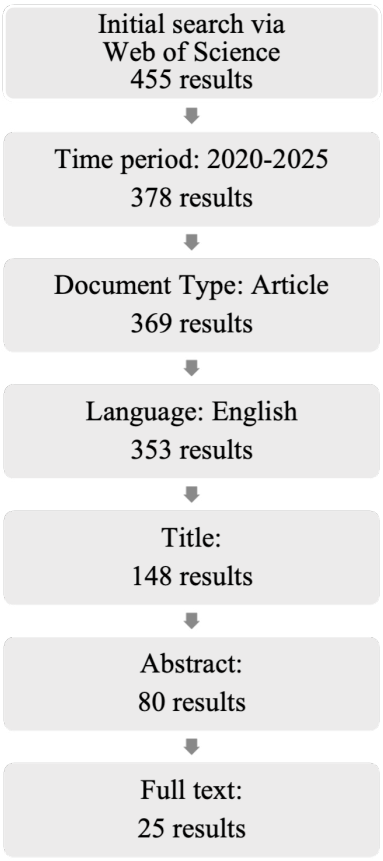


Figure 1 illustrates the search strategy and provides insights into the research field. The initial search yielded 455 results, which were reduced to 378 by limiting the publication period to 2020-2025, highlighting the increase in empirical studies since 2020. Restricting the document type to articles published in English further reduced the results to 353. From the initial search results, only 25 studies met the rigorous inclusion criteria after systematic screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts.

Content Analysis and Discursive Sensitivity

The qualitative content analysis method proposed by Kuckartz (2014) is particularly well-suited for the present research project, as it offers a systematic yet flexible approach to analyzing large text corpora. This method enables the inductive and deductive development of categories within a structured procedure.

A key advantage of this method lies in its combination of structure and openness: the deductive main categories (positive, negative, neutral) provide an initial broad classification, while the stepwise development of inductive subcategories allows for more nuanced differentiation of the representations. Pre-defined theoretical categories did not guide the inductive, data-driven approach. Codes were developed close to the material and were only interpreted in relation to broader theoretical concepts in the discussion.

Coding units were defined in a content-driven manner: segments ranged from individual sentences to entire paragraphs, depending on whether the text addressed a single coherent topic; a new coding unit was created only when a thematic shift occurred. Where a single passage addressed multiple themes or evaluative aspects, it was coded with more than one code accordingly. Importantly, all codes were generated as close to the text as possible, avoiding interpretation beyond what is explicitly

stated. The assignment of passages to the valence categories positive, neutral, or negative was based on explicit evaluative framing: passages were coded as positive when conspiracy believers or conspiracy beliefs were evaluated in affirmative terms, as negative when they were evaluated in deficit-oriented terms, and as neutral when they were limited to descriptive statements reporting empirical findings or theoretical positions without evaluative judgment. This analysis is also informed by a discursively sensitive perspective, paying attention to linguistic strategies and patterns in the narratives to identify implicit power relations and the ways knowledge or worldviews are legitimized or delegitimized (Reisigl and Wodak 2009), which culminates in an explanatory framework on the discursive dynamic of marginalization that is presented in detail in the results section.

Table 4 clearly links the subcategories to their respective codes, and the results section provides examples in direct quotes from the texts, ensuring the analysis is fully traceable. Coding was conducted with the support of MAXQDA software. In line with Glaser and Strauss (1967), theoretical saturation at the category level was achieved after analyzing 18 articles, as no new overarching categories emerged thereafter. Subsequent articles continued to yield additional codes, but these consistently mapped onto already established categories (e.g., cognitive deficits, psychological deficits), further saturating them rather than expanding the categorical structure.

Table 1 provides a concise overview of the articles' content, including authors and main topics. A full, detailed table is available in Appendix 1, which summarizes key aspects of the 25 selected publications, including study design, sample, methodology, significant findings, and limitations. Journal titles were also included in Appendix 1 to indicate the disciplinary context of each article. For publications containing multiple studies (Marchlewska et al. 2021; Bertin 2024; Enders et al. 2024), the first two were prioritized for their relevance. Where funding information was reported, the studies were supported by public research funding bodies or academic institutions, and no systematic conflicts of interest were indicated.

Across the corpus, conspiracy beliefs are predominantly operationalized using generic conspiracy mentality or broad belief scales that aggregate heterogeneous contents, often combining political, health-related, and cosmological narratives within a single measure. As content-specific instruments are comparatively rare, the corpus does not permit systematic conclusions regarding whether stigmatizing framings vary by the specific type of conspiracy theory under investigation.

Table 1. Data corpus overview: Authors and Topics (CT—Conspiracy Theory; CB—Conspiracy Belief)

Study Info	Research Topic
Albath et al. 2024	Correlation of CBs & psychological needs
Ballová Mikušková 2021	Correlation of CBs, conspiracy mentality & analytic cognitive style
Bertin 2024	Effects of induced victimhood on COVID-19 CBs
Bogatyreva 2024	Correlation of high prostate CTs belief & high institutional trust
Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen 2021	Associations between conspiracy mentality & schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation & right-wing authoritarianism
Enders et al. 2021	Examining the structure & organization of CBs & their coherence as a belief system
Enders et al. 2023a	Modeling correlates of conspiracy thinking
Enders et al. 2023b	Correlation of anti-social personality traits & anti-establishment views with CBs
Enders et al. 2024	Sociodemographic correlates of CBs
Frenken and Imhoff 2022	Correlation of CBs & detection of facial trustworthiness cues
Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024	Differentiating the correlates of judgments of plausible vs. implausible CTs
Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022	Correlation of CBs & schizotypy traits, autistic traits, cognitive flexibility & scientific reasoning
Hall, Franks, and Bauer 2025	Exploring the coexistence of conspiracist & non-conspiracist beliefs
Hausschild et al. 2023	Associations between CBs & epistemic stance, mentalizing & paranoid distress
Lantian et al. 2021	Correlation of critical thinking & CBs
Leveaux et al. 2022	Comparing the lay representations of conspiracy believers & non-believers
Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker 2024	Effects of brooding about societal problems on CBs
Marchlewska et al. 2021	Association of different coping strategies with CBs
Min 2021	Investigation of sociodemographic factors among conspiracy believers
O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus 2025	How belief in a just world, ambiguity tolerance & scientific reasoning influence CBs
Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020	Correlation of CBs & intuitive thinking and jumping to conclusions
Sambol et al. 2024	Correlation of CBs & working memory, cognitive flexibility & affective decision making
Stanovich and Toplak 2024	Association between CBs & rational thinking
Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas 2024	CBs & satisfaction in interpersonal relationships
Yendell and Herbert 2022	Associations between conspiracy mentality & anti-democratic attitudes, racism & religiosity

Source: Self-elaboration.

Results

Common Themes and Main Findings

Most studies report statistically significant, yet small-to-moderate, correlations between conspiracy beliefs and a range of psychological, cognitive, and social variables. A consistent focus on negative attributes is apparent: Conspiracy belief is predominantly conceptualized as a problematic belief system, associated with undesirable traits or behaviors.

Concerning psychological traits, studies frequently examine associations between conspiracy beliefs and characteristics such as paranoia, schizotypy, psychopathy, and narcissism (e.g., Dyrendal et al. 2021; Georgiou et al. 2022; Enders et al. 2023a; Hausschild et al. 2023).

Research on cognitive styles highlights relationships between conspiracy beliefs and a lack of analytical or rational thinking, as well as cognitive biases such as intuitive thinking and jumping to conclusions (e.g., Pytlik et al. 2020; Lantian et al. 2021; Stanovich and Toplak 2024; Sambol et al. 2024). Studies focusing on social and affective factors investigate links between conspiracy beliefs and low institutional trust, feelings of victimhood, or maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., Marchlewska et al. 2021; Albath et al. 2024; Bertin 2024).

A cross-cutting pattern across studies is that findings are mostly correlational and often weak, with no study establishing causality. This significantly limits the explanatory power of individual studies and reflects a field that remains theoretically and empirically fragmented. Nonetheless, some studies report moderate to strong effects:

- Albath and colleagues (2024) found a moderate negative correlation between conspiracy beliefs and the need for control (b = –0.41). However, the measurement of conspiracy beliefs in this study was limited to a single item, raising concerns about construct validity.
- Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen (2021) reported moderate to strong correlations between conspiracy beliefs and paranormal beliefs (r = .58 for women, r = .45 for men), as well as between conspiracy beliefs and social dominance orientation (r = .44 for women, r = .46 for men).
- Enders and colleagues (2023a) identified several psychological traits moderately associated with conspiracy belief, including anomie (r = .40), manicheanism (r = .37), populism (r = .38), and political violence (r = .30).
- Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff (2024) found a strong correlation between conspiracy mentality and belief in implausible conspiracy theories (r = .512).
- Stanovich and Toplak (2024) identified superstitious thinking as the strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs (β = .340) in a comprehensive assessment of rational thinking.

These examples represent the most robust findings in the current literature, yet they remain relatively scarce and indicate that the field lacks cumulative evidence and is marked by many limitations. Table 2 summarizes recurring conceptual, methodological, and sampling-related issues identified across the reviewed studies. These issues are not treated as empirical findings in their own right, but as analytic observations emerging from the systematic reading and comparison of the literature.

Table 2. Recurring limitations across studies

Conceptual issues	Methodological Issues	Sample Biases
• Some studies lack a clear definition of CTs or conflate them with related concepts such as misinformation. • Little differentiation between types of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., plausible vs. implausible). • Inconsistent operationalizations of conspiracy beliefs across studies. • Limited theoretical grounding of the variables measured. • Predominant focus on individual traits; structural and social contexts are largely neglected. • Stigmatizing framings are often left unexamined.	• Predominantly quantitative, self-report, and correlational designs. • Mostly small effect sizes. • No causal inferences. • Use of modified or self-developed scales with limited validity & few items. • Low internal consistency of measures (SPQ, CRT, ETQ). • Artificial experimental settings in some studies. • Lack of replication & inconsistent measurements across studies. • Limited generalizability of findings.	• Some non-representative samples (e.g., students, Prolific users, skewed gender ratios). • Incomplete demographic data in some studies (e.g., age or education). • Overrepresentation of Western countries (USA, Germany, UK). • Underrepresentation of marginalized, older, or less-educated populations. • Recruitment via social media or convenience sampling in some studies. • Small sample sizes in some studies.

Source: Self-elaboration.

As already mentioned in the background of this article, this review reiterates the limitation of the current state of research: contradictory findings. These are particularly evident in sociodemographic factors. So, are conspiracy believers really "socio-economic 'losers'" (Enders et al. 2024:12)? The following table (Table 3) contrasts some of the central conflicting findings, each illustrated with one example study. Quotes from the material supporting the study selection are in Appendix 2.

Table 3. Contradicting findings

Conspiracy believers…	Yes	No
tend to follow an ideology	Enders et al. 2024	Stanovich and Toplak 2024
have a lower level of education	Yendell and Herbert 2022	Frenken and Imhoff 2022
are more religious	Min 2021	Marchlewska et al. 2021
tend to be older	Min 2021	Enders et al. 2024
are more likely to be male	Enders et al. 2024	Dyrendal et al. 2024
are more likely to be white	Min 2021	Enders et al. 2024
have low analytical thinking	Ballová Mikušková 2021	Georgiou et al. 2022
are a threat to democratic values	Yendell and Herbert 2022	Hall et al. 2025
have a psychological disorder	Georgiou et al. 2022	Pytlik et al. 2020
show maladaptive mistrust	Frenken and Imhoff 2022	Hausschild et al. 2023
show high gullibility	Lantian et al. 2021	Hausschild et al. 2023

Source: Self-elaboration.

Despite frequent attempts to define conspiracy believers in terms of negative traits, empirical findings remain contradictory. This suggests that conspiracy belief is not reliably associated with a specific "deficit profile" but may instead reflect a complex, context-dependent phenomenon.

In light of the inconsistent and often deficit-oriented findings in the quantitative literature, two qualitative approaches attempt to capture the complexity of conspiracy belief. These studies explore how such beliefs are formed, maintained, and meaningfully integrated into individual worldviews.

Hall, Franks, and Bauer (2025) conducted in-depth interviews with 41 participants to examine how conspiracist and non-conspiracist beliefs coexist within individuals. Their thematic coding revealed five escalating types of belief coexistence, from cognitive dissonance to integrative frameworks. This points to a nuanced, internally dialogical structure of belief systems, rather than a rigid conspiracist mindset.

The study by Leveaux and colleagues (2022) includes qualitative elements and uses lexometric analysis to examine how participants (n = 939) define conspiracy theories. They identified four distinct clusters of lay representations, which correlated with the level of conspiracist belief. Interestingly, those with low conspiracy beliefs focused more on pathologizing believers, whereas high believers emphasized political content. Notably, Leveaux and colleagues (2022) are the only study in the corpus that does not include negative characterizations of conspiracy believers. Although participants report pathologizing attributions, these are presented descriptively, with multiple perspectives and interpretive possibilities offered, such that the study itself refrains from reproducing evaluative judgments.

Together, these studies offer a more differentiated view of conspiracy belief, not as a fixed deficit, but as a dynamic, socially and cognitively embedded phenomenon.

Among the quantitative studies, four can be identified that take a largely neutral stance toward belief in conspiracy theories (Frenken and Imhoff 2022; Bogatyreva 2024; Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024; Stanovich and Toplak 2024). What sets these studies apart is their use of neutral definitions of conspiracy belief that do not presuppose cognitive or moral deficiencies. Instead, they consider systemic and potentially legitimate reasons for the emergence of such beliefs. Moreover, these studies explicitly address the stigmatization of conspiracy believers. Negative findings are reported as study-specific results, not as facts. In total, only six studies adopt a largely neutral tone.

Results of the Content Analysis

The following table (Table 4) presents the main categories and codes derived from the content analysis. Categories and codes are elaborated and empirically illustrated with quotations from the material in the subsequent results section. The results are grouped according to three main categories: positive (green), neutral (yellow), and negative (red). For each subcategory, all assigned codes are listed to provide a transparent insight into how conspiracy beliefs are described. Of the coded text passages, 45 were classified as positive (distributed across 14 articles), 168 as neutral (distributed across all 25 articles), and 1,237 as negative (distributed across 24

articles). These absolute frequencies represent coding density under the adopted coding rules and are not normalized by article length or number of coded segments. Taken together, they point to a substantial asymmetry in how conspiracy believers are characterized across the coded material.

Table 4. Results of the Content Analysis

Categories	Codes
CB: justified response	Rooted in legitimate social causes, based on real negative experiences with powerful groups, suppression risks harm if concerns are valid
CB: adaptive mistrust	CB as an epistemic tool, adaptive strategy of mistrust, fosters democratic values via critical scrutiny of hidden processes, evolutionary advantage in detecting harmful coalitions, more intense information seeking
CB: mental utility	CB as a cognitive & psychological benefit, linked to higher analytical thinking, a stronger sense of meaning in life, increases self-esteem
Descriptions & Context	CB is widespread across society, varies by region & topic, spreads via social media, distinction between a general conspiratorial mindset & specific CTs is essential, CTs can function as belief systems, show parallels to religion, are not necessarily monological
Neutral mental traits	CB is a psychologically normal & context-dependent psychological phenomenon, the origins and influencing factors of CBs are unclear, the link to cognition is controversial, can reflect a distinct cognitive style, CTs believers differentiate between plausible and implausible theories, conspiracy mentality can be learned
Lack of associations	Individual belief influences how conspiracy theories are defined and perceived, no consistent link between conspiracy belief & negative traits (mistrust, mental disorders, low analytical thinking, gullibility, ideological extremes, excessive social media use), no consistent association with demographic factors (gender, age, education, political orientation, religion, ethnicity), inconsistent findings
Cognitive deficits	CB is unjustified/irrational, is based on magical/paranormal thinking, offers simple explanations for contradictory or complex situations, results from a low level of education, is based on a false perception of malevolence & power, is based on logical fallacies, CTs believers show deficient thinking, do not think analytically/rationally/objectively, prefer intuitive thinking, cannot assess the credibility of sources, glorify their critical thinking, misjudge trustworthiness, are naive & gullible, are easily manipulated, believe anything as long as it contradicts the official version, believe suspicious theories, have weak arguments, are poorly informed, misjudge their thinking ability, have a populist attitude, reject scientific consensus, exhibit manichean thinking, have a confirmation bias, have a cognitive bias (jumping-to-conclusions)
Psychological deficits	CB stems from a general psychological predisposition, is a psychological deviation, results from low psychological need satisfaction, leads to paranoid stress, is clinically relevant and should be treated, is a dysfunctional/avoidant coping strategy, CTs believers have an insecure attachment style, suffer from their inner world, are psychopathic, have experienced trauma, have delusions, tend to be neurodivergent, have autistic & schizotypal traits, experience anomie, ruminate
Emotional instability	CB is caused by stress, results from frustration of basic needs, can help cope with a frustrated sense of meaning in life, provides a sense of control, CTs believers have difficulties regulating their emotions, believe in an unjust world, are strongly convinced of threats, have unjustified fears/paranoia/insecurity, are misled by emotionally-charged narratives
Maladaptive personality traits	CB changes a person's identity, CTs believers are selfish, ignorant, racist, sadistic, pessimistic, argumentative, dogmatic, eccentric, cynical, not open-minded, willing to knowingly share false information online, tend to be criminal, violent, correlate with dark triad traits (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy), exploit the victim role, have low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, antisocial orientation, want to be special

Categories	Codes
Social & adaptive deficits	CB leads to social withdrawal, dissatisfaction in interpersonal relationships, family division, CTs believers see themselves as victims, are resistant to interventions, are distrustful of others (interpersonal, institutions, authorities, experts), try to convince others, use social media extensively, struggle to take others' perspectives, seek acceptance within CBs social groups, are more likely to be unemployed, feel socially excluded or isolated, have difficulties adapting to society
Negative societal consequences	CB should be reduced, threatens democracy, leads to social division, fosters racism, discrimination & antisemitism, CTs are instrumentalized in non-democratic countries, CTs believers are spreading conspiracy theories, politically disengaged, questioning election results, sowing political distrust, holding extreme political positions and ideologies, tend to radicalize, are prone to right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, show anti-establishment attitudes, have lower pro-environmental attitudes, exhibit negative health behavior, frequently abstain from voting

Source: Self-elaboration.

All positive categories converge on a crucial insight: conspiracy theories can be, or become, true. This point is raised explicitly by Stanovich and Toplak (2024:18), who ask in their discussion: "In a world of increasing complexity and global interaction—and increasing potential conflicts among fractious and polarised interest groups—why wouldn't you think that some of the groups were colluding and coordinating to advance a goal that remains empirically opaque to the public?"

Concrete examples of real-world manipulation or public health scandals mentioned in the studies include the Iran-Contra Affair and the Watergate scandal (Hausschild et al. 2023), as well as the contaminated blood and Depakine scandals in France (Leveaux et al. 2022). A certain degree of conspiracy belief is described as an adaptive strategy of mistrust, sometimes necessary to uncover political corruption (e.g., Frenken and Imhoff 2022; Hausschild et al. 2023; Stanovich and Toplak 2024).

Several studies include neutral descriptions of conspiracy beliefs. Some of these statements provide contextual or descriptive information without evaluative framing. For example, Leveaux and colleagues (2022:335) note that "the media coverage of conspiracy theories (CTs) has drastically increased over the past few years." Sambol and colleagues (2024:1) write that "Conspiracies have always existed in society," and Enders and colleagues (2024:2) observe that "most people believe one or a few conspiracy theories."

Statements categorized as neutral also include findings that do not confirm assumed negative associations. Enders and colleagues (2023a:7), for example, report that "neither [is] the extremity of ideological (0.004, $p > .999$) or partisan (−0.04, $p > .999$) orientation" significantly associated with conspiracy belief. Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff (2024:19) explicitly challenge earlier findings by stating: "Contrary to previous research…our findings did not provide evidence supporting a general bias of conspiracy mentality in informational processing." Likewise, Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:6) note that their results "did not find a significant association" between conspiracy beliefs and analytic thinking.

The presence of such neutral statements, even within studies that predominantly frame conspiracy beliefs in negative terms, suggests that the discourse is not

monolithic. Rather, it contains moments of restraint, complexity, and even contradiction, indicating that alternative perspectives exist within the field.

Looking at the section of the table (Table 4) on negative attributions, it becomes evident that conspiracy beliefs are predominantly framed as resulting from intrapersonal deficits.

Cognitive deficits are particularly frequently cited in this context, often in a derogatory manner. For example: "Given this, it seems plausible that individuals with heightened cognitive flexibility, working memory, and affective decision-making capabilities might also display reduced conspiracy beliefs, due to their increased capacity to effectively evaluate evidence and resist unverified or emotionally charged narratives" (Sambol et al. 2024:2). In some cases, conspiracy believers are even denied the capacity to act as rational citizens: "It is important not to neglect efforts in critical thinking education that would allow individuals to behave as autonomous and informed citizens" (Lantian et al. 2021:681; see also Ballová Mikušková 2021). Additionally, statements based on weak effects without establishing causality can be found: "As hypothesised, it was found [that] individuals with high CT beliefs would have the highest clinical scores, lower scientific reasoning scores and a stronger bias against disconfirmatory evidence" (Georgiou et al. 2022:8).

In several studies, conspiracy belief is framed as a consequence of underlying *psychological deficits* or unmet psychological needs. This perspective is reflected in pathologizing language and clinical framings, such as references to "schizotypal and autistic traits" (Georgiou et al. 2022:1) or the proposal that research on conspiracy belief may inform "therapeutic and preventive interventions" (Hausschild et al. 2023:8). Such approaches construct conspiracy belief as a deviation from psychological normality, further emphasized by phrases like the "urgent need to combat the non-normative behaviors associated with conspiracy theory beliefs" (Enders et al. 2024:2). Moreover, conspiracy belief is portrayed as a maladaptive coping mechanism, when people are "seeking refuge in conspiracy theories" (Albath et al. 2024:10), or as a consequence of impaired psychological need regulation: "deviations in psychological need satisfaction may precede conspiracy belief" (Albath et al. 2024:3). Such representations not only individualize and medicalize conspiracy belief, but also contribute to a discursive construction of conspiracy beliefs as psychologically deviant, thereby reinforcing normative boundaries of mental health, rationality, and social conformity.

A further prominent category concerns *emotional instability* as a factor contributing to conspiracy beliefs: "People turn to conspiracy beliefs when they feel uncertainty, when they feel unsafe, and when they experience lack of (sociopolitical) control and psychological empowerment, and feel powerless and anxious" (Ballová Mikušková 2021:199). Across several studies, individuals prone to conspiracy thinking are described as struggling with emotion regulation and stress adaptation. Marchlewska and colleagues (2021:544), for instance, suggest that "improving people's ability to cope with stress might inadvertently reduce the appeal of conspiracy theories." Similarly, Bertin (2024:35) frames conspiracy believers as emotionally vulnerable, highlighting the "victimizing effects of conspiracy beliefs." Hausschild and colleagues (2023:2) describe them as experiencing "difficulties in self- and interpersonal regulation and reduced adaptation to society," while also emphasizing that epistemic mistrust and paranoid distress often remain unregulated: "indi-

viduals may try to regulate this distress via 'organizing' it within conspiracy theories" (Hausschild et al. 2023:2). These studies suggest conspiracy beliefs may not simply stem from a deficit in cognition or information literacy, but from affective instability and unmet emotional needs.

Another category refers to negative and *maladaptive personality traits*. Conspiracy believers are, for example, described as exhibiting characteristics associated with the "dark triad personality traits" (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy) (Enders et al. 2023a:1), and possessing a "weakened ego" (Yendell and Herbert 2022:232). Yendell and Herbert (2022:238) find that "conspiracy mentality and belief in corona conspiracies go hand in hand with a lack of support for democracy, a lack of a sense of political agency, and with racist, anti-Muslim, and right-wing extremist attitudes." Moreover, their worldview is portrayed as "negatively distorted" (Liekefett et al. 2024:15) and "relatively pessimistic" (Enders et al. 2023a:9). Yendell and Herbert (2022:233) also note a pronounced "desire to be unique," while Enders and colleagues (2023b:255) describe them as "people with anti-social and conflictual styles who are inherently less amenable to 'correction' or persuasion by outside forces." These findings culminate in a portrayal of conspiracy believers as psychologically and socially deviant.

Across the analyzed studies, conspiracy belief is frequently associated with various forms of *social and adaptive deficits*. Toribio-Flórez and colleagues (2024:2) suggest that conspiracist ideation can transform personal identity in ways that "are likely to further distance conspiracy believers from their social network and diminish the quality of their relationships." This notion is echoed by Albath and colleagues (2024:2), who describe feelings of "being socially excluded and ignored by others" as a central experience of conspiracy believers. Frenken and Imhoff (2022:3) further emphasize a pervasive "undifferentiated and generalized mistrust attitude," which contributes to social alienation and a breakdown of interpersonal trust. Together, these findings construct a narrative in which conspiracy belief is a socially disintegrating force.

The last subcategory summarizes codes that describe *negative societal consequences* of conspiracy belief. Yendell and Herbert (2022:229) argue that they are "associated with significant public threats and harms," while O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus (2025:4) explicitly refer to them as "harmful beliefs." Similarly, Marchlewska and colleagues (2021:545) note that "conspiracy beliefs may lead to socially undesirable behavior" and undermine social cohesion. Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:2) emphasize that conspiracy beliefs are linked to "the rejection of generally accepted social norms." According to Min (2021:1), conspiracy theories "present serious challenges to society as they distort public opinions and attack the informational basis of democracy." Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas (2024:2) highlight that such beliefs "have negative consequences, not just due to their oppositional nature, but also as perceived threats to common goods accepted by the social majority," and Hausschild and colleagues (2023:2) warn that "On a societal level, individuals' more extreme positioning towards socially transmitted information in specific domains may ultimately be a factor in the forming of irreconcilable groups and an indicator of societal separation." Taken together, these studies construct conspiracy belief as a destabilizing force for a democratic society.

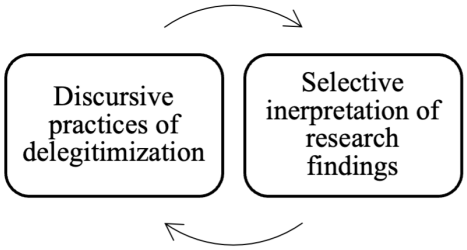
Overall, the negative attributions found in the analyzed studies follow a strongly individualizing,

deficit-oriented narrative. They pathologize belief in conspiracy theories by framing it as a symptom of cognitive, emotional, or social failure. This suggests a moralizing stance and reflects dominant discursive patterns that construct conspiracy beliefs as a form of deviance from socially accepted standards.

Discursive Dynamic of Marginalization

The dynamics of marginalization of conspiracy believers in the analyzed studies become particularly evident through the examination of *discursive practices of delegitimization*, which are further sustained by the *selective interpretation of research findings* (Fig. 2). The concept of "delegitimization" was not applied as a code within the content analysis but is useful as an explanatory analytical key category for synthesizing the overall findings, particularly the recurring negative attributions, informed by a discursively sensitive reading attentive to power relations and processes of epistemic devaluation (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

Figure 2. Discursive Dynamic of Marginalization



Source: Self-elaboration.

Discursive delegitimization through devaluation occurs mostly implicitly, for example, by associating conspiracy beliefs with a range of negative variables. This is, for instance, evident in the claim that "we should understand anti-social personality traits and conflictual behaviours as characteristics of the types of people that are attracted to [conspiracy belief]" (Enders et al. 2023b:256).

Explicit delegitimization, marked by a mocking and openly scornful tone, can also be observed in formulations such as: "the conspiracy myth is no longer about strengthening the weakened ego, but about reshaping the world: In the world of conspiracy ideologists, the reality principle no longer applies. The world is supposed to adapt to one's own wishes and needs" (Yendell and Herbert 2022:232). This kind of rhetoric signals a shift from analytical description to polemical judgment.

An openly derogatory example can also be found in the sarcastic title: "Maybe a Free Thinker but Not a Critical One" (Lantian et al. 2021:1). Through irony, the title highlights the alleged lack of critical thinking among conspiracy believers, contributing to their symbolic devaluation.

A similarly condescending tone is evident in descriptions such as "people who fall down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories" (Toribio-Flórez et al. 2024:2), which imply a loss of rationality and control. Conspiracy believers are portrayed as unable to accurately assess their cognitive abilities, as evidenced by the recurring observation that they describe themselves as researchers or investigators (Pytlik et al. 2020). However, this self-perception is frequently presented with irony, implying that these individuals believe they are engaged in critical inquiry, while they are thought to be drawn to oversimplified explanations for complex problems they fail to understand (Lantian et al. 2021; Liekefett et al. 2024). This rhetorical strategy subtly ridicules

their epistemic aspirations, reinforcing their exclusion from legitimate knowledge production.

Conspiracy beliefs are described as "non-normative beliefs that currently concern social scientists and political observers" (Enders et al. 2023b:248) and are often portrayed as something that should be reduced. However, such reduction is described as unlikely because conspiracy believers are attributed with numerous negative traits, suggesting that interventions would be ineffective: "those who exhibit the highest levels of conspiracy thinking also possess psychological and political traits (e.g., dogmatism, argumentative, distrusting, narcissistic) that would seemingly make them hostile to perceived corrections or interventions from outsiders" (Enders et al. 2023a:9).

Besides devaluations, many studies seem primarily concerned with confirming their hypotheses, often failing to demonstrate the critical thinking they claim conspiracy believers lack. An example is Sambol and colleagues (2024:4), who, despite their study showing no evidence of causality, conclude that *"[f]uture research should explore whether cognitive exercises or 'brain training' programs targeting working memory and cognitive flexibility can reduce an individual's susceptibility to conspiracy theories."*

Another issue in this field concerns the use of titles that imply a strong connection or even causality, such as Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020:1): *"Thinking Preferences and Conspiracy Belief: Intuitive Thinking and the Jumping to Conclusions Bias as a Basis for the Belief in Conspiracy Theories."* Despite the suggestive title, the study produced only weak results without establishing causality, relied on a non-representative sample with generally low levels of conspiracy belief, and was based on an artificial experimental design.

The narrative of the intellectually or psychologically deficient conspiracy believer is maintained through selective interpretation and framing of results, aligning findings with preconceived hypotheses, even when the empirical support is weak. For instance, Min (2021:1) reports that conspiracy believers tend to be "older White males with high conservatism and Protestantism" despite only weak statistical associations. Similarly, Yendell and Herbert (2022:236) state optimistically that their results "provide important information on the connections between conspiracy mentality, religiosity and political or anti-democratic attitudes" and link these findings to the concept of the "authoritarian syndrome" (Decker et al. 2020), although their data are based on weak effects without causality (see also Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020; Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022; Sambol et al. 2024). In some cases, this tendency goes so far that practical implications for therapeutic interventions with conspiracy believers are derived from similarly weak findings (Hausschild et al. 2023).

A similar dynamic occurs when studies report findings that could cast conspiracy believers in a positive light, only to then undermine these implications through reinterpretation. Albath and colleagues (2024), for instance, consider a link between conspiracy belief and increased meaning in life and self-esteem, but ultimately reverse the association, attributing it to temporary fluctuations in meaning and narcissism instead. Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl (2020) briefly acknowledge traits such as analytical thinking, only to frame them as misperceptions or motivated reasoning. Ballová Mikušková (2021:191) notes potential social benefits, yet these are quickly subordinated to "more serious disadvantages." Such patterns suggest a tendency to undermine findings that might challenge the prevailing narrative.

Although there appears to be some awareness of the potential legitimacy of conspiracy thinking, the dominant negative narrative is maintained. Sympathy is extended only to a limited subset of conspiracy believers: "with respect to individuals whose social groups have endured subjugation and even the perpetration of real conspiracies. In other words, patterns in the sociodemographic correlates of conspiracism may be interpreted to paint a sympathetic picture of at least some conspiracy theory believers" (Enders et al. 2024:12).

Discussion

Theoretical Context: The Stigma of Conspiracy Theorists

Stigma theory is not introduced as an explanatory model that structured the coding process, but as an interpretive framework to contextualize and critically reflect on the patterns identified in the results. Erving Goffman (1963) defines *stigma* as an attribute that discredits an individual in the eyes of society and marks them as *different* or *inferior*. Stigmatization is not an individual trait but a social process, shaped by normative ascriptions and societal power structures. Goffman distinguishes between various types of stigma, including character-based stigma (conceptual overlap with the category of maladaptive personality traits), which refers to perceived moral or psychological flaws. He emphasizes that stigma affects both how individuals are socially perceived and how they perceive themselves. Particularly relevant in the context of conspiracy beliefs is the notion of discreditable stigma, stigmatizing attributes that are not immediately visible and can be concealed. It is likely that individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs may often choose to hide their views to avoid social exclusion or discrimination.

Drawing from this theoretical perspective, the common pathologization of conspiracy belief can be critically examined. Pathologization is understood as one mechanism of stigmatization rather than its equivalent. Frequent attributions of emotional and cognitive deficits can be understood as stigmatizing practices that not only devalue conspiracy beliefs psychologically but also contribute to the social marginalization of those who hold such views. By labelling conspiracy believers as "mentally ill" or "socially dysfunctional," scientific discourse reproduces power structures that delegitimize dissenting perspectives and push those affected into a damaged social identity. This reflects the function of stigma described by Goffman, as a mechanism of social control that reinforces norms and enables social exclusion.

The stigmatization of conspiracy beliefs can produce significant epistemic inequality. Many empirical studies implicitly position researchers as having privileged access to "truth," thereby framing alternative perspectives as irrational or pathological rather than engaging with them meaningfully. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as a process involving labeling, stereotyping, social separation, status loss, and discrimination, all of which are reinforced by power structures. When the label "conspiracy theorist" is applied uncritically or instrumentally, it can lead to the dismissal of legitimate doubts about official narratives.

To make explicit how the empirically derived categories relate to established concepts of stigmatization, the following paragraph summarizes how the findings map onto core components of stigma theory. The identified categories can be related to key elements of stigmatization as conceptualized by Goffman (1963) and by Link and Phelan (2001). Attributions such as cognitive deficits, psychologi-

cal deficits, emotional instability, and maladaptive personality traits function as forms of labeling and stereotyping. Constructions of negative societal consequences, social deficits, and maladaptivity further contribute to processes of social separation and status loss by positioning conspiracy believers as socially inferior. In contrast, categories such as justified response, adaptive mistrust, and mental utility complicate these stigmatizing constructions by framing conspiracy belief as contextually meaningful rather than inherently pathological.

Linking the findings with Goffman's stigma theory shows that stigmatizing conspiracy beliefs reflects broader power structures. Research should therefore avoid stigmatizing attributions and more carefully capture its social complexity. This analytical stance resonates with Becker's (1967) call to temporarily take the perspective of marginalized groups to understand how social judgments are produced. Becker's notion of "hierarchies of credibility" (1967:241) further helps to situate the delegitimization of conspiracy belief within broader power relations, in which those labelled as conspiracy theorists are often positioned as socially inferior. A similar perspective can be found within the sociology of scientific knowledge, particularly the Edinburgh Strong Programme, which emphasizes suspending judgments about the truth or falsity of beliefs to examine how knowledge claims are socially produced (Barnes and Bloor 1982; Bloor 1984). From this perspective, conspiracy beliefs can be approached as contested claims within specific epistemic contexts rather than evaluated solely in terms of their presumed correctness.

Methodological Implications

Methodologically, the strong deficit focus and attempts to construct psychological profiles raise questions, especially given contradictory findings that show conspiracy belief as a complex, society-wide phenomenon. Linking conspiracy beliefs to ethnicity (e.g., Min 2021; Enders et al. 2023a) appears particularly questionable. At this point, it appears that the scientific community may have allowed itself to engage in a practice reminiscent of what it often attributes to conspiracy believers: confirmation bias and the search for simplistic explanations for complex social phenomena.

Most studies in this field rely on quantitative designs, yet it may be premature to focus solely on them. Rather than testing often speculative hypotheses (Popper 1945; Hofstadter 1965), exploratory work could clarify which aspects of conspiracy belief are relevant. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note, theory risks being confirmed by selective evidence. Acknowledging the subjectivity of research decisions underscores the value of qualitative methods that foster reflexivity.

Measuring conspiracy belief quantitatively is complex. The line between conspiracy and reality can be narrow, and it matters whether one examines specific theories or a general conspiratorial mindset. Precise definitions are crucial; overly negative, undifferentiated ones risk producing results of limited interpretive value. The development of scales faces additional challenges due to the potentially shifting truth-value of conspiracy theories. A notable example is belief in COVID-19-related conspiracies. As Bertin (2024:29) notes: "The measures were the same as in Study 1, except that I modified two items of the COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs scale because they referred to outdated political events." When constructing scales, it is also important to distinguish between falsifiable claims (e.g., the vaccine alters DNA) and politically charged interpretations

(e.g., the death toll has been exaggerated) (items from Enders et al. 2024). Furthermore, some items may be problematic because they reflect reasonable opinions about the socio-political world. For instance, the widely used Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al. 2013) includes statements such as: "I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about" and "I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions." Agreement with such items may simply indicate a realistic view of political and bureaucratic processes, rather than an "irrational" response (Stanovich and Toplak 2024:17).

Many scales additionally focus on absurd or easily falsifiable theories, thereby capturing only the extreme, irrational end of conspiratorial thinking. This risks distorting the overall picture, giving the impression that conspiracy belief is inherently "disordered" or pathological (Stanovich and Toplak 2024:17). Items such as those concerning alien contact can further reduce the content validity of scales if no distinction is made between socially relevant conspiracies (politics, health, power) and more fantastical theories. For this reason, Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker (2024) deliberately excluded such items from their measurement.

Whenever conspiracy beliefs are linked to negative intrapersonal deficits, structural issues are overlooked, and the substantive existence of conspiracy theories themselves is effectively negated. Therefore, it would be valuable to conduct correlational studies examining the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and positive traits, such as empathy, creativity, or prosocial behavior, an area that remains largely unexplored in the current literature.

Practical Implications

How societies confront conspiracy beliefs serves as a test for democratic resilience. The vitality of democratic systems is revealed in how they accommodate dissent (Boese et al. 2021). Striking a careful balance between safeguarding against misinformation and maintaining space for critical inquiry can be understood as a marker of democratic robustness.

For policymakers, this implies that conspiracy beliefs should not be dismissed wholesale. More productive responses involve addressing the underlying social conditions that make such narratives persuasive, ranging from deficits in transparency to experiences of corruption and entrenched power asymmetries. Strengthening genuine transparency can help to undercut the perceived necessity of conspiracy thinking. Rather than stigmatization, democratic institutions should foster participatory arenas, such as citizen dialogues, community forums, and other inclusive deliberative spaces, that enable constructive engagement (Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014).

Media representation is equally consequential. Portraying believers in conspiracies in disparaging ways risks deepening social divides. In contrast, nuanced reporting that differentiates between unfounded claims and legitimate grievances creates openings for more inclusive and neutral public debate. Sensationalist coverage that amplifies mistrust should therefore be avoided (Čejková and Macková 2025).

For social work and related fields, the challenge is to take conspiracy beliefs seriously without dismissing them as irrational. Such beliefs may serve

as coping strategies, reflect distrust, or stem from marginalization. Distinguishing legitimate concerns from unfounded convictions is essential (Nera and Schöpfer 2023). Sensitive engagement helps maintain trust, while fostering critical media literacy beyond debunking "fake news" requires awareness of power relations and discursive framings. Empowerment-oriented approaches can strengthen democratic participation and resilience (Muringa and Adjin-Tettey 2024).

Researchers should reflect on their positionality and avoid pathologizing language, as labeling conspiracy believers as "irrational" can reinforce stigma, deepen polarization, and hinder dialogue. Dismissive portrayals may also weaken public trust in science if people feel their views are devalued.

Limitations

The corpus of 25 empirical articles, published between 2020 and 2025, provides a focused insight into contemporary discursive patterns on conspiracy beliefs. However, the restricted time frame limits the ability to assess longer-term changes in discursive strategies. Examining such historical shifts would require a follow-up study with a broader temporal scope. Restricting the search to English-language articles, although justified by the dominance of English in international research on conspiracy theories, might overlook important findings from non-English-speaking contexts.

The use of a single database was a deliberate choice to maintain precision and manageability; however, this may have led to the omission of studies indexed exclusively in other databases, potentially narrowing the scope of the included literature.

By deliberately selecting the data corpus according to clearly defined criteria, this study achieved theoretical saturation within the categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This highlights that, despite the limited sample size, a comprehensive and nuanced reconstruction of the representations of conspiracy believers in the empirical discourse was possible.

The sampled articles were predominantly published in journals from social and personality psychology, with smaller contributions from political science and interdisciplinary journals. This study focuses specifically on empirical social science research examining psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers, which may limit the generalizability of findings to the broader academic discourse. Future research could benefit from incorporating additional perspectives, such as media representation or dissemination studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding and to test the robustness of the observed deficit orientation.

Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis shows that, across empirical social science studies on the psychological and social characteristics of conspiracy believers from 2020 to 2025, there is a persistent deficit orientation, with a strong tendency to pathologize or stigmatize individuals. Although some contributions acknowledge the complexity of conspiracy thinking and its entanglement with broader social, political, and historical contexts, these perspectives remain exceptions. By framing conspiracy believers predominantly in terms of intrapersonal deficits, research risks reinforcing polarization, reproducing stigma, and overlooking the power relations and structural conditions that may, in fact, enable real conspiracies.

Future studies should adopt more reflexive approaches, critically examining their own assumptions and the potential consequences of their terminology and research design. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches could help to capture the nuanced, ambivalent, and context-dependent character of conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, exploring potential positive correlations, such as links to creativity or civic engagement, could counterbalance the current overemphasis on pathology. A more differentiated research agenda is therefore essential, not only for achieving scientific accuracy and reflexivity, but also for ensuring reliable and transparent scholarship, which is vital for sustaining public trust and upholding democratic values.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Under "Study Info," authors and study countries are listed. In the second column, key aspects of the studies are listed: Research Topic, Sample, Methods, Results, Limitations, and Journal. The table reflects the heterogeneity of the studies, with its structure flexibly adapted to each study's specific design and features. Reliability coefficients are reported only where relevant for interpretation. Studies with neutral descriptions of conspiracy beliefs are marked with "X." Abbreviations include CB (conspiracy belief), CT (conspiracy theory), and n.s. (not significant), with instruments detailed in section 3 (Methods).

Appendix 1. Data corpus complete overview

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Albath et al. 2024, Switzerland, UK, Australia, New Zealand	Correlation of CBs & Psychological needs n = 55.269; Mage = 53.63; SD = 14.23; 64% female; via New Zealand Attitudes & Values CB: 1 item (perception of official explanations as distorted/incomplete); Other variables: Control, Belonging, Self-esteem, Meaning in life; Measured at T1-T4 Correlation CBs & Control: b = –0.41; Belonging: b = –0.21; Meaning in life: b = –0.06; Self-esteem: b = –0.12 (all p < .001) No definition of CTs; CBs assessed with 1 item; other constructs 2-3 items; Belonging (low reliability); CBs & control: moderate correlation; others weak/n.s.; No causality *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*
Ballová Mikušková 2021, Slovakia	Correlation of CBs, conspiracy mentality & analytic cognitive style n = 470; Mage = 42.35; SD = 13.1; 49.4% female; non-student sample; via Qualtrics Slovak CB Scale (SCBS), Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ), Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), Jellybean Task (Dominator Neglect), The Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI), Master Rationality Motive Scale (MRMS) Correlation SCBS & CMQ: r = .64, p < .001; CRT: r = –.22, p < .001; Jellybean Task: r = –.15, p < .01; REI (Experiential Thinking): r = .18, p < .001; REI (Rational Thinking): r = –.19, p < .001; MRMS: r = –.28, p < .001 Moderate CB: M = 3.11; SD = 1.06 (6 items), Jellybean Task simplifies reasoning to basic probability, MRMS unclear construct validity, No causality *Studia Psychologica*
Bertin 2024, Belgium	Effects of induced Victimhood on COVID-19 CBs Study 1: n = 352; Mage = 28.1; SD = 9.57; 38.35 % female; Study 2: n = 378; Mage = 53.2; SD = 12.8; 50.26% female, French; via Foule Factory Study 1: Participants viewed COVID-19 data (19 countries). Questions induced negative, positive, or no comparisons for France. COVID-19 CBs Scale; Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire; Competitive & Exclusive Victimhood Scales; Study 2 added the Blaming Conflicting Groups Scale Study 1: Competitive victimhood was successfully induced (M = 2.13 vs. 1.83, F(1,349) = 11.66, p < .001, ηp^2 = .032; Study 2: Competitive M = 3.02 vs. 2.03, p < .001, ηp^2 = .22; Exclusive M = 2.90 vs. 2.18, p < .001, ηp^2 = .13) but no effect on CB & blame attribution COVID-19 CB Scale was adjusted during the study due to outdated political events; Measures were frequently adapted; No causality *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*
Bogatyreva 2024, Switzerland X	Correlation of high prostate CT belief & high institutional trust n = 819; Mage = 37.7; SD = 10.7; 47.9% female, Residents of Russia; via Yandex.Toloka Prostate Specific CB Scale (PSCBS); Generic CBs Scale (GCB); Institutional trust (4-point Likert scale); Cognitive reflection skills: 3 math problems PSCBS & government malfeasance (GCB subscale) r = –.39; GCB excluding government malfeasance r = .28; institutional trust r = .45; (all p < .001); Cognitive reflection skills (r = .07, p = .037); GCB & Cognitive Reflection skills (r = .06, p = .096) Moderate CB: M = 3.44, SD = 1.11; GCB is not unidimensional; social desirability bias in Russia is considered high by the author; No causality *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Dyrendal, Kennair, and Bendixen 2021, Norway	Associations between conspiracy mentality & schizotypal traits, paranormal beliefs, social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism n = 883, Age = Not stated; 62% female; only students 2/3 of them first year Belief in Specific CTs; Schizotypal Personality Questionnaire-Brief (Odd Beliefs, Paranoid Ideation); Paranormal Beliefs (PB); Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA); Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO); Results for male (m), female (f) CBs & Schizotypal odd beliefs m: r = .28, f: r = .38; Paranoid ideation m: r = .26, f: r = .20; PB m: r = .45, f: r = .58; SDO m: r = .46, f: r = .44; RWA m: r = .33, f: r = .38 BSCT means: 2.18 (m), 2.29 (f) on a 7-point scale; Survey conducted in 2016 with mostly first-year students; No age reported; BSCT, SPQ, PB, RWA (modified or self-developed); SPQ & RWA: borderline internal consistency; Effect sizes weak to moderate; No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Enders et al. 2021, USA	Examining the Structure & Organization of CBs & their coherence as a belief system n = 2.023; Age & Gender: Not stated; U.S. adults; via Qualtrics Agreement with 20 CTs; Similarity mapped via nonmetric multidimensional scaling (mean Euclidean distances, R/*smacof*); Variables: partisan & ideological identity, psychopathy, machiavellianism, narcissism, spreading false information, political violence 2 main dimensions shaping CB: Partisan/ideological identity & antisocial orientations Only negative variables; Limited set of CTs; U.S.-specific data; No standards for CT selection; Unclear cluster stability; No causality *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*
Enders et al. 2023a, USA	Modeling correlates of conspiracy thinking n = 2015; U.S. adults; Sample was quota-based to match the U.S. population in age, gender, education, income, ethnicity; via Qualtrics American Conspiracy Thinking Scale (ACTS): Correlation analysis with 34 psychological, political & social characteristics Model explains 24% of variance; Anomie: r = .40; Argumentativeness: r = .26; Dogmatism: r = .24; Narcissism: r = .21; Psychopathy: r = .27; Machiavellianism: r = .23; Manicheanism: r = .37; Populism: r = 0.38; Political violence: r = .30; Political interest: r = −.10; Partisan: Only support for Biden shows correlation: r = −.09; Sharing false information online: r = .29, Age: r = −.26, White: r = −.17, Black: r = .19; all $p < .001$ Only negative variables; Quota sample; 76% unexplained variance; U.S.-specific data; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; No causality *Scientific Reports*
Enders et al. 2023b, USA	Correlates Anti-Social Personality Traits & Anti-Establishment Views with Beliefs in CTs n = 2.065; Mage = 46; SD = Not stated; 52 % female; U.S. adults; via Qualtrics CB: Election Fraud (EF), QAnon (Q), COVID-19 (COV); Dark Personality Traits: Machiavellianism (M), Narcissism (N), Psychopathy (P); Anti-Establishment (AE) N.s. omitted; N & Q: r = .136, COV: r = .052; P & EF: r = .067, Q: r = .093, COV: r = .167; AE & EF: r = .399, COV: r = .314; all $p < .001$ but N & COV $p < .01$ No definition of CT; Mage SD missing; U.S.-specific data; CT & misinformation used synonymously; Limited to specific CTs; Weak correlations; No causality *American Politics Research*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Enders et al. 2024, USA, UK, Canada	Sociodemographic correlates of CBs Study 1: n = 2.021; via Qualtrics; Study 2: n = 26.416; via YouGov; U.S. adults Study 1: Agreement with 39 CTs & sociodemographics; Study 2: Agreement with 11 CTs & sociodemographics in 20 additional countries Study 1: Age *r* = –.16 (sig. in 90%), Female *r* = .03 (sig. in 56%), Education & Income: *r* = –.1 (sig. in 82–85%), White: r = –.09 (sig. in 90%), Black: r = .08 (sig. in 85%), Hispanic: r = .05 (sig. in 54%); Study 2: Correlations consistent across countries, Age: *r* = –.05 (sig. in 50%), Education: *r* = –.09 (sig. in 64%), Sex: *r* = –.01 (sig. in 29%) Heterogeneous CTs tested; Ethnicity & income not replicated; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; Weak correlations; No causality *Scientific Reports*
Frenken and Imhoff 2022, Germany X	Correlation of CBs & detection of facial trustworthiness cues Study 1: n = 280; Study 2: n = 283; Age & Gender: Not stated; both via Prolific Study 1: Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS) & Binary decision task on computer-generated faces (neutral, ±1 SD trustworthiness); Study 2: Same task with real faces Study 1: Higher CMS → lower trust (r = –.131, p = .028); Study 2: Higher CMS → lower trust (r = –.154, p = .01); Both n.s.: age, education, gender Limited sample details; Small effect sizes; Artificial experimental settings; Unaccounted confounders; Weak correlations; No causality *Applied Cognitive Psychology*
Frenken, Reusch, and Imhoff 2024, Germany X	Differentiating the Correlates of Judgments of Plausible vs. Implausible CTs Study 1: n = 271; Mage = 40.97; SD = 15.9; 50.9% female; Study 2: n =292 (47% female); Mage = 42.53; SD = 14.05; both via Prolific (UK & USA) Study 1: Psychological traits & judgments of 3 plausible vs. 3 implausible fictional CTs; Conspiracy Mentality Scale (CMS), Plausible/Implausible CT-Judgments (PCT/ICT); Critical Thinking Disposition (CTD); Modified Cognitive Reflection Task (CRT); Bullshit Receptivity Scale (BRS); Rational-Experiential Inventory: Rational Thinking (RT), Experimental Thinking (ET); Study 2: Same scales, more background info (t3) BADE-test Study 1: PCTs & CMS: r = .319; ICTs & CMS: r = .512; CRT: –.269; BRS: .224; RT: –.223, ET: .229; Study 2: PCTs (t3): r = .157; ICTs (t3) & CMS: r = .26; BRS: r = .154; RT: r = –.206; Only significant correlations ($p < .01$) are reported CTD self-reported; Confirmation bias t3; Fictional CTs reduce ecological validity; CRT reliability low (α = .62–.64); Weak correlations, No causality *Social Psychological and Personality Science*
Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2022, Australia	Correlation of CBs & schizotypy traits, autistic traits, cognitive flexibility, scientific reasoning n = 565; Age & Gender: Not stated; 36.81% female; via Prolific; 80%: Education beyond secondary level, 24,1%: Diagnosis of a mental health disorder Autism-spectrum Quotient, short (AQ); Multidimensional Schizotypy Scale, short (MS); Analytical thinking (REIm, R); Generalized CB Scale (GCBS); COVID-19 CBs; Scientific Reasoning Scale (SRS); Active open-minded thinking beliefs (AOT); BADE-test Higher GCBS correlates with lower SRS; No patterns for other variables; Class 1: Lower CB than Class 5 (Δ = –5.48, p = .001) & higher scientific reasoning (Δ = –4.15, p = .001) No definition of CT; Scientific & analytical thinking are weighted differently; Non-clinical sample; LPA used for categorization; No causality *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Hall, Franks, and Bauer 2025, UK X	Exploring the Coexistence of Conspiracist & Non-Conspiracist Beliefs n = 41; Mage = 48.8; SD = 15.6; 15 females; CT-related groups & an event Semi-structured interviews (M = 113 min, SD = 28.8); Dimensions of thematical coding: Type of conspiracist worldview (light suspicion to strong spiritual commitment), Mode of dialogical coexistence of beliefs (describing how contradictory beliefs are held together) 5 escalating types: Cognitive dissonance between beliefs, Analogical beliefs, Target-dependent beliefs, Synthetic beliefs, Integrative beliefs Non-representative sample; Spiritual CT worldviews overrepresented; Data from England *European Journal of Social Psychology*
Hausschild et al. 2023, Germany	Associations between CBs & epistemic stance, mentalizing, paranoid distress n = 595; Mage = 43.05; SD = 18.87; 48.32% female; via SoSci Survey Epistemic Trust, Mistrust Questionnaire (ETQ); Paranoia Checklist (PC); Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ); Mentalizing Questionnaire (MQ) Only significant result: More epistemic trust → More paranoid distress (β = .178, p = .004); More paranoid distress → More CB (β = .255, p < .001) Model fit suboptimal (CFI = .88); Partly contradictory results; ETQ (α = .67-.81), Small effect sizes; No causality *Research in Psychotherapy*
Lantian et al. 2021, France	Correlation of critical thinking & CBs Study 1: n = 86; Mage: 18.82; SD = 2.67; 98% female; Study 2: n = 252; Mage: 21.8, SD = 8.94; 83% female; Both studies: Psychology students Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Test (CTT), Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCB) Study 1: Critical Thinking & CB, r(84) = −.20, p = .064; Study 2: Critical Thinking & CB, r(250) = −.18, p = .005 Non-diverse sample; GCB not unidimensional; Ennis-Weir test uncommon & bias-prone, Study 1: n.s.; Weak correlations; No causality *Applied Cognitive Psychology*
Leveaux et al. 2022, France, Belgium X	Comparing the Lay Representations of Conspiracy Believers & Non-Believers n = 939; Mage = 36.2; SD = 12.1; 27.68% female, French participants; via Facebook Generic CB Scale (GCB) (without 'alien contacts'); Lexometric Analysis of vocabulary & definitions; 1) 4 words associated with CT, 2) Definition CT 4 clusters: 1) Low CBs: Psychological aspects of CTs (38.02%); 2) Moderate CBs: Conspiring groups & CTs (27.91%); 3) High CBs: Historical events (11.86%); 4) High CBs: Societal & political processes criticized by CTs (22.21%). Pattern: High GCB focus on CT content (e.g., lies, government, 9/11), low GCB on believers (e.g., paranoia, biases). Follow-up study (n = 271) replicated results Recruitment via social media; French sample; Generally low GCB scores; Reduction of complex worldviews to single terms *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*
Liekefett, Sebben, and Becker 2024, Switzerland	Effects of Brooding about Societal Problems on CBs n = 2.007; Mage = Age 52.03; SD 14.09; 54.62% female; via SoSci Panel The main study was based on 4 pilot studies; Participants were assigned to control, brooding, or reflection groups. T1: 7-item CBs scale. T2: Brooding group reflected emotionally on their worry topic; Reflection group analyzed the topic to evaluate possible explanations SESOI (d=.2): Brooding: t = –3.41, p < .001, d=0.18, Reflection: n.s. Risk of demand or reactance effects due to repeated measures; Higher dropout in experimental groups; No active control condition; Conceptual overlap between brooding, reflection, anxiety; Effect Brooding (weak), Reflection (n.s.); No causality *Collabra Psychology*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Marchlewska et al. 2021, Poland, UK	Association of different coping strategies with CBs Study 1: n = 199; Mage = 24.45; SD = 9.30; 55.78% female; via Facebook & University; Study 2: n = 411; Mage = 35.7; SD = 10.6; 74.4% female; via Prolific; Both British Study 1: Association between belief in Snooper's Charter CT & coping strategies (COPE): Avoidance, Self-sufficient coping, Social support, Religion; Study 2: Association between general CT belief (GCB) & COPE Study 1: CBs & Avoidance r = .26 (p < .001), Social support −.15 (p < .05), Religion −.18 (p < .05); Study 2: GCB & Avoidance r = .23 (p < .001) Heading implies strong results, but correlations are weak or n.s.; Study 1: mostly students; British sample; Overlap between Anxiety & Coping strategies *British Journal of Social Psychology*
Min 2021, USA	Investigation of sociodemographic factors among conspiracy believers n = 3.441; Mage = 44.42; SD = 16.65; 57% female; via Qualtrics CBs: Agreement with 3 CTs (9/11, Obama birther, Global warming hoax); Sociodemographics CBs prevalence 33.7-41.6%; 9/11-believer: 28.2% republican, 35% democrat, 40.4% independent, 36% female, 30.6% male, 22.2% White, 48.6% Latino/a, 50.7% Black, 38.9% Asian, 30.7% protestant, 33% catholic, 48.5% Muslim, no religion/other 37.9%; Obama birther believer: 63.3% republican, 22.3% democrat, 41.7% independent, 40.7% female, 42.9% male, 43.6% White, 34.7% Latino/a, 33.7% Black, 34.3% Asian, 49.7% protestant, 41.6% catholic, 45.5% Muslim, no religion/other 30.3%; Global warming hoax-believer: 52.4% republican, 23.3% democrat, 33.9% independent, 33.8% female, 39.7% male, 35.4% White, 39.8% Latino/a, 40.3% Black, 34.3% Asian, 42.3% protestant, 37.5% catholic, 33.3% Muslim, no religion/other 27.5% Values vary greatly by CT; Study used 2 conservative, 1 liberal CT; Network diversity had a small effect on CBs; Questionable linking CBs & ethnicity; No causality *American Politics Journal*
O'Brien, Georgiou, and Bartholomaeus 2025, Australia	How belief in a just world, ambiguity tolerance & scientific reasoning influence CBs n = 163; Mage: 32.0; SD = 13.91; 55.2% female; 79% Australian; 49% with bachelor's degree; liberal-leaning; via networks, University, Prolific Just World Scale, Generalized Conspiracy Belief Scale (GCB), Multiple Stimulus Types Ambiguity Scale-II, Scientific Reasoning Scale Stronger belief in a just world predicted moderately lower CBs (b = −0.37, p = .001); Higher scientific reasoning slightly reduced CBs (b = −0.12, p < .001); No other effects No definition of CT, Small sample; Moderate CBs (M = 2.26, SD = 0.94); No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Pytlik, Soll, and Mehl 2020, Germany	Correlation of CBs & Intuitive Thinking, Jumping to Conclusions n = 488; Mage = 28.11; SD = 7.79; 60,45% female; via SurveyCircle Generic CB Scale (GCBS) modified; Rational-Experimental Inventory (Subscale Need for Cognition, Faith in Intuition); Modified Beads Task Males scored higher in analytical thinking (M = 73.52 vs. 68.73; p < .001), females scored higher in intuitive thinking (M = 62.92 vs. 59.33; p = .004); JTC bias → higher CBs (M = 2.99 vs. 2.58, *p* < .001), higher faith in intuition (*M* = 66.41 vs. 60.67, *p* < .001), lower need for cognition (*M* = 64.78 vs. 71.59, *p* = .001) than without JTC bias. Faith in intuition → CBs (*b* = 0.34, *p* < .001), need for cognition → CBs (*b* = −0.07, *p* = .13) SurveyCircle mostly students/researchers, Modified GCBS limits comparability; Low overall CBs scores (M = 2.63); Beads Task: artificial experiment, may reflect risk-taking rather than reasoning, only a few showed JTC bias (n = 69), no causality *Frontiers in Psychiatry*

Study Info	1) Research Topic 2) Sample 3) Methods 4) Results 5) Limitations 6) Journal
Sambol et al. 2024, Australia	Correlation of CBs & working memory, cognitive flexibility, affective decision making n = 194; Mage = 35.56; SD = 10.0; 52% female; via Prolific, 52% Australians, 48% USA, 21% Highschool, 16% Sub-Bachelor, 45% Bachelor, 18% Postgraduate Generic Conspiracy Belief Scale, Covid-19 CB Scale, Card Sorting Task (modified), N-Back task, Iowa Gambling Test – Generating 3 Profiles of Executive Functioning (EF) CBs & Low EF (M = 24.56, SD = 10.01) > Moderate EF (M = 19.04, SD = 7.91; p = .042) > High EF (M = 15.80, SD = 6.89; p = .0001) No definition of CT, Small sample, No Bonferroni-Correction, Card Sorting Task was modified, EF groups (Low n = 25, Moderate n = 128, High n = 41) based on sample-specific scores, No causality *Personality and Individual Differences*
Stanovich and Toplak 2024, Canada X	Association between CBs & rational thinking Group 1: n = 359, Mage = 20.1, 68.86% female; Group 2: n = 397, Mage = 32.4, 41.81% female; SDage: Not stated Comprehensive Assessment of Rational Thinking with added CBs subtest, Cognitive ability: Analogy, Antonym & Vocabulary task (Split-half, Spearman-Brown, r = .86) Strongest predictors of CBs (all p < .001): Superstitious Thinking (β = .340), Probabilistic Reasoning (β = –.167), Actively Open-Minded Thinking (β = –.148) → This predictors explained 29% of the variance (R^2 = .290) No disclosure of limitations, Low reliability in analogy task; No SDage; No education level reported; Addition of own items limits comparability with other studies; No causality *Thinking and Reasoning*
Toribio-Flórez, Green, and Douglas, 2024, UK	CBs & satisfaction in interpersonal relationships Study 1: n = 201; Mage = 38.1; SD = 13.59; 48.26% female; Study 2: n = 801; Mage = 41.08; SD = 13.84; 49.31% female; both via Prolific Study 1: Participants read 8 CT statements, name 1 believer & 1 non-believer for each, provide demographics & closeness ratings & relationship satisfaction questionnaire; Study 2: Hypothetical scenarios: Someone in their network endorses or rejects a CT; pre-post design measured changes in relationship satisfaction Study 1: Relationships with CT believers are less satisfying (M = 4.67 vs. 6.02; SD = 1.57 vs. 0.95; t(200) = –11.15). Study 2: Participants expected a drop in relationship satisfaction if someone endorsed a CT (Mdiff = –0.13, SE = 0.03) vs. rejected (Mdiff = 0.01, SE = 0.03) Sample: Mostly weak to moderate CBs; UK & USA only; relationship impact assessed hypothetically; methodological limits in direct CBs manipulation; No causality *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*
Yendell and Herbert 2022, Germany, Norway	Associations between conspiracy mentality & anti-democratic attitudes, racism, religiosity n = 1093; Mage = 44.29; SD = 15.9; 50.3% female; Data from Respondi's Access Panel Self-developed items on conspiracy mentality, support for democratic values, racist attitudes, religious affiliation Conspiracy Mentality & Support of democracy: r = –.082, Satisfaction with democracy in the UK: r = –.158, Anti-Muslim sentiment: r = .169, Anti-Black racism: r = .172, Right-Wing-Extremist-Worldview: r = .20, Religious fundamentalism: r = .158 (all p< .001) Lack of clearly validated scales & reported α; Conceptually overloaded; over 50% of CBs variance unexplained; No causality *Politics and Governance*

Source: Self-elaboration.

Appendix 2. Contradicting findings with quotations

Conspiracy Believers…	Yes	No
tend to follow an ideology	Enders et al. 2024 "ideological tendencies"	Stanovich and Toplak 2024 "ideological association"
have a lower level of education	Yendell and Herbert 2022 "Lower educational qualifications are linked with conspiracy belief"	Frenken and Imhoff 2022 "education status [was] unrelated to… conspiracy mentality"
are more religious	Min 2021 "Almost a half of the Protestants believed in… conspiracies, whereas only small portions of those with no religion did so"	Marchlewska et al. 2021 "religious coping will positively predict belief in general notions of conspiracy"
tend to be older	Min 2021 "those who have higher beliefs in conservative conspiracy theories tended to be old, male, White"	Enders et al. 2024 "suggesting that older individuals tend to be less likely to believe conspiracy"
are more likely to be male	Enders et al. 2024 "males are very slightly more likely than females to believe conspiracy theories"	Dyrendal et al. 2021 "find no difference between men and women in belief in specific conspiracy theories"
are more likely to be white	Min 2021 "older White males with high conservatism and Protestantism showed higher endorsement of conservative conspiracy theories"	Enders et al. 2024 "White respondents tend to agree with fewer conspiracy theories"
have low analytical thinking	Ballová Mikušková 2021 "conspiracy beliefs were predicted by a lower level of cognitive reflection"	Georgiou et al. 2022 "higher analytical reasoning scores co-occurred with higher CT beliefs"
are a threat to democratic values	Yendell and Herbert 2022 "dangers of conspiracy thinking for democracy"	Hall et al. 2025 "conspiracist belief is linked to support for democratic principles"
have a psychological disorder	Georgiou et al. 2022 "Schizotypal and autistic traits have both been implicated in the development of conspiracy theory"	Pytlik et al. 2020 "believing in conspiracy theories per se is not a mental disorder"
show maladaptive mistrust	Frenken and Imhoff 2022 "following the assumption that mistrust is a central psychological component behind the endorsement of conspiracy theories"	Hausschild et al. 2023 "epistemic trust may represent a factor in individuals turning to conspiracy belief"
show high gullibility	Lantian et al. 2021 "As predicted by the gullible conspiracist hypothesis"	Hausschild et al. 2023 "Findings did not suggest that epistemic mistrust and credulity…were associated with conspiracy mentality"

Source: Self-elaboration.

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State and Civil Society Response to the 2024 Floods in Southern Poland: A Critical Review

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Keywords:
Crush Zones; Social Resilience; Crisis Management; Local Government; Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs); Relational Capital; Crisis Communication

Abstract: This article presents a secondary analysis of research findings on the responses of state institutions and civil society to the September 2024 flood in southern Poland. The study selectively examines results from individual and group interviews regarding flood preparedness, the mobilization of social actors during the crisis, and organizational transformations necessary to enhance state resilience. The primary research objective is to analyze the interfaces between governmental, local, and civil society institutions, conceptualized herein as "crush zones." The original contribution of this paper lies in operationalizing these zones to evaluate how inter-institutional friction impacts societal resilience. Furthermore, the conclusions of the source report are subjected to a critical evaluation within the context of the existing literature on resilience, with attention to its potential to mask institutional power asymmetries.

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In this article, society is conceptualized as the aggregate of individual and collective activities, in which agency is mutually conditioned. Drawing upon Margaret Archer's critical realist framework (2003), this study assumes that the characteristics and actions of social actors are structurally and culturally shaped by institutional interactions. Consequently, the triad of structure-agency-culture serves as the primary analytical framework for examining the resilience of state and local communities, as the quality of such resilience depends on the organization of flows among these constituent elements.

Integrating critical realism with resilience theory suggests that societal resilience cannot be established by investing in any single element in isolation. Moreover, the independent strengthening of individual components does not inherently foster systemic resilience. Instead, community resilience is fundamentally rooted in the communicative and organizational space between formally distinct entities. Depending on the quality of this "inter-institutional space," the capital of central government, local authorities, and social organizations can be either multiplied or squandered.

A review of the literature on resilience supports this premise: the endogenous characteristics and resources of individual entities contribute to the collective's resilience only when communication between actors is structurally unobstructed and culturally practiced (Bhamra, Dani, and Burnard 2011; Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013; Saja et al. 2021). Community capital, which influences both environmental (infrastructural) and social factors, emerges from a fusion of agency rooted in public policy and the grassroots activities of social organizations (Tiernan et al. 2019). Thus, the generation of resilience—encompassing both infrastructural reinforcement and social strategies for threat mitigation—requires deep commitment and synergy across all institutional levels (Kapucu, Hawkins, and Rivera 2013).

To systematically analyze these inter-institutional spaces during crises, I propose the analytical concept of "crush zones." In automotive engineering, crush zones refer to structural areas designed to absorb kinetic energy during a collision. In the social sciences, this concept extends beyond traditional frameworks such as "boundary-spanning" and "institutional voids." While those theories often focus on the mere presence of networks, the "crush zone" framework specifically operationalizes the material friction, relational resource asymmetry, and temporal delays that occur during sudden crises.

In this study, social "crush zones" are operationalized as the specific institutional, legal, and relational interfaces where public and civic actors negotiate

responsibilities, exchange information, and manage resources. The conceptualization of resilience based on "crush zones" was developed through the following analytical progression:

- **Step 1:** Identification of the primary institutional pillars (central government, local authorities, and civil society).
- **Step 2:** Mapping the communicative and organizational interfaces ("crush zones") between these actors during the specific crisis event.
- **Step 3:** Assessing the relational and material variables (trust, legal frameworks, resource flows) within these zones to determine whether they effectively absorb the crisis impact or exacerbate systemic failures due to friction.

The parallels between mechanical engineering and social dynamics are particularly striking in this context. To prevent casualties, it is essential to design spaces that minimize forces hazardous to individuals by establishing structures that buffer their impact. While in mechanics these structures are physical, in the social realm, they consist of the material resources available to various institutions. However, a fundamental distinction arises from a unique characteristic of the social world: the temporal dimension. Inefficient communication and poor organization among actors who possess these resources fail to provide the time needed for effective countermeasures against natural disasters and other crises. Consequently, I define the institutional and personal spaces of communication and organization between the individual and collective actors affected by a crisis as social "crush zones." The efficacy of these zones depends on material resources, legal frameworks, interpersonal relations (linked to accumulated social capital), and established practices of collective action.

Social "crush zones" are inherently processual. The dynamics of mutual relations between individuals and groups directly influence the strengthening or weakening of a community's resilience. The concept of resilience itself must account for the capacity to anticipate threats, respond to crisis situations, and skillfully reconfigure resources, organizational structures, and communication during the post-disaster recovery phase. A detailed characterization of social "crush zones" can be illustrated by identifying the specific conditions necessary to bolster communal resilience. The extant literature allows for the identification of numerous constituent elements that contribute to such resilience (Aldrich 2012; Berkes and Ross 2013; Mayer 2019; Mesjasz 2024).

In this article, I examine specific elements that proved deficient during the September 2024 floods in southern Poland. The reconstruction of this crisis is based on qualitative data from in-depth individual and focus group interviews with key personnel responsible for managing the flood response. Specifically, I describe those components of social "crush zones" that compromised the resilience of local communities in the short term and, prospectively, threaten to undermine long-term systemic stability. These factors encompass social and institutional trust, established norms of collaboration and cooperation, and access to information and communication flows (Welsh 2014; Onyx and Bullen 2000). Furthermore, the analysis accounts for network diversity—specifically concerning the connections between disparate social groups and their relations with public institutions—and the overall level of political and institutional connectivity (Thomalla et al. 2018; Kyne and Aldrich 2020)while well suited for

capturing demographic characteristics such as age, race, and wealth, do not include sufficient proxies for social capital. This article proposes a concrete way to measure bonding, bridging, and linking social capital using widely available information. Our social capital index (SoCI.

Methodology

The report selected for this critical analysis was developed by a research team affiliated with the Batory Foundation (Kotras, Kubala, and Sześciło 2025).[1] Typically, the production of such reports culminates in recommendations aimed at rectifying systemic deficiencies and enhancing operational outcomes. Furthermore, these recommendations must be articulated in a language accessible to a broad spectrum of collective and individual actors. Consequently, both the report as a formal document and the underlying empirical data provide a robust foundation for further critical inquiry—specifically through the application of analytical categories not explicitly utilized in the original publication.

To satisfy the broader research objectives (which, though omitted here, were integral to the original project), it was necessary to reconstruct the communicative environment surrounding the flood, encompassing mainstream, local, and social media. Additionally, the report delineated the legal frameworks governing institutional responses and the statutory possibilities for flood prevention.

The empirical component of this study is based on nine in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) and two focus group interviews (FGIs) conducted with key actors involved in the 2024 flood relief efforts. The IDI participants included a diverse range of social actors: two mayors, a deputy mayor, a village head, a voivodeship government official, a representative from the District Crisis Management Center, a social organization leader, a fire service brigadier delegated to crisis management, and a member of the scientific community. The focus groups were conducted with representatives of social organizations and local authorities.

The study was conducted in May and June 2025. Preparations for the research involved attempts to contact individuals both affected by the flooding and those responsible for coordinating relief efforts. Various localities were taken into consideration. An important methodological concern quickly emerged regarding the hierarchy implicitly assigned to hamlets, settlements, villages, and cities through the selection process. On the one hand, we sought to avoid reproducing the common media tendency to focus primarily on urban centers; on the other hand, it is precisely within such centers that the functioning of basic crisis-management institutions can most readily be observed. The final selection of research sites was therefore shaped by the need to reconcile these considerations with practical constraints. Participants from both rural and urban areas were ultimately included in the study. Alongside the positions they held, a key criterion for participant selection was their willingness to take part in the research. Individuals invited to participate most frequently expressed skepticism regarding the study's potential interventionist impact—in other words, they doubted that it could bring about any meaningful change.

1 The author of this article was an integral member of the research team, contributing to the conceptualization of the study, the design of research instruments, and the derivation of practical recommendations. As a co-author of the original report, the author is prompted to engage in a reflective re-evaluation of the empirical findings, situating them within established theoretical categories in the resilience literature.

The research team raised ethical concerns regarding the very nature of engaging with individuals who had experienced such an extraordinary event. Given that potential participants may have lost both their homes and their life's work, there was a significant risk that the research process itself could exacerbate the trauma caused by the natural disaster. Even the team's preliminary assessment of the affected communities led to a revision of the original research design. In particular, plans to conduct interviews with local residents had to be abandoned due to the highly emotional responses associated with the recent events.

Additional difficulties emerged when attempts were made to contact officials responsible for coordinating emergency assistance. Local government representatives frequently declined to participate in the study. However, the interviews that were ultimately conducted helped clarify the possible reasons for this reluctance. According to participants who agreed to participate, local government representatives are often not perceived as integral to the community resilience system.

It should also be emphasized that the final selection of participants was made possible through the author's extensive network of institutional and personal contacts. This method of access may raise legitimate concerns regarding the selective nature of the information sources. At the same time, however, it is reasonable to ask whether researchers operating without institutional support would, in comparable circumstances, be able to reach the participants identified in the research project.

In analyzing the organization of flood relief efforts, particular attention was devoted to the elements of bridging social capital, understood as mechanisms capable of generating synergistic effects when crisis-response measures are effectively planned and coordinated. Accordingly, the scope of the study focused on cooperation among civil society organizations, local government, central government institutions, and the business sector.

With regard to cooperation with local government, particular emphasis was placed on the nature and scope of collaboration across the different stages of crisis management: preparedness, ongoing response activities, and post-flood recovery. The study examined potential forms of cooperation, their substantive focus, the degree of formalization of agreements, as well as examples of rapid information exchange, joint planning, and financial support provided during the flood. Attention was also paid to conflicts of competence and to the absence of clear communication channels or procedures that may have hindered or delayed relief efforts.

Participants were also asked to identify the factors they considered most effective during the crisis, including procedures, organizational tools, partnerships with public institutions and other aid-providing organizations, as well as forms of solidarity among residents. The overall aim of the inquiry was to collect as much information as possible concerning the functioning of networks composed of individual and collective actors responsible for initiating and sustaining community resilience processes.

For the purposes of this report, SWOT analyses were prepared for the social actors involved in the relief effort.[2] Although this analytical framework

2 SWOT is an acronym derived from the English terms *Strengths*, *Weaknesses*, *Opportunities*, and *Threats*. It refers to an analytical framework used to assess four key dimensions of an organization, project, policy, or social situation: strengths,

differs considerably from the tools more commonly employed in sociological research, it responds to the need for practical and actionable insights. Given that the study was intended to culminate in a set of recommendations, the SWOT analyses provided a useful point of departure for further analytical work.

At the same time, this approach is not without limitations. SWOT analyses are closely tied to the specific environmental and institutional conditions within which proposed solutions are to be implemented. In some cases, they reveal functional deficiencies of such magnitude that any effective response would require changes of a systemic or even revolutionary character. This, however, stands in tension with the practical purpose of formulating realistic recommendations.

The underlying reason lies in the complexity of social life and institutional agency. Individuals cannot be replaced in the same manner as mechanical components within a machine, just as institutions—often characterized by a significant degree of autonomy—cannot simply be "repaired" through technical adjustments alone. Consequently, if the report is to provide a meaningful foundation for systemic reform, particular caution must be exercised, especially when assigning responsibility for specific actions or omissions.

The inquiry into the designated "crush zones" focused on issues of social and institutional trust, both of which are critical determinants of resilience. The research addressed specific post-flood actions within local communities—ranging from immediate relief to long-term recovery efforts, including infrastructure reconstruction, social assistance, and land-use planning. Furthermore, participants were asked to identify necessary organizational and procedural reforms to mitigate the impact of future disasters and to reflect on the lessons learned from the 2024 flood. We also explored urgent systemic changes at the state and legislative levels required to enhance crisis management in Poland.

Regarding the second pillar—the standards of cooperation and collaboration essential to the functioning of these "crush zones"—the interviews examined several key areas. These included cooperation with local authorities (commune heads, mayors, and municipal offices) across all stages of the disaster cycle: preparedness, response, and recovery. Specific attention was paid to the formalization of relationships through agreements and contracts between the public sector and social organizations, as well as the role of informal networks. We analyzed instances of rapid information exchange, collaborative planning, and financial support, while also identifying procedural bottlenecks (e.g., delays in grant competitions) that hindered assistance. Additionally, the study investigated jurisdictional conflicts, the lack of clear decision-making channels, and the quality of inter-institutional cooperation with government administration, including the Voivode, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Ministry of Climate and Environment, and the Government Center for Security (RCB). A pivotal question was whether the state acted as an effective coordinator of activities among non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In examining access to information and communication flows, the study sought to clarify the inter-

weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The method is widely applied in strategic planning, management, and marketing, as it supports informed decision-making and facilitates the identification of both internal capacities and external conditions affecting future actions.

actions among the central administration (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Prime Minister's Office), command centers, emergency services, and local leadership. The analysis covered internal communication channels within intervention teams, as well as external channels utilized to reach residents and the media. Attention was paid to the challenges of misinformation and communication channel overload, alongside an evaluation of the efficacy of early warning systems and public information protocols.

Furthermore, the focus group scenarios and in-depth interview guidelines included questions on network diversity, specifically the linkages between disparate social groups and their relations with public institutions. This included the dynamics of cooperation with local government officials and their administrative teams, strategies for engaging non-governmental organizations, and local grassroots initiatives that augmented formal emergency services. Finally, the research explored the relationships between residents and local community leaders, such as village heads, local councilors, and the clergy.

Finally, "crush zones" in crisis situations encompass the level of political and institutional connectivity. This is manifested in consultations on local problems, the inclusion of NGO representatives and community leaders in decision-making processes, and direct access to key decision-makers. Consequently, the research explored the necessity for permanent coordination mechanisms (e.g., dedicated crisis teams, integrated online platforms), the demand for joint training exercises between NGOs, local governments, and emergency services, and the optimal organization of preventive education within flood protection programs. These inquiries addressed both the *status quo*—investigating whether such mechanisms existed prior to the flood—and the potential for future procedural reforms and public consultations.

The primary objective of this article is to present facets of the analysis omitted from the report, using qualitative data and quotations that were not included in the original document. This selective exclusion does not imply that these findings are of secondary importance. Rather, while the report aimed to formulate recommendations by harmonizing the potential of various actors—avoiding an overemphasis on factors that might undermine the legitimacy of the overall flood response—this article serves a different purpose. While the report functions as a pragmatic foundation for future cooperation, a scientific article provides the necessary space for a more rigorous and critical assessment of existing realities. Below, I present research findings pertaining to the four identified "crush zones." I argue that the weaknesses within these zones could lead to higher casualty rates in future crises if left unaddressed. Thus, shifting the analytical focus toward a more critical perspective in this context is not only scientifically appropriate but also ethically justified.[3]

Results

Any analysis of the elements identified as pivotal to building national resilience must account for the divergent perspectives and institutional positions

3 The authors of the report emphasize that the resilience system worked despite the specific weaknesses described. Journalistic studies of the generally positive tone of the report can be found, among others, here: https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,32425091,-co-pokazala-nam-zeszloroczna-powodz-panstwo-nie-moze-traktowac.html [Retrieved May 04, 2026] and https://www.rp.pl/opinie-polityczno-spoleczne/art43278521-kiedy-pekaja-tamy-jak-budowac-odpornosc-spoleczna-na-kryzysy [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

of the social actors surveyed. The discrepancies between these positions regarding the same phenomena serve as indicators of the degree of cooperation and functional complementarity between subjects. In the following section, I focus primarily on the perspective of non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives. There is a consensus among all interviewees regarding the scope and effectiveness of the third sector's role. Their contributions are described as invaluable, particularly within the "soft" dimensions of security that encompass various aspects of social life. NGOs provided clothing, food, and shelter; facilitated communication; organized waste collection; offered psychological support; and reached individuals unable to solicit aid independently. Consequently, the description of the individual components of "crush zones" is structured around the NGO perspective.

Social and Institutional Trust

The lack of material support for NGOs directly erodes institutional trust. In terms of resilience-building, it is critical to recognize that this deficit may adversely affect NGO leaders' decision-making in future crises. There is a notable absence of systemic solutions to strengthen horizontal trust structures. Without institutional guarantees for the reimbursement of incurred costs, a further erosion of trust between NGO leadership and both local and central authorities appears inevitable.

> It is very inconceivable. Nine months have passed since the flood, and these people have not been compensated, despite their presence and immense personal sacrifice. I personally donated several vehicles—trucks and so on—for their use, yet the authorities failed to acknowledge this and did not provide a single zloty in return. [NGO IDI]

The financial asymmetry between institutions pivotal to disaster response may result in NGOs' material inability to fully participate in state resilience systems. Equally significant is the psychosocial dimension: a profound sense of disillusionment stemming from a lack of perceived fairness—an element that should ideally underpin any strategic reinforcement of state resilience (Ensor, Forrester, and Matin 2018; Matin, Forrester, and Ensor 2018; Ensor et al. 2021). The third sector can be conceptualized as an actor capable of flawlessly executing its mandates, provided that formal, regulated agreements govern the relationship between the state and NGOs.

> I must reiterate that there were already high expectations after the war [the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine—KK], and I felt like a loser. We will not allow ourselves to undertake such an immense task again without receiving any government compensation. Notably, while the government received hundreds of millions of zlotys for the Belarusian border—where I also worked extensively—not a single zloty reached the NGOs. We didn't even get cars or thermoses; it all went to the security services. [NGO IDI]

This issue is further reflected in staffing deficiencies within local government crisis management bodies. Severe underinvestment in dedicated crisis management activities suggests that emerging procedural solutions—such as warning systems and risk prediction—may be merely superficial measures.

It is unbelievable, given the current era and the proliferation of threats. We have individuals employed on a one-seventh basis who are overwhelmed by so many responsibilities that crisis management becomes a marginal task, dealt with only at the end of the week. Unfortunately, this is counterproductive; with all due respect to these individuals, they lack

the specific competencies required to effectively assist a mayor or local council, simply because they are not dedicated exclusively to this role. [PCZK IDI]

Standards of Cooperation and Collaboration with Local Authorities

According to representatives of social organizations, the primary obstacles to establishing robust cooperation standards are the politicization and hermeticism of local authorities. Local governments often prioritize mechanisms for the reproduction of power, which significantly delays the resolution of fundamental systemic problems. Public sector concerns appear to stem from both a perceived encroachment on local government competencies and the emergence of "image competition."

> We are not a political force that they should refuse to work with; we are apolitical. Yet, I have a distinct feeling that whatever we do, it doesn't suit them. And that truly surprises me. [NGO FGI]

> I believe this lack of will on their part is driven by fear for their own positions. They are afraid the public will see us as the people they can truly count on and perhaps vote for us in the future. [NGO FGI]

> Well, I don't think it's just political maneuvering or fear. To me, it is also a matter of disregard. They stay in their offices, maintaining contact with the Territorial Defense Forces (WOT), the ministries, and the central government, while remaining blind to our achievements and our labor. [NGO FGI]

This dynamic results in low inclusiveness within local policies, a failure to recognize the strategic role of NGOs, and a persistent reluctance to co-finance third-sector activities. Furthermore, the friction between NGOs and municipal authorities often stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the economic and social value provided by the former, as illustrated by the following observation:

> For years, we have faced the problem of being treated as if we are always asking for something. But it is quite the opposite. We bring capital into the municipality. We transfer funds to residents and organize virtually all the cultural events in the city through the efforts of our NGOs—precisely because the municipality lacks the funds to do so themselves. [NGO FGI]

The antagonisms and tensions between NGOs and local governments constitute the antithesis of a functional cooperative system. The development of standards designed to bolster community resilience is fundamentally obstructed when mutual animosity prevails between representatives of differing institutional orders. Furthermore, the threat posed by issues of "dignity" and symbolic recognition should not be underestimated. Within this framework, agency must be treated as a variable attribute of individual and collective actors—one that is activated not only by conducive institutional and organizational conditions but also by psychosocial factors such as trust and solidarity. It is this specific communicative space that triggers the volitional attitudes necessary to prioritize communal interests over individual ones during natural disasters. The fusion of these two orders—the institutional and the psychosocial—offers the most viable path toward systemic resilience. However, the qualitative data gathered do not confirm the existence of such conditions.

> For instance, regarding local government—which is your primary interest—I actually avoid them as much as possible…They are quite content with that,

> because when I do go there, I present my ideas as specific tasks to be addressed, and they don't like me very much for it, and the feeling is mutual. [NGO FGI]

> However, throughout my heavy involvement in providing aid, I felt that we, as a foundation, were being marginalized—pushed aside the entire time. Despite the help we were providing to people, there was not a single instance of support or acknowledgment on social media from, say, government officials, was there? [NGO FGI]

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that in small communities, it is common for NGOs to be systematically ignored when attempting to establish cooperation with local authorities.

> I was simply told, "I'll call you." There was no further communication, but I knew we couldn't just wait there; we had to act. [NGO FGI]

Representatives of social organizations highlight a critical lack of procedures governing activities at the most granular level of local government during natural disasters. This procedural vacuum obstructs cooperation between diverse social actors and shifts the burden of decision-making onto personal, volitional agency. The absence of institutionalized decision-making pathways can lead to "decisional paralysis," driven by a reluctance to assume personal liability for outcomes affecting the lives, health, and property of citizens. Such institutional ambiguity profoundly weakens community resilience.

> Indeed, there are no procedures for actors like village leaders. I haven't received any guidelines whatsoever on how to act in this situation. At the end of the day, every village leader and every mayor is forced to navigate the crisis individually. [NGO FGI]

However, grievances regarding the lack of responsiveness and organizational gaps are not limited to the third sector. A representative from the District Crisis Management Center (PCZK) expressed ambivalent views on cooperation with NGOs, citing their perceived reluctance to adhere to top-down command structures. From an administrative perspective, the core issue is the lack of legal regulations to formalize and organize NGO involvement during catastrophes.

> Generally, these organizations arrive to assist with cleanup, logistics, or food distribution. That is commendable, but these activities take place within high-risk areas. We cannot simply allow unregulated access. Everything must be controlled—even mundane matters like insurance. Do these volunteers have accident insurance? Are they vaccinated, which is essential in hazardous zones? Everything must be verified. We cannot allow spontaneous, uncoordinated action, as that could—to put it bluntly—lead to a secondary disaster. [PCZK IDI]

This observation corresponds with the need for volunteer training expressed by NGO representatives. Without such systemic preparation, it is not only impossible to harness the full potential of those willing to assist, but both volunteers and victims are exposed to significant risks. The circumstances described above reflect a lack of a political culture of participation. This culture, indispensable for bolstering community resilience, is predicated on trust and on established norms of collaboration with local government. Deficits in this form of networking—that should ideally integrate knowledge, experience, and capital—result in paralysis in decision-making. This phenomenon was underscored by a representative of the provincial voivodeship government:

> …[the central government intervention—KK] unfortunately made me realize—or was the direct result of—a dramatic reactive disaster on the part of local government; as a local official, I can state this with a clear conscience. The local government simply capitulated. In many instances, it was entirely absent—we had to track down one mayor who had gone on vacation, while others, overwhelmed by the crisis, sank into depression and barricaded themselves in their offices. [PSPW IDI]

> …they were incapacitated by the inherent weakness of their own structures and overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the catastrophe. Ultimately, it appears the human factor remains the most vulnerable link in the system. [PSPW IDI]

Communication Failures Across NGO and Governmental Levels

One of the most profound weaknesses within the identified "crush zones" is the communicative inefficiency among NGOs, the national government, and local authorities. A critical systemic error in the resilience framework is the lack of coordinated dissemination of information and warnings by local governments. NGO representatives often receive alerts regarding impending floods from fragmented sources—such as neighbors, national media, or local social media groups—while citing local authorities only incidentally as a reliable source. This fragmented landscape is further complicated by residents' disregard for Government Center for Security (RCB) alerts, the rapid proliferation of disinformation on social media, and a significant lack of real-time data regarding flooded areas and road accessibility for external relief organizations.

> It was extremely difficult for us to obtain precise information about where, what, and how. Knowing the exact locations and the progression of the flooding was a major challenge. [NGO FGI]

> I don't even know who it was—the mayor or someone else—who simply failed to answer a basic question, such as how many dehumidifiers were needed. [NGO FGI]

> [What is needed—KK] is a higher degree of automation in the warning processes. We heard accounts of why, for half an hour, no one in Kłodzko knew that the dam in Stronie Śląskie had breached. Regarding Lądek, the consensus was that either mobile networks had failed or that no one was aware of the situation at all. [PSPW IDI]

The intersection of deficiencies in public trust, organization, coordination, and communication results in a complete systemic disconnect—a finding consistently confirmed in both individual and group interviews. Analytically speaking, any positive assessment of the 2024 flood response can be reduced to a "stroke of luck" rather than the result of a robust system. According to active NGO members, cooperation remains merely incidental, while the permanent situation is rooted in mutual animosity.

> I also do my part, as if I know what needs to be done, but for now, I don't have a partner to talk to…Someone interested in creating this would have to appear, and also not make promises or bullshit…I like to get involved, but I like it to make sense. And I know it makes sense because when I get involved, it brings huge results. So I analyze the situation, whether it's worth it or not. And there have been too many empty talks. I stopped going to them because nothing comes of them. [NGO IDI]

Furthermore, representatives of social organizations bolster their critical assessment by citing the

authority of an external figure—a key leader in the rescue operation who managed the crisis effectively and was perceived as an impartial guarantor of order.

> General Z left [the city—KK] with a message to all of us: that our case as NGOs—specifically, regulating the aid situation for the city—is the only issue he was unable to bring to a conclusion, and that he considers this his failure. [NGO FGI]

Operational communication, upon which the efficacy of disaster relief depends, is a critical factor that cannot be overlooked. While the challenges posed by a massive influx of nationwide aid are predictable—given the typical readiness of Polish society to engage in charitable action—the lack of preparation remains a glaring systemic failure. The absence of coordinated aid influxes, designated storage facilities for material donations, and task-level coordination (resulting in groups being redundantly assigned to the same tasks) underscores a systemic weakness. Such deficiencies profoundly undermine the resilience potential of local communities permanently exposed to flood risks.

> …there were actually a lot of groups coming to help. But unfortunately, no one coordinated it. They all sat around and didn't know what to do…No help from the authorities. So we could only do what we could ourselves. [NGO FGI]

> No, we don't need anything. And it's not even at the level of small NGOs. WOŚP [Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity] came. Everyone in Poland knows WOŚP; it's impossible not to know them. And the first thing the mayor said—the first decision he made—was that "No, we don't need any help." [NGO FGI]

> Foundations called us, asking: "Why, if you need help, are we being told otherwise [by the authorities—KK]? We can see that things are bad, can't we? We're calling you, not the authorities." [NGO FGI]

The negative assessment of crisis communication is a recurring theme across all interviewed social actors. Regardless of participants' institutional affiliations, there was a consistent belief that communication channels were insufficiently open, lacked decisiveness in immediate messaging, and lacked the organizational links necessary for the effective deployment of communication tools. The representative of the District Crisis Management Center (PCZK) identified significant discrepancies in the responses of local government officials at the municipal level. Communication was frequently characterized by sluggishness; furthermore, warnings failed to automatically trigger established procedures, as recommendations were often treated as optional rather than mandatory.

> …there was no consistent communication between the central government and local authorities. Discrepancies were frequent. It was clear that the system was simply falling apart. At times, messages appeared to contradict each other, exacerbated by a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the practicalities of the work. [PCZK IDI]

> There was a palpable lack of coordination in the management of communication resources across the local, district, and voivodeship levels.

> Leaders of individual local government units, such as village heads, occasionally bypass their immediate administrative level. When a disturbing event occurs, they turn directly to the voivode's resources instead. [PCZK IDI]

> We were able to provide approximately twelve Starlink sets to assist with connectivity. However, the local governments utilized only one. [PCZK IDI]

Systemic communication errors are further compounded by flawed crisis management plans. Overly complex and voluminous documentation obstructs the effective dissemination of these plans, necessitates an impractical degree of narrow specialization among personnel, and alienates potential actors. Such documents discourage engagement and fail to distinguish between critical priorities and secondary concerns. Consequently, they lose their operational utility and become entirely impractical in high-pressure environments.

> …these documents are simply immense…Even in the Opole Voivodeship, which is the smallest in the country, the plan totals about a thousand pages…If we do not treat this as a practical document—a concise collection of procedures and a "phone book" that tells us exactly whom to call and what to ask for—it simply will not work. [PCZK IDI]

The reconstructed landscape of crisis communication must also account for the absence of a coherent information policy for flood-affected residents. A significant disconnect exists between high-level political messaging and the functional capacity of field administration. Given the severe staffing and material shortages identified, local officials should not be burdened with the impossible task of reconciling mainstream media narratives with the actual operational constraints of flood relief. As one mayor noted, this lack of alignment forces front-line employees to manage the fallout of public disillusionment.

> …the government's *ad hoc* communication policy was counterproductive; the media narrative starkly contradicted what Social Welfare Center [GOPS] employees were experiencing on the ground. There were no updated templates for aid applications. We worked with the old forms, only to discover they had been changed, forcing us to revisit the affected residents… The Prime Minister announced on television that "Everyone would receive 10,000 PLN," but our internal instructions were different: we had to estimate and determine the percentage of damage. Only those with 100% damage qualified for the full 10,000 PLN; for others, the funding decreased proportionally. However, the media message was unequivocal: everyone gets 10,000. Consequently, our employees were left to manage the intense frustration and emotions of the residents. [Mayor IDI]

Political and Institutional Connectivity: The Crisis of Recognition

The resilience of any community is fundamentally dependent on networking—specifically, the integration of diverse social actors' potentials. In the context of sudden crisis events, this requires direct, functional access to public sector decision-makers. Furthermore, systemic issues must be subject to broad, meaningful consultation rather than superficial, "tick-the-box" exercises. Equally vital is the active inclusion of social organizations and grassroots initiatives in the design and implementation of crisis mitigation programs. However, the evidence and testimonies presented in this study offer little ground for optimism.

> It is a profound misunderstanding and a total lack of respect. It's disheartening. We experienced some very ugly situations here in [X]. We have yet to receive an apology from the authorities, nor any genuine gratitude. Now, we see our mayor receiving a medal from the President—and we know exactly how things

> looked from the inside. It's almost farcical, isn't it? The fact that such things happen, while we remain completely cut off from any further contact. [NGO FGI]

From the perspective of state and local community resilience, it is imperative to recognize that NGOs cannot indefinitely assume the burden of coordinating, managing, and financing emergency aid in every disaster scenario. The potential of the third sector can only be fully realized through sustained external financial support and effective collaboration with other social actors. It is fallacious to assume that the expectation of effective NGO intervention will consistently be met by the organizations' own capacity for resource acquisition. Moreover, the financial risks inherent in such large-scale operations are significant enough to trigger decision-making paralysis among NGO leadership. Currently, there is little evidence to suggest that institutional networking will evolve sufficiently to strengthen these resilience processes.

> Above all, we need greater trust in local leaders. When a problem arises, for example, in [X], I believe the funding was blocked due to personality clashes—something quite common in small towns. There are "local hells" where deep-seated conflicts suppress those who rise to the occasion. In times of crisis, natural leaders emerge and theoretically could build social capital, but they are immediately struck down. It's brutal. I don't know if anything can be done; we would essentially have to transform the nature of leadership in this country into one that is not driven by fear. [NGO IDI]

A distinct challenge within the resilience framework is the actual nature of cooperation between local and central government representatives. This tension arises from both the formal statutory framework and the prevailing administrative culture within the public sector. One could argue that this is one of the most sensitive components of the resilience-building system, given the competing interests of institutional sovereignty and the psychosocial impact on social actors. Effective coordination depends as much on legal and organizational structures as it does on social trust and a political culture of participation.

> …the Voivode lacks the legal instruments to issue binding orders to the Starost or village heads regarding their internal operations. This is the essence of local government; they are autonomous in these matters. We have granted local authorities very broad powers. To be frank, while some local governments manage these responsibilities exceptionally well—and I am not necessarily referring to the "wealthy" ones—others struggle significantly. [PSPW IDI]

Discussion: The Litmus Test of Local Governance

Local and mainstream media predominantly portrayed local authorities in a negative light, characterizing them as passive and ineffectual (Kotras et al. 2025). Such communicative stigmatization of local governments severely undermines trust in the very institutions that, by definition, should operate closest to the public and in tandem with a robust civil sector. However, the interviews conducted suggest that the core issue is not necessarily the "ill will" of officials, but rather profound systemic neglect across the four identified "crush zones." Addressing these failures requires more than mere legislative adjustments; it demands an interrogation of deep-seated institutional taboos.

> These are the objective consequences of a social system built upon the current Polish model of local gov-

> ernment. A hidden feature of Polish democracy at the local level is the chronic lack of substantive and practical management preparation. While disasters and natural catastrophes act as a litmus test for local authorities, the stakes are far too high to allow for this type of *post-hoc* evaluation of local leadership. [PCZK IDI]

> There are weak districts that essentially have no reason to exist, yet there is a lack of political courage to admit that we are over-administered. While the local government reform of thirty-five years ago is generally held in high regard, it is overdue for a revision. There is no political will for this, but the current flood has exposed a rapid escalation of these structural pathologies—phenomena we are afraid to acknowledge, leaving no one capable of an effective response. [PSPW IDI]

To objectify this assessment, we must question whether the knowledge, competence, and resources available to local government representatives at the most granular level are sufficient to manage extraordinary crises. This inquiry necessitates a differentiation of roles: to what extent can a municipal government manage the administrative dimensions of a crisis, and in what specific areas can it supplement the interventionist management provided by central government delegates? A potential solution may lie in preventively prepared, standardized, and rehearsed operational protocols (instructions). These would functionally complement the actions of specialized actors deployed to disaster-prone areas before a crisis escalates.

> …delegating the military to take action was a sound decision. However, the manner of its execution was problematic. The communication surrounding it suggested that local government was incompetent, bewildered, and overwhelmed—implying that the state and the military had to "take over" at that point. This narrative was widely disseminated, leading some residents to remark that it was a relief that the military arrived since the mayor was failing. I disagree with this framing; I believe forces should be integrated and combined, rather than one institution merely replacing another. [MA IDI]

The insights presented above reinforce the article's initial theses. The discourse on building social resilience at the local level must account for the necessity of well-prepared, external interventionism. Furthermore, there is a compelling case for the partial delegation of institutional responsibility for initiating interventions. Such a shift would act as a buffer against the personal financial liability that currently paralyzes local actors. This problem spans the entire administrative spectrum, from officials in small rural municipalities to those in large-scale institutions. When decision-making restraint ceases to be reasonable and instead becomes an ingrained, habitual attitude, it actively undermines the capacity for immediate response. To correct this, a "safe harbor" list of standardized activities is required—actions that do not place an undue personal or legal burden on the individual administrator (e.g., protocols for controlled reservoir drainage or simplified aid application processing).

However, procedural adjustments cannot substitute for the accumulation of both personalized and institutional trust. External agency will remain insufficient in the absence of robust networking between collective and individual actors. Communication blockages at the levels described in this study inevitably lead to decisional paralysis regarding warnings and evacuations—a critical failure in areas prone to flash floods. Ultimately, strengthening state resilience requires the mutual complementarity of these elements—structure, agency, and trust—

ensuring that no single component dominates at the expense of others. Unfortunately, we do not yet exert control over all these variables.

> …did those who were elected mayors eighteen months ago truly know what they were getting themselves into? Forty percent of the new mayors in Poland had no idea. And these individuals in the flood zones certainly did not…In such small communities, factors like family ties or neighborhood feuds play such a peculiar role in elections that sometimes entirely random people become mayors or village heads. Unfortunately, that is the stark reality. [PSPW IDI]

The evidence gathered underscores the existence of fragmented, insular microcosms where social organizations, local authorities, and central agencies operate in parallel rather than within a synergistic network. Instead of collaboration, a culture of suspicion and mutual distrust is habitually recreated. This leads to a reflective withdrawal that ultimately exhausts the potential of all the social actors involved.

A panel discussion organized by the Batory Foundation on October 17, 2025, provided a poignant illustration of this dynamic. A village leader from a flood-affected area revealed that while the local mayor initially established a crisis management team designed to be inclusive—comprising over twenty members, including numerous NGO representatives—the group was later arbitrarily purged. By mid-October, all social organization representatives had been excluded, reducing the team to a handful of public officials. Similarly, during a community meeting in Lądek-Zdrój on December 09, 2025, residents noted, with irony, that the Foundation's initiative was the first public forum in which they could voice their perspectives on the flood response. They further ridiculed current prevention policies, observing that mayors and village leaders return from provincial training sessions with a superficial sense of security, convinced that a mere theoretical understanding of "what to do" equates to actual community safety.[4] This institutional lack of trust toward citizens triggers a reciprocal deficit among residents. These paroxysms of mistrust frequently target the most active and visible members of the local community—as evidenced by the dismissal of the village leader in Stara Morawa for supporting strategic regional flood mitigation efforts.[5] Collectively, this depicts a landscape fundamentally hostile to the integrated strengthening of social resilience.

It is an entirely separate matter to what extent academic studies, like this article, contribute to the framing of resilience in ways that raise a number of concerns. One might ask whether they function as a metanarrative that depoliticizes the well-known actor—the state—responsible for the safety of its citizens? Do they not constitute an element in the privatization of the problem of resilience? While a critique of resilience discourses lies beyond the scope of this text and requires separate analyses, one must remain mindful of the weaknesses inherent in the dominant operationalization of resilience. The task of building resilience is frequently ceded to the lowest levels of local government and non-governmental organizations.

The proposed analytical isolation of "crush zones" is intended to reveal the necessity of the state's presence as a collective entity in the process of organiz-

4 The mentioned content can be found in the recording from 1h04min to 1h15min. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JlPVyn2Dq48 [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

5 See: https://walbrzych.wyborcza.pl/walbrzych/7,178336,32510689,soltyska-starej-morawy-odwolana-za-popieranie-budowy-zbiornika.html [Retrieved May 04, 2026].

ing resilience. The conducted research underscores the irreplaceable role of the state in the process of reconstructing the resources of smaller collective entities, generating legal frameworks, coordinating communication processes, and occasionally substituting for actors who, due to the sheer scale of natural and man-made disasters, would never be capable of confronting them independently.

Appendix: Abbreviations and Research Codes

IDI: Individual In-Depth Interview

FGI: Focus Group Interview

GOPS: Municipal Social Welfare Center [*Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej*]

MA: Mayor

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

OSP: Volunteer Fire Department [*Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna*]

PCZK: District Crisis Management Center [*Powiatowe Centrum Zarządzania Kryzysowego*]

PLN: Polish Zloty [the national currency]

PSPW: Provincial-level local government representative [*Przedstawiciel samorządu szczebla wojewódzkiego*]

RCB: Government Center for Security [*Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa*]

WOT: Territorial Defense Forces [*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*]

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