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Conspiracy theories tend to be taken more seriously by people who are mistrustful and prone to certain forms of magical thinking, have a worldview that generally fits with conspiratorial interpretations of events, feel alienated from society and its norms, and frequently come into contact with other topics outside of the mainstream such as alternative medicine. Conspiracy theories are less plausible when the audience has a positive attitude toward the group implicated as the conspirators, when they are engaged in analytical, detail-focused thinking, and when they feel like they are generally in control of their own fate.

conspiracy theories, social psychology, control, ideology, worldviews

Chapter 16

Conspiracy Theory Psychology

Individual Differences, Worldviews, and States of Mind

Michael J. Wood and Karen M. Douglas

Conspiracy theories are a contentious subject. Beyond the already complex issue of what defines a conspiracy theory, people who disagree about conspiracy theories seem to be perennially confused by one another. People who generally reject conspiracy theories tend to deride people who believe them—how can these people take such ridiculous ideas seriously? On the other hand, people who take conspiracy theories more seriously wonder why everyone else seems so blind—how can these people buy into the obvious lies put out by the establishment? In a broader sense, these questions are asking the same thing: why do people differ in how much they believe conspiracy theories? This is an important question—as seen elsewhere in this volume, certain conspiracy theories can lead to serious consequences for vaccination rates, political engagement, pro-environmental behaviors, and even how people engage with their workplace.¹ On the other hand, if people really are routinely engaged in sinister conspiracies against the public good, being suspicious is probably a good idea.

Psychologists have been wondering about variation in conspiracy belief for a long time, at least since conspiracy theories about the John F. Kennedy assassination started to circulate in the 1960s. In the half-century since then, we have discovered a substantial amount about the psychology of conspiracy theories. Specifically, we have a basic picture of the personality factors that influence belief, the mindsets that are more likely to lead to

conspiracy theorizing, the conditions under which conspiracy theories are likely to arise, and the effects of conspiracy theories on people's thoughts and attitudes.

Personality and Individual Differences

One of the strongest findings in social psychology over the past century has been the discovery of the Fundamental Attribution Error.² This is the tendency for people to think that others' behavior is mostly caused by the sort of person they are, rather than the situations they find themselves in. For example, if someone yells at another driver in a parking lot, they could be an average person having an unusually bad day. Maybe the other driver did something very dangerous or offensive. In other words, their reaction could come from something specific to provoke the situation. However, most people would generally jump to the conclusion that the angry person is just that—an angry person, someone with a naturally short temper and little patience for others.

Belief and disbelief in conspiracy theories is no exception to this way of thinking. A diehard skeptic might see conspiracy theories as the mark of someone who is paranoid and suspicious by nature. Likewise, for the more conspiracy-minded it is tempting to think that conspiracy skeptics are naïve and gullible. Because of the fundamental attribution error, these sorts of explanations are simply the first things that come to mind. It should be no surprise, then, that psychologists and other social scientists have spent a lot of time investigating exactly this kind of explanation for conspiracy theory belief—in other words, asking what sort of person believes (or rejects) a conspiracy theory. In psychology, this maps onto the general field of individual differences. The individual differences question drove much of the early research into conspiracy theories and continues to be highly influential today. If you want to know how seriously someone

takes conspiracy theories, you should ask about how much they trust others, whether they are agreeable or open-minded, how much they think people are out to get them, and whether they routinely have unusual or paranormal experiences. Conspiracy theorizing may be driven in part by evidence, but is certainly driven by underlying psychological tendencies.

One of the earliest subjects investigated was interpersonal trust. Reasonably enough, people who believe more conspiracy theories tend to trust others less—not just the government, the media, or the institutions of society, but also other people in general, such as friends, neighbors, and co-workers.³ This makes sense—people who are more suspicious of others are more likely to detect a conspiracy, genuine or otherwise. In line with this, some psychologists have speculated that conspiracy theories are a manifestation of healthy interpersonal suspicion.⁴

The research on trust is mostly correlational. We know that trust and conspiracy theories are correlated, but we do not exactly know why. Less trusting people might be suspicious in general and therefore more likely to detect a conspiracy, but it also makes sense that if you think others are conspiring a lot, you would probably end up trusting them less. Likewise, some third factor could influence both variables, or there could be a feedback loop between mistrust and conspiracy beliefs so that each one feeds the other. This is a limitation that is shared by much of the psychological research on conspiracy theories, particularly the individual differences research.

Other work has looked at predicting conspiracy theory belief from broad personality traits. These investigations have produced conflicting results. The two personality traits most often found to be connected to conspiracy belief are agreeableness

and openness to experience—studies show that people who are more modest, compliant, and empathic are likely to reject conspiracy theories, as well as people who are less creative and open-minded.⁵ However, there have also been studies showing no independent relationships between conspiracy beliefs and either openness to experience (Lobato et al.) or agreeableness.⁶ Other studies have found that open-mindedness, a variable closely related to openness to experience, was negatively correlated with beliefs in conspiracy theories.⁷ At the moment it is not completely clear how personality predicts conspiracy belief.

Research aside, popular fiction and news media very often characterize conspiracy theorists as paranoid and conspiracy theories as delusions.⁸ Some research has looked into whether there really is a connection between conspiracy belief and paranoid delusion, but the relationship is not straightforward. The most common form of delusion in schizophrenia is the persecutory delusion, a paranoid belief that others are conspiring to persecute you—for example, harassing you on the street or deliberately making noise that prevents you from sleeping.⁹ Persecutory delusions differ from what are usually called conspiracy theories in that delusions usually propose a conspiracy against the deluded person themselves (“they are out to get me, specifically”). However, conspiracy theories about 9/11, vaccines, or the moon landings tend to be much broader in scope. That is, someone who believes a standard conspiracy theory might be a member of a relatively large targeted group such as African Americans or the general public (“they are out to get us”), or they might be totally irrelevant to the conspirators’ goals. This seems to be a key difference between everyday conspiracy theories and the delusions of conspiracy that stem from clinical paranoia.¹⁰

Still, there are enough similarities between conspiracy theories and the features of certain psychological disorders that there might be some kind of psychological connection. There is some evidence that nonclinical paranoia is correlated with beliefs in conspiracy theories, but most of the research in this area focuses on schizotypy, a theory that people fall on a broad spectrum of psychological experience ranging from complete normality to mild dissociative states to full-blown psychosis.¹¹ Mentally healthy individuals vary considerably in how schizotypal they are. Specifically, people who are higher in schizotypy tend to display higher creativity and artistic ability, impulsiveness, superstitious beliefs and magical thinking, disorganized thought patterns, introversion, and antisocial behavior.¹² Recently, psychologists have added conspiracy theories to this list—more schizotypal individuals, especially those more prone to magical thinking and unusual experiences, tend to take conspiracy theories more seriously.¹³ The exact reason for this is unclear. Some researchers have theorized that more schizotypal individuals believe more conspiracy theories because they are simply more suspicious than others, but this has not been well supported by the available data.¹⁴ Some evidence suggests that people high in schizotypy are more likely to detect intention or agency in ambiguous situations—that is, they are more likely to think that things happen intentionally rather than accidentally.¹⁵ Because of this, they conclude that a conspiracy could be behind a set of events that others might dismiss as coincidence.¹⁶ It is also possible that less schizotypal people simply come into contact with fewer unusual or unconventional beliefs, including conspiracy theories. As we will see in the next section, a person's other beliefs have a strong influence on what they think about a particular conspiracy theory.

Worldviews, Other Beliefs, and Politics

Next we review how conspiracy theories are made more or less credible by the other beliefs people hold. Naturally, whether someone agrees with a certain idea depends on more than just their personality, their level of schizotypy, or other general characteristics—it also depends on their broader belief system, ideology, religion, political leanings, and so on. A consistent finding running throughout the psychological research literature has been that beliefs in conspiracy theories, as well as the larger belief systems they are built on, are often better understood as disbeliefs. This can be seen in how people argue for conspiracy theories that they believe in. For example, in an analysis of online arguments about 9/11 we found that people advocating conspiracy theories more often argued against the mainstream explanation (“the official story is impossible”) than for their own (“this is evidence that 9/11 was a conspiracy”). People arguing in favor of the mainstream account of 9/11 did the opposite.¹⁷ This disbelief—a distrust of authority and officialdom, a perception of ulterior motives, and a conviction that things are not quite what they seem—is a feature of a great number of popular conspiracy theories. Maybe because of this common ground, one of the strongest predictors of someone’s opinion of a conspiracy theory is their thoughts about other conspiracy theories. For instance, knowing what someone thinks of the JFK assassination, the moon landings, chemtrails, and the New World Order will allow you to predict fairly accurately what they think of water fluoridation or 9/11.¹⁸

Interestingly, the correlations between conspiracy beliefs also hold true for real historical conspiracies. Conspiracy skeptics also (incorrectly) apply their skepticism to things like the MKULTRA experiments (the CIA’s Cold War mind control and brainwashing program) or various instances of government corruption, while conspiracy

theorists will either be more aware of them or just think they sound more likely to be true.¹⁹ It is not yet clear whether this connection stems from differences in historical knowledge, trust in government, or some combination of factors. However, beliefs in different conspiracy theories tend to be positively correlated even if the theories have nothing to do with one another, and even if they explicitly contradict one another.²⁰ This all points to a general tendency for people to accept or reject conspiratorial explanations, as well as general suspicions about particular topics. Individual conspiracy theories are an outward manifestation of these two forces.²¹

Of course, conspiracy theories are not the only way to embrace “fringe” knowledge and belief. Many other topics lie on the outer edges of what society considers to be acceptable knowledge or belief—like the paranormal, alternative medicine, urban legends, extreme politics, and pseudoscience. Other psychological research has looked at what makes people believe or disbelieve in these things as well, and the results are not totally dissimilar. Research has shown that people who are skeptical of conspiracy theories also tend to be skeptical of these topics.²² Some of this comes down to a simple match in worldviews—if we are being lied to about 9/11, maybe we cannot trust mainstream medicine or archeology either. Beyond that, these correlations could be due to both conspiracy theories and other fringe beliefs being correlated with schizotypy, openness to experience, agency detection, an increased exposure to conspiracy theories in social circles where fringe topics are more openly discussed, a desire to find simple solutions to complex problems, or some other factor.²³

More generally, a good deal of research points to a connection between beliefs in conspiracy theories and perceived “outsiderdom” or separation from mainstream society.

This is especially evident when looking at work on the psychological concept of anomie. Anomie is a sense of social alienation or disconnection, a feeling that one's own values and beliefs are not represented in broader society.²⁴ Feelings of anomie have been shown to correlate significantly with beliefs in conspiracy theories in diverse samples.²⁵

While conspiracy theories might be more popular on the fringes of society, of course that is not the only place they exist. Some conspiracy theories are fully mainstream: a clear majority of Americans believe that there was a conspiracy to assassinate John F. Kennedy, for instance.²⁶ Others are more or less popular because of their agreement with mainstream worldviews and ideologies. For example, Republicans were naturally more likely than Democrats to believe that Barack Obama was secretly born in Kenya, while Democrats take the idea that the Bush administration was involved with 9/11 more seriously.²⁷ People who follow a New Age spirituality are more likely than Christians to believe the conspiracy theories about Christianity popularized by *The Da Vinci Code*—these theories fit a New Age worldview just fine, but are a harder sell to a committed Christian.²⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find conspiracy theories about vote-rigging much more plausible when our favored candidate loses than when the election has the outcome we want.²⁹

Some of it comes down to attitudes toward the group that is supposed to be behind the conspiracy. People who are high in the psychological variable of right-wing authoritarianism, which measures the tendency to submit to authority, to dislike outsiders, and to prefer convention and tradition to new ideas, are more likely to buy into conspiracy theories that accuse minorities and deviant groups of secretive plots to destroy society.³⁰ Stereotypes about particular groups are naturally influenced by attitudes toward

those groups, as well—if someone sees a group of people, such as Jews, as more of a single-minded collective entity than simply a collection of individuals, conspiracy theories implicating that group will seem much more likely.³¹ So, while belief in some conspiracy theories tends to predict belief in others, it is not that simple. Different theories appeal to different audiences, and many of the most successful conspiracy theories play on the anxieties and fears of particular social groups.

Psychological States, Specific Mindsets, and Social Context

Of course, personality and general beliefs about the world are not the whole story. After all, the fundamental attribution error is just that—an error. The ways we think and act are subject to more fleeting influences than our relatively consistent traits and worldviews—next, we will look at some fairly temporary psychological factors that influence how people think about conspiracies. A striking demonstration of this comes from a 2008 experiment where the researchers had participants write a short essay before completing a variety of tasks.³² Half of the participants wrote about a time they lacked control over their lives, while the others described a time when they were in control. This task was meant to induce a feeling of having or lacking control—and a lack of control is thought to be a troubling psychological state that people are motivated to resolve. In follow-up tasks, the participants who had been manipulated to feel a lack of control were more likely to see patterns in noise, to make superstitious inferences about connections between events, and to perceive sinister conspiracies in ambiguous situations.

Psychologists theorize that drawing connections and recognizing patterns in this way can help to restore a sense of control and certainty—to make sense of a world that, in that moment, seems difficult to predict or understand.³³ The world follows patterns; it is

regular, knowable, and perhaps controllable, even if the wrong people (i.e., evil conspirators) are controlling it at the moment. Consistent with this experimental work, feelings of control have been found to correlate reliably with beliefs in conspiracy theories as well as with the related variables of mistrust and paranoia.³⁴

The connection between pattern recognition and conspiracy theory belief makes some intuitive sense. Conspiracy literature often talks about connecting the dots, seeing the bigger picture based on the limited information that has slipped through the conspirators' fingers—they have covered their tracks well, so there is no single definitive piece of proof. Psychologists know this sort of thinking—seeing broad patterns and recognizing trends at the cost of ignoring some smaller details—as holistic or intuitive thinking. Its opposite—focusing on details and the interrelationships between parts of a system at the expense of looking at the whole—is called analytic or rational thinking.³⁵ While everyone uses both modes of thinking, it is possible to induce someone to rely more heavily on one system or the other at a given time. When someone is thinking more analytically, conspiracy theories seem much less plausible than otherwise. People with a more generally analytic thinking style tend to be more skeptical of conspiracy theories as explanations for events than those with a more holistic/intuitive style.³⁶

When measuring people's opinions of conspiracy theories, psychologists generally employ questionnaire methods. They present survey participants with a statement, such as "The government is covering up alien visitations," and ask them to rate their agreement with it on a scale. Most of these scales do not contain the words "conspiracy theory" at all, because of a concern that the term has negative connotations and it would influence people's views. Instead, they tend to ask about plots, intrigue,

covert orchestration, and so on. This matches a general concern that “conspiracy theory” has such baggage that it works as a kind of rhetorical weapon, and poisons people against anything that it’s applied to. However, some research has shown that people are no less likely to agree with something when it is labeled a conspiracy theory than when given a more neutral label, suggesting that the presence or absence of the term may not be as important as once thought.³⁷

What Makes Particular Theories More Appealing?

Finally, some more recent research has moved beyond looking at what makes people reject or accept conspiracy theories in general. This line of research focuses more on the theories themselves—in other words, what makes a good conspiracy theory? This research is in its early days, but we are starting to get a general picture.³⁸ A successful conspiracy theory explains important events or social conditions, implicates a group seen as both powerful and immoral, and provides a coherent motivation for the conspirators. 9/11 conspiracy theories are a good example. The conspirators are said to be powerful politicians and financiers, the event itself was a major historical moment, and the motivation, a war for oil in the Middle East and a crackdown on civil liberties at home, is easily understandable. These elements help to engage people in the search for a hidden truth, and motivate them to find patterns that point to the possibility of conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories about a particular group seem particularly likely when someone holds unfavorable social stereotypes about them, or when the less powerful party in a hierarchical social relationship has little control over matters but depends on the more powerful party for a vital resource.³⁹ It should be no surprise that feelings of power are relevant to beliefs in conspiracy theories. On a very basic level, conspiracy

theories are basically stories about power—the secret power of a particular group, and the new power of the people who have come to see through their deception.⁴⁰ People who feel relatively powerless are more likely to agree with conspiracy theories, and general conspiracy mentality predicts prejudice against high-power but not low-power groups.⁴¹

Groups that are implicated as conspirators are generally seen as being fairly powerful. They tend to have a lot of resources at their disposal—at least enough to carry out their plot, create a cover story of some sort, and maintain a cover-up more or less indefinitely. In general, people see conspiracies as much more competent than individuals are. In extreme examples, the conspirators are seen as having a sort of superhuman power and near infallibility in executing their plans. Research has shown that people are more likely to perceive a conspiracy when a disastrous event occurs than when a disaster was narrowly averted, possibly because of this idea that conspiracies of powerful people usually manage to do what they set out to do. Unlikely or unusual events are more likely to give rise to conspiracy theories than likely or normal ones are.⁴² Critics of conspiracy theories point out that the more elements there are in a conspiracy the more likely it is that at least one would fail, and that conspiracy theorists overestimate how likely it is that large conspiracies could be successfully carried out.⁴³

Even assuming a very high level of competence among the perpetrators, conspiracies are still risky.⁴⁴ On a very basic level, a plausible conspiracy theory must have a good reason for the conspirators to risk being caught committing some terrible crime or another. Motive is everything. In fact, a fairly strong predictor of conspiracy theorizing is not just someone's understanding of the conspirators' motives, but also their own willingness to conspire in a specific situation. For example, some research has

shown that those who are most convinced that Princess Diana was secretly killed by the British royal family believe so because they are also more likely than others to say that they themselves would have had her assassinated, had they been in the royal family's position.⁴⁵ This finding also occurs for several other conspiracy theories, and the immorality of the suspected conspirators also plays an important role. For example, conspiracy theories are easier to believe when the conspirators are seen as immoral.⁴⁶ People are especially sensitive to immoral behavior by authorities when they are feeling uncertain. Perceptions of immorality and of the existence of ulterior motives can prompt suspicion, which social psychologists see as a state of ambiguity. When we are suspicious, we are not sure what to think, so we entertain several hypotheses for why others are acting the way they are.⁴⁷ Suspicious people do not always come to uncharitable conclusions about others—instead, they suspend judgment and look for further information.⁴⁸ This matches the nonspecificity and vagueness of conspiracy theory beliefs highlighted above.

Conclusion

Despite all that we know about the psychological factors associated with conspiracy theories, we know much less about their social consequences. In part, this might be due to the incorrect assumption that conspiracy theories are trivial notions believed only by disenfranchised, paranoid, or distrustful people.⁴⁹ However, dismissing all conspiracy theories as either trivial or ridiculous risks overlooking some of the potential consequences of the theories that many members of society find at least plausible, such as those associated with vaccination, climate change, or the sinister motives of particular

social groups.⁵⁰ In such cases, conspiracy theories may be harmful if they are used to discredit information for which there is clear legal, scientific, or historical evidence.⁵¹

Too often, the question of why people believe (or refuse to believe) conspiracy theories becomes a question of who believes conspiracy theories. While psychologists have made some strides in identifying people who are most likely to take conspiracy theories seriously, perhaps more importantly we have started to move beyond the who. We also know something about when conspiracy theories are most plausible, how they fit into larger systems of belief, and what the effects (and, perhaps, functions) of conspiracy theories are. The “why” is a much broader question that encompasses all of these areas, and the next few years of research will develop our understanding of it even further.

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