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Consequences of conspiracy theories

Daniel Jolley¹, Silvia Mari², and Karen M. Douglas³

¹ Staffordshire University, United Kingdom

² University of Milano - Bicocca, Italy

³ University of Kent, United Kingdom

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dr Daniel Jolley

Department of Psychology, School of Life Sciences and Education,
Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom, ST4 2DF

Ph: +44 (0)1782 294896, E-mail: daniel.jolley@staffs.ac.uk.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Abstract

The majority of psychological studies of conspiracy theories have investigated the personality correlates and psychological processes associated with conspiracy belief. There is now increasing concern about the consequences of conspiracy theories, however, and it is these consequences that we turn to in this chapter. A growing body of research suggests that conspiracy theories may have negative consequences in a variety of settings that are vital to the smooth functioning of a society. Specifically, conspiracy theories appear to reduce engagement with the political process, climate change, childhood vaccination and increase people's intentions to leave their workplace. Conspiracy theories are also associated with increased prejudice and discrimination toward stigmatized groups. Further, conspiracy theories can lead to feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, anomie, and mistrust. This chapter will provide an overview of the literature to date, discussing both the behavioral and psychological consequences of conspiracy theories. Based on our review, we will argue that developing tools to alleviate the potentially dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories is timely and important.

INDEX WORDS:

Conspiracy, Consequences; Attitude; Politics; Science-denialism; Polarisation; Prejudice; Discrimination; Violence; Crime; Health; Work

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Introduction

Conspiracy theories explain the ultimate causes of significant events and circumstances as the secret actions of malevolent groups who cover up information to suit their own interests (e.g., Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, 2017). Well-known conspiracy theories propose that climate change is a hoax orchestrated by the world's scientists to secure research funding, that Diana, Princess of Wales was murdered by members of the British government, and that the harms of vaccines are being covered up so that pharmaceutical companies can continue to make huge profits. Conspiracy theories are popular, and some research suggests that around half of the U.S. population believes at least one (Oliver and Wood, 2014). In recent years, psychologists have made significant progress in understanding why so many millions of people believe in conspiracy theories (see Douglas, et al., 2017 for a review). However, much less is known about their consequences. In this chapter, we outline what is known to date, and review the psychological research on the positive and negative consequences of conspiracy theories. Overwhelmingly, this research suggests that conspiracy theories are harmful. We, therefore, argue that future research efforts should attempt to address the negative psychological and behavioural consequences of conspiracy theories.

Belief in conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories at first glance appear to satisfy important psychological needs (Douglas, et al., 2017; see also Douglas, Cichocka, and Sutton, this volume). For example, conspiracy theories may allow people to gain an accurate and consistent understanding of the world (epistemic need); for example, people who need concrete answers (Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska, 2017) and those showing a tendency to overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events (Brotherton and French, 2014) are more likely to be drawn to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories may also allow people to meet the desire to be

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

secure and in control (existential need); for example, people who are anxious (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) and feel powerless (e.g., van Prooijen and Acker, 2015) are likely to subscribe to conspiracy theories. Moreover, conspiracy theories may allow people to maintain a positive sense of the self and the social groups one belongs to (social need); for example, conspiracy theories appeal more to narcissists (Cichocka, Marchlewska, and de Zavala, 2016) and people who view themselves on the losing side of political processes (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Together, a growing body of literature on the psychology of conspiracy theories provides evidence that belief in conspiracy theories can be explained by everyday psychological needs and not simply the result of paranoia (cf. Hofstadter, 1964).

Consequences of conspiracy theories

Whilst psychologists now understand a great deal about the factors that draw people toward conspiracy theories (e.g., Douglas, et al., this volume; Lantian et al., this volume; van Prooijen, Klein and Milošević Đorđević, this volume), less is known about their consequences. Scholars once suggested that conspiracy theories may be harmless fun and of little concern (Bratich, 2008; Clarke, 2002). Other than being perhaps foolish and illogical, it was therefore thought that conspiracy theories have little or no detrimental influence over society (e.g., Melley, 2002; Willman, 2002). Although this view is now less popular, whether conspiracy theories have more positive or negative consequences still remains open for debate. In the following sections, we review research on both the positive and negative outcomes of conspiracy theories.

Positive consequences

Although there is little empirical evidence at present, some research suggests that there may be positive consequences of endorsing conspiracy theories. For example, believing

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

in conspiracy theories might lead to a sense of shared community with others who endorse the same theories (Franks, Bangerter, Bauer, Hall and Noort, 2017), thus satisfying a social need. As suggested by Miller (2002) conspiracy theories can provide individuals with the opportunity to question the credibility of governments, which in normal circumstances would likely be denied to them, and thus opens up possibilities for political debate.

In a similar vein, conspiracy theories may in certain contexts inspire collective action and social change attempts, especially in reaction to threatening events. Potentially, therefore, they have the capacity to satisfy existential needs. For example, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that Germans with higher levels of conspiracy belief were more likely to take political action, such as organizing a protest, in response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011. In a different context, Mari and colleagues (2017) found that representations of the recent European economic crisis amongst Italian and Greek participants as a secret plot by powerful groups influenced different forms of political participation. Conspiracy beliefs triggered both classic positive forms of political responses such as legal activism (e.g., signing petitions) and other atypical forms, such as financial resistance (e.g., taking money abroad). Belief in conspiracy theories predicted political action beyond the effects of ideology and feelings of personal vulnerability.

Scholars have also suggested that conspiracy theories can reveal actual anomalies in mainstream explanations (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Swami and Coles, 2010). Indeed, some conspiracy theories have been proven to be true such as the U.S. Department of Defence plans to orchestrate terrorism and blame it on Cuba, the Watergate scandal that involved a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters where President Nixon's administration attempted to cover-up their involvement and the Tuskegee syphilis scandal where treatment was withheld from 399 Black men without their informed consent.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy theories may, therefore, allow people to question social hierarchies, which may encourage governments to be more transparent (see Swami and Coles, 2010).

Negative consequences

Whilst there may be some positive consequences of believing in conspiracy theories, empirical research examining these consequences is lacking. At present, the vast majority of research examining the consequences of conspiracy theories has focused on negative consequences, particularly in the domains of politics and health. These consequences can be broken down into different areas: psychological, attitude polarisation, political, scientific, and daily life. We now cover these each in turn.

Psychological needs

As we have discussed, conspiracy beliefs are thought to satisfy important psychological needs (Douglas et al., 2017). However, emerging experimental research has demonstrated that conspiracy theories might thwart these needs more than they help people meet them. For example, exposure to conspiracy theories can directly increase feelings of powerlessness, disillusionment, uncertainty, mistrust and anomie rather than decrease them (Jolley and Douglas, 2014a, 2014b; Jolley et al., in press). That is, rather than helping alleviate negative psychological states, conspiracy theories might sometimes make them worse. As Douglas et al. (2017) put it, “[conspiracy theories] may be more appealing than satisfying” (p. 538).

Conspiracy theories may also be a source of social stigma (Harambam and Aupers, 2015). Indeed, people subscribing to these beliefs may be aware of being the target of stigma. For instance, individuals advocating for alternative explanations through comments on news websites were reluctant to label and let others name their beliefs as “conspiracy theories”

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

(Wood and Douglas, 2013). Lantian and colleagues (2018) experimentally tested whether people endorsing conspiracy theories experience social stigma. They found that French participants induced to endorse (vs. reject) conspiracy theories related to the Charlie Hebdo shooting event expected greater fear of social exclusion, via the mediation effect of anticipated negative evaluation of the self. A second study, where participants were asked to imagine the presence of an audience, replicated the results, thus underlying the importance of perceived social norms in such negative psychological consequences. Overall, therefore, research suggests that conspiracy theories may not help people meet important psychological needs, and may make people feel as though they are outsiders.

Polarisation and attitude change

Conspiracy theories may also change the way people think about events. Research more broadly exploring the influence of information has shown that external sources can play a critical role in shaping beliefs (cf. Swami et al., 2013). Based on this idea, Swami et al. (2013) argued that as attitude formation is rarely based on a critical review of all the relevant issues, the nature of the information that an individual receives about a given phenomenon should have an impact on their attitudes. In testing this assertion empirically, Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo (1995) found that people who had viewed the film *J.F.K* – which highlights several prominent conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy – were more inclined to disbelieve official accounts than those who had not yet viewed the film. Similarly, Swami et al. (2013) exposed people to either information that argued NASA faked the moon landing, a text critical of the moon landing conspiracy account or a control condition where no information was provided. Results demonstrated that those who were exposed to the moon landing conspiracy theory indicated a higher level of belief that the landing was faked, relative to the other conditions.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Further, Douglas and Sutton (2008) found that participants who read conspiracy information concerning the death of Princess Diana were more inclined to endorse conspiracy explanations, even though they perceived that their beliefs had not changed. Conspiracy explanations, therefore, are able to change people's attitudes, and this has wide-reaching implications when considering the ease of access to conspiracy theories within popular culture (e.g., Bessi et al., 2015).

Special attention has been devoted to online environments. The confirmation bias – the tendency to select the information that adheres to an individual's system of beliefs and to avoid contradictions – promotes the selective exposure to information relative to the specific narrative of interest while ignoring alternative viewpoints. Del Vicario et al. (2016a) showed that this is also true when considering conspiracy theories' online consumption and content diffusion. Moreover, online social media allow for the aggregation of individuals in communities with shared narratives and worldviews, acting as echo chambers, that reverberate and reinforce biased narratives. The main features of such communities, indeed, refer to the strong group homogeneity - the primary driver for the diffusion of content - and polarization (Del Vicario et al., 2016a; Del Vicario et al., 2016b).

Sunstein (2018) raised a concern about the perils of group polarization when considering online misinformation - i.e., moving toward a more extreme attitude in the direction of the original inclination of the group's member. Fake news, unverified rumors and conspiracy theories cannot be easily filtered and suppressed by mainstream media or social pressure. Mocanu, Rossi, Zhang, Karsai, and Quattrociocchi (2015) found that conspiracy theories reverberate for as long as other types of information conveyed by online political activism, as well as mainstream media. Thus, such false information developed for minority audiences is particularly pervasive on social media who may be already favourable towards

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

conspiracy theories, promoting collective credulity. Big data analyses of cascade dynamics of Facebook posts and interactions about conspiracy theories revealed that they were assimilated slowly but there was a positive relationship between the size of the cascade and lifetime (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Moreover, Bessi et al. (2015) found that Italians believing in conspiracy theories and who were active online on Facebook concentrated their social media activities on four specific domains (diet, health, environment, and geopolitics) and were actively engaged in posting comments on the same comments, contributing to the vitality of the conspiracy theories.

Political consequences

Conspiracy theories propose that (perceived) powerful groups are involved in secret plots and schemes. Typically, the conspirator is seen to be the government but can also be other social groups, such as people who are Jewish (e.g., Biddlestone, Cichocka, Žeželj, and Bilewicz, this volume; Golec de Zavala and Cichocka, 2012). Subscribing to these conspiracy theories can lead to apathy and prejudice. For example, focusing on political behaviours, political scientists have found that conspiracy thinking is associated with behaviours such as not wanting to vote, donate to political parties or put up political yard signs (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). To examine the impact of government conspiracy theories on political engagement experimentally, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) presented British participants with material arguing in favor of governments being involved in plots and schemes (e.g., 9/11), or arguing against government conspiracy theories. They found that participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories were less likely to engage in politics (e.g., voting) compared to those who had read arguments against government conspiracy theories. This effect was shown to be mediated by feelings of political powerlessness.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

However, conspiracy theories can also be politically activating, such as organizing a protest (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014) or being involved in illegal political actions such as occupying buildings (Mari et al., 2017). As Jolley, Douglas, Leite, and Schrader (in press) discuss, depending on the context (such as feeling empowered by the (in)action), conspiracy theories may lead to inaction rather than action. For example, disengaging from voting might be empowering for people who believe the government is conspiring, but at the same time, protesting against the government may be empowering for people who also believe sinister forces in the government ought to be challenged. Alternatively, some conspiracy theories may breed a feeling of helplessness that promotes inaction (such as feeling politically powerless so not wanting to vote; Jolley and Douglas, 2014a), whereas others may make people angry, leading to action (cf. Mari et al., 2017). Future research should explore these possibilities further.

Conspiracy theories are also associated with institutional distrust. Mari et al. (under review), using a cross-cultural dataset with almost 12,000 participants in 11 democracies, found that supporting general political conspiracy beliefs determined mistrust toward specific different institutions (the representative government; non-representative government bodies, and security institutions) and the effect was generalized, with few exceptions, across the different countries. In an experimental study, Einstein and Glick (2015) revealed that exposure to a conspiracy claim reduced trust in the government and institutions not connected to the accusation. Conspiracy theories thus contribute to the diffusion of suspicion and the erosion of the necessary trust and confidence climate between citizens and central authorities, hence endangering the entire democratic system.

Conspiracy theories have also been shown to interfere with intergroup relations (see Biddlestone et al., this volume). For example, Swami (2012) has demonstrated that among a

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Malaysian Malay sample, belief in Jewish conspiracy theories - that propose Jewish people are involved in plots and schemes - was associated with greater racist attitudes towards Chinese citizens. Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012) also found that belief in conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of the world was associated with anti-Semitic attitudes. Moreover, research by Imhoff and Bruder (2014) has shown that conspiracy beliefs are a significant predictor of prejudice against a variety of high-power groups (e.g., Jews, Americans, capitalists). Similarly, in correlational data, Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, and Wójcik (2013) reported that conspiracy stereotypes of Jewish people—which refer to social schemas of groups that typically view group members with ill intentions—are a strong predictor of discrimination towards Jewish people (e.g., favouring policies that prevent Jewish people from buying Polish land, see also Bilewicz and Krzeminski, 2010).

Building on this work, Jolley, Meleady, and Douglas (in press), found that British participants who were exposed to Jewish conspiracy theories displayed increased prejudice towards this group compared to a control group, which then translated into biased behavioural tendencies towards Jewish people. Specifically, participants who were exposed to Jewish conspiracy theories were less likely to vote for a Jewish political candidate in an election. Importantly, our work has extended previous work by demonstrating that exposure to Jewish conspiracy theories not only increased prejudice towards Jewish people, but also indirectly increased prejudice towards a range of other, uninvolved groups such as Americans, Asians, and Arabs. This effect occurred via a process of attitude generalization where prejudice towards secondary groups is increased *through* prejudice towards the group at the centre of the conspiracy theory (cf. Pettigrew, 2009). Together, this research demonstrated that conspiracy theories can have a widespread negative impact on intergroup relations.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In addition to fuelling prejudice and discrimination, conspiracy theories have been shown to potentially fuel violence towards others. Bartlett and Miller (2010) analysed the content of writings and speeches of more than 50 extremist groups across the political ideology continuum. They discovered whilst there was no difference in conspiracy thinking between violent and nonviolent extremist groups, conspiracy theories accelerated the process of radicalization where conspiracy theories can change ingroup/outgroup dynamics and reinforce “othering”. There has been anecdotal evidence that conspiracy theories were openly expressed by the perpetrator involved in the 2019 shootings at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand (Davey, 2019). Journalists have also suggested that the basis for aggression towards survivors in recent mass shootings in the US appear to originate with conspiracy theorists, who believe that survivors are crisis actors employed by gun law reformists (Levin and Beckett, 2017). For example, the survivors of a mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 has been accused of being crisis actors by a variety of sources, including some mainstream media outlets (Pearce, 2018). Whilst there is limited empirical research exploring this possibility, Uscinski and Parent (2014) have found that people high in conspiracy beliefs are twice as likely to oppose gun law reform and defend political violence.

Science denialism

Conspiracy theories can also lead to inaction and disengagement in the scientific domain. For example, a popular conspiracy theory proposes that climate change scientists fake their data in order to receive research funding (Douglas and Sutton, 2015). Polls indicate that upwards of 37% of Americans believe that global warming is a hoax (Public Policy Polling, 2013; also see Uscinski, Douglas, and Lewandowsky, 2017). This is potentially troublesome if people were to act on their beliefs and not wish to engage with climate science. Indeed, to explore the impact of climate change conspiracy theories on behavioral

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

intentions, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) exposed British participants to materials arguing in favor of climate change conspiracy theories, or materials arguing against such theories. We also used a control condition where no arguments were provided. Results revealed that being exposed to climate change conspiracy theories reduced intentions to engage in climate-friendly behaviours such as using energy efficiency, in comparison to the other conditions. This effect was explained by feelings of powerlessness associated with climate change, uncertainty, and disillusionment. Specifically, being exposed to the idea that climate change is a hoax directly increased the feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty towards tackling climate change, alongside feeling disillusioned with climate scientists, which led to lower intention to reduce one's carbon footprint. Similarly, Van der Linden (2015) found that participants who were exposed to a conspiracy video about global warming were less likely to sign a petition to help reduce global warming, in comparison to participants who watched an inspirational pro-climate video or a control group with no exposure.

Conspiracy theories have also been shown to impact important medical choices. For example, researchers have shown that endorsement of birth control and HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, which propose that HIV/AIDS are a form of genocide against African Americans, are associated with increased negative attitudes towards contraceptive behaviours (e.g., the use of condoms; Bird and Bogart, 2003; Bogart and Thorburn, 2006). Indeed, negative attitudes towards condoms have been shown to partially explain the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and condom use (Bogart and Thorburn, 2006). Similar results have been found in research conducted by Hoyt et al. (2012), where HIV conspiracy beliefs were associated with increased risk relating to HIV such as being more likely to avoid appropriate treatment behaviour.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Moreover, the former South African President Mbeki publicly stated that HIV is not the cause of AIDS and that antiretroviral (ARV) drugs are not useful in controlling the HIV infection (Chigwedere, Seage, Gruskin, Lee, and Essex, 2008). The South African government, therefore, declined to accept donations of ARV medication. It is plausible that such a public expression of conspiracy belief may have influenced the South African public's trust in biomedical claims (Rubincam, 2017). It has since been estimated that over 330,000 South Africans died between the years 2000-2005, which could have been due, in part, to the actions of the South African government (Chigwedere et al., 2008).

In a similar vein, Oliver and Wood (2014) have shown using four nationally representative surveys sampled between 2006 and 2011 that over half of the U.S. population endorses at least one medical conspiracy theory, such as the link between vaccines and autism. When considering vaccinations, Jolley and Douglas (2014b) explored the link between anti-vaccine conspiracy theories and vaccination intentions. In the first study with British parents as the sample, Jolley and Douglas uncovered a correlation between belief in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories and intentions to have a fictitious child vaccinated against a made-up disease. In a second study, they employed an experimental design where British participants were exposed to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (e.g., that vaccines harm more than the help and that this fact is covered up), anti-conspiracy arguments, or no arguments (control condition). The researchers found that exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories reduced vaccination intentions, compared to the other two conditions. Jolley and Douglas (2014) also included a number of mediators in order to explain this effect. It was found that the conspiracy theory account aroused suspicion concerning the perceived dangers of vaccinations, and made people feel powerless, disillusioned and mistrustful, leading to a lower intention to vaccinate the fictional child.

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Moreover, Oliver and Wood (2014) found that people who endorse such conspiracy theories were less likely to use traditional vaccines such as flu shots and were more likely to indicate that they would trust medical advice from non-professionals such as friends and family. Similarly, Lamberty and Imhoff (2018) found that conspiracy beliefs were associated with more positive attitudes towards alternative and complementary medicine and more negative attitudes towards biomedical approaches. However, the consequences of conspiracy theories are not only constrained to the “hard sciences” and medicine but have also been found to impact the humanities. Specifically, Imhoff, Lamberty, and Klein (2018) found that conspiracy theories lead to questioning of established narratives and facts, such as about history. Together, this provides empirical evidence that conspiracy beliefs can lead to disengagement with a range of established medical practice, but also with established narratives and fact.

Daily life context

Conspiracy theories may not only influence people’s medical decisions but also how they behave in their everyday work and social lives. For example, belief in organizational conspiracy theories – which is the belief that powerful groups act secretly to achieve objectives at the cost of employees – have been shown to have a detrimental impact in the workplace. Specifically, van Prooijen and de Vries (2016) discovered that organizational conspiracy beliefs predicted increased turnover intentions via decreased organizational commitment. Exploring this experimentally, Douglas and Leite (2017) exposed participants to organizational conspiracy theories, where participants were asked to read a workplace scenario in which a conspiracy had occurred (vs. control). Participants who were exposed to organizational conspiracy theories displayed a lower intention to remain in their workplace. This was mediated by organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Together, this work

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

showcases the impact that conspiracy theories may have in organizational settings and that they should therefore not be dismissed as harmless gossip.

Conspiracy theories may also lead people to disengage from social norms, making them more likely to engage in counter-normative behaviour. Jolley, et al., (in press) have explored this novel issue. Specifically, in a correlational study with British participants, they measured known predictors of everyday crimes – which are common offences that most people are likely to commit some point in their lives, such as running red lights and paying with cash to avoid paying taxes (Karstedt & Farrall, 2006), alongside belief in conspiracy theories. Results demonstrated that along with other known personality predictors (e.g. Honesty-Humility), conspiracy theories (both general conspiracy beliefs and belief in well-known conspiracy theories in society) were found to uniquely predict an increased tendency towards everyday crime. A second study extended these findings in an experimental design. Participants were exposed to either conspiracy-related material that argued in favour of government conspiracy theories, anti-conspiracy material that argued against the theories, or a control condition where no information was provided. It was found that participants who were exposed to conspiracy theories were more likely to engage in everyday crime in the future. This effect was mediated by anomie - or a general feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig and Gregory, 1999). The researchers argued that feelings such as anomie can be exacerbated by conspiracy theories, which in turn change the perceptions about the particular ways in which social systems operate, leading to unethical behaviour. In other words, if others are perceived to be conspiring, then perhaps it is permissible to commit negative acts oneself. Together, this research provides evidence that endorsing the idea that *others* are involved in conspiracies may alter one's perceptions of social norms by signaling that unethical activities are permissible.

Conclusion

Although there may be some positive consequences of holding conspiracy beliefs, and further research should explore how people's psychological needs might be met by conspiracy theories, the literature to date paints rather a pessimistic picture. Specifically, a growing body of research has shown that conspiracy theories can negatively impact people in a variety of areas, including their work life, medical choices and political engagement. Conspiracy theories appear to be a significant problem for modern society. It is, therefore, paramount that researchers explore avenues to address the detrimental consequences of conspiracy theories.

As further discussed in this volume, researchers are beginning to make progress in developing tools that can be used to combat the negative impact of conspiracy theories; however, there are challenges in ensuring that the interventions will work successfully in society. For example, Jolley and Douglas (2017) found that once a conspiracy belief has become established, the consequences of conspiracy theories are difficult to correct. Counter-arguments that come before a conspiracy account may be promising as an intervention (e.g., in the case of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories), but often the conspiracy account is widespread before the official explanation is published. In these situations, conspiracy theories could be difficult to refute. Nonetheless, promising results were recently obtained in a series of studies by Bonetto, Troian, Varet, Monaco, and Girandola (2018), where priming resistance to persuasion reduced individual endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, Mari et al. (under review) considered the differential impact of social media use on political conspiracy beliefs and institutional trust. They found that specific types of social media use (i.e., interactional, informational, and political expressive) may soften the negative effect of conspiracy beliefs toward institutional trust. Interestingly, such types of social media use are

CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

precursors of political participation and can be utilized as a starting point in interventions of media literacy and consumption, to make people aware of the effects of social media use.

Developing interventions is an important question for scholars in the future, where the emerging research is showcasing some early promising results.

Alongside focusing on developing interventions, scholars conducting future research must consider some methodological issues. For example, there is a scarcity of experimental and or longitudinal designs used in the field. This is particularly troublesome as researchers are unaware whether the effects of conspiracy exposure on behavioural intentions last for a prolonged period of time. In a similar vein, there is a scarcity of real behavioural measurement – the literature to date is focused on intentions or fictional scenarios. It is unclear whether intentions translate into real behavioural engagement or disengagement. Moreover, the majority of the research literature has focused on participants who are relatively low in conspiracy beliefs. There is therefore limited research exploring the psychological make-up and consequences for the self of strong conspiracy beliefs. Future research could explore these important questions to enable a fuller understanding of the consequences of conspiracy theories.

In sum, the literature on the psychology of conspiracy theories has made some important strides in understanding conspiracy theories in contemporary society. Whilst scholars still have work to do there is currently a dark picture of conspiracy theories emerging from the literature to date. Conspiracy theories have the power to seem appealing but, can go on to have a detrimental impact on the self and wider society.

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CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

AUTHOR BIOS:

Daniel Jolley is a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at Staffordshire University. He is particularly interested in using experimental methods to examine the social consequences of exposure to conspiracy theories and test tools to alleviate the negative impact of conspiracy theories.

Silvia Mari is an Associate Professor at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Her research interests cover attitudes and conspiracy beliefs in different behavioural domains, including intergroup relationships, political psychology, and the social media context.

Karen M. Douglas is a Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Kent. Her research focuses on why people believe in conspiracy theories, and what the consequences of these beliefs are for individuals, groups, and society.