

Conspiracy theories: what the research says about why people believe them



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Research Briefing

Why people believe conspiracy theories: a review of the research

Conspiracy theories are everywhere, particularly on social media. For examples the various conspiracy theories around 9/11 such as

- Explosives were planted in the twin towers by the government or government agencies before the attack and that the attack was known about and colluded with by 'the authorities,
- The moon landings were faked

- The US government has evidence of alien life
- Global warming is a hoax

and so on are still being shared and believed around the world. So why are some people more likely to believe **conspiracy theories than others?**

A new study (*this research briefing was sent to members in November 2017 – [to make sure you have the very latest thinking and research direct to your inbox click here](#)*) has looked at the psychology of conspiracy theories and makes for interesting reading.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, beliefs, organisational commitment, intolerance to uncertainty, cognitive closure, disenfranchisement, social identification

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42% of the American population believe that there has been a cover-up with regards to the events of 9/11, 10% of Americans aren't sure and 48% don't believe that there has been a cover-up. Over one third of Americans believe that global warming is a hoax. Regardless of how preposterous conspiracy theories might appear, a significant percentage of people still believe them, for example, recently it was found that about 4% of Americans and 3% of Europeans believe that the Nazi hierarchy survived the war and fled to the moon!



Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are causal explanations of an event or events, which involve other people collaborating to cover up what really happened.

Why do people believe conspiracy theories?

So, why do people believe conspiracy theories? A new review of research has just been published by researchers from the UK.

Previous studies have found a number of reasons why conspiracy theories take hold including

- Filling in where there are discontinuities and gaps in information
- Intolerance to uncertainty
- Resolving paradoxes and conflicting information
- Creating meaning in situations that appear to be random
- Defending or aligning with particular beliefs and values
- Creating greater certainty by ascribing the causality of events to individuals or groups that are out of favour with an individual.

It has been found that conspiracy theorists, and those who believe them, tend to use the device of insinuating that people who try to disprove a conspiracy theory are themselves part of the conspiracy, suggesting that people who are trying to debunk a conspiracy theory are using disinformation, as opposed to proper evidence. Further, that conspiracy theorists tend to try to protect a set of beliefs, such as vaccinations are harmful or climate change isn't very serious, by proposing strong and compelling 'evidence' as proof of their beliefs.

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When do conspiracy theories get generated?

Previous studies have found that conspiracy theories tend to get created more frequently when there is a need to find explanatory patterns in a set of events. Additionally it has been found that conspiracy theories tend to emerge primarily with large-scale or significant events and where people are left disappointed by either mundane, boring or ordinary explanations for events, particularly events that have a significant emotional impact.

Additionally, it is been discovered that conspiracy theories tend to arise more frequently where there is confusion or incomplete explanation. Conspiracy theories tend to be produced when there is a need within some people for what is known as cognitive closure. This is where an individual wants to have a firm answer to a situation, rather than leave it

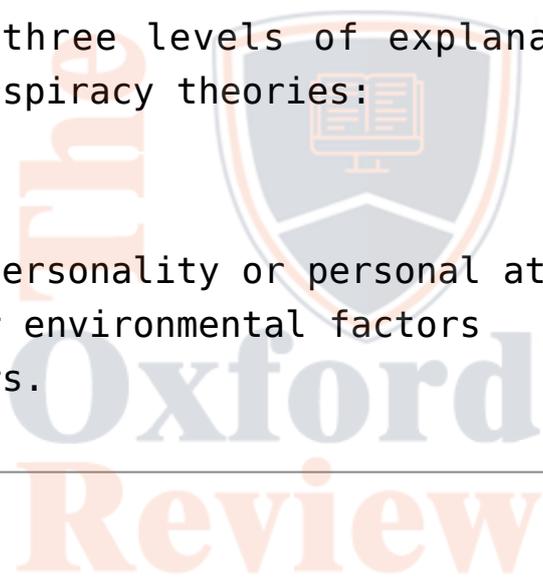
open or ambiguous. Such behaviour is strongly associated with an intolerance to uncertainty.

Previous studies have also found that belief in a conspiracy tends to be stronger when people experience distress and increased levels of uncertainty.

Research findings

There tend to be three levels of explanation for people's engagement with conspiracy theories:

1. Individual, personality or personal attributes
2. Contextual or environmental factors
3. Social factors.



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Personal factors

It is been found that belief in conspiracy theories is more frequent in people who are less likely to engage in critical

thinking, it is strongly correlated to people with lower levels of analytical ability and lower levels of educational attainment. The researchers found that belief in conspiracy theories is significantly higher with people who tend to assume that all events have a cause outside of random chance and that the cause largely tends to be human in origin. In effect, people who believe that every action of other people is intentional and do not factor in the possibility of mistakes, errors of judgement or lack of motive are much more likely to engage with conspiracy theories.

Other studies have found that people who tend to have more extreme and entrenched attitudes and beliefs are more likely to engage with and believe conspiracy theories. We tend to find that people like these who are presented with evidence that a conspiracy theory is itself incorrect tend to strengthen their beliefs in the conspiracy theory (confirmation bias) and suffer from greater levels of uncertainty immediately before doing so.

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Environmental attributes

A number of studies found that people who engage with conspiracy theories tend to have heightened need for safety and security and also tend to engage in greater levels of controlling behaviours. One study found that people who have little control in their lives, particularly for economic reasons, are much more likely to engage with conspiracy theories as it gives them a sense of control over what is often a series of uncertain events and explanations. People are much more likely to turn to conspiracy theories when they are anxious and feel that they have little power in their own environments. Other studies have found that belief in conspiracy theories tends to increase in groups that feel socially and or politically disenfranchised, or who have a

lack of emotional control in their lives.

Bizarrely, other studies have found that believing in conspiracy theories actually does the opposite to giving control. At one level it gives the perception of control, but it has been found that in fact it reduces an individual's sense of autonomy and control. Such people are significantly less likely to take action that will increase their autonomy and control of the environment and are significantly less likely to commit to an organisation or engage in mainstream politics, such as voting. In effect, conspiracy theories tend to be the provenance of those who feel disenfranchised and are unlikely to take action to increase their autonomy and control in the world.

Social factors

There are a series of social motives for believing or engaging with conspiracy theories. These are largely based around a desire to belong, in this case with the group of other people who believe in the conspiracy theory, and in order to create a positive self-image and gain acceptance from the in group. A number of studies have found that conspiracy theories tend to be engaged with more by people who have lower levels of self-esteem or exaggerated levels of self-esteem. Additionally, people are significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when either they or any social group that they belong to feel under threat. This includes people and groups who have low social status and or income.

Additionally, people who are politically disenfranchised or

are supporters of groups that have not been able to find political power are also significantly more likely to engage with conspiracy theories. This is particularly the case if the focus of the conspiracy theory is the enemy or the group who is in power whilst their group is out of power.

Again, this is somewhat counter rational behaviour, in that, whilst at the outset it appears to give the individual or the group a sense of control and power, it does however end up highlighting their lack of agency, power and control. A number of studies have found that engaging with conspiracy theories actually creates greater disenchantment, disenfranchisement and reduces their sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, and power.

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Reference

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