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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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I am taking the floor to talk about the psychology of conspiracy theories. I have not focused on a particular paper or a particular study, but instead I have taken an overarching viewpoint to talk about the field in fifteen minutes. It is going to be quick going through the different ideas that myself and others have thought about conspiracy theorizing. Broadly, I will discuss: why do people believe in conspiracy theories? What are their consequences—are they just harmless bits of fun? Then, what can we do about them; how can we try and help people come unrooted from conspiracy narratives? It will be a bit of a whirlwind, but hopefully you will get a good idea of how we approach these issues.

I think it's good to start with a definition. I'm sure, as this topic is multidisciplinary, everyone will have a different definition for how they think about a conspiracy theory. This is one that I always go back to: "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces, rather than overt activities."¹ This definition feels like it contains the key *ingredients* of a conspiracy theory. It points the finger at a secret group of powerful people; it could be power in the sense that they are part of the government, or it could be someone who's seen to be threatening, offering to take over something. What you find is that conspiracy theories, defined in this kind of way, are associated with almost every significant event that happens in our society. Some examples are: the idea that climate change is a hoax orchestrated by the world's scientists to secure funding; Diana, Princess of Wales, was murdered by the British government; or that the harms of vaccines have been covered up for the pharmaceutical companies to continue making huge profits. And of course, I'm sure we all know that there's a whole range of different COVID-19 conspiracy theories, from the suggestion that Bill Gates is involved, to the suggestion that it is 5G. It is all secret plots by powerful people, but the conspirators can be a whole range of different people.

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¹ Clark McCauley & Susan Jacques, *The Popularity of Conspiracy Theories of Presidential Assassination: A Bayesian Analysis*, 37 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 637 (1979).

While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories can accuse any group that is perceived to be powerful.² I think here, that the perception that they are powerful is the key term. As Karen Douglas discussed in a paper in 2019, an event such as climate change can be suggested to have a whole range of conspirators involved, where scientists are accused, along with Democrats, the government, and the oil industry.³ This case highlights that for one event, there could be multiple conspirators—in essence, multiple explanations—to explain that same event. And they are popular. They are much more widespread than is often assumed. I've included just two examples here, but there are many large polls done by YouGov and Public Polling, that have demonstrated that there are a reasonable number of people subscribing to these types of viewpoints. For example, a survey showed approximately half of the American population believes in at least one conspiracy.⁴ Similarly, over the pond here, sixty per cent of British people believe in one conspiracy theory.⁵

Of course, conspiracy theories have been around since, arguably, the start of time, and I am sure there are many experts who could speak to that more than I can. But it is over the last decade or so, maybe even less, that people have become interested in trying to understand the widespread nature of conspiracy narratives, speculating whether the internet or social media has brought these narratives to our fingertips. Of course, the internet plays some role, but these beliefs have been around for a very long time. There are many other researchers that have tracked them before the internet, and the suggestion that the internet has caused a resurgence in conspiracy belief is unsupported. But the fundamental idea is that they are widespread, enjoying acceptance and adoption among heterogeneous groups of people.

A key question is who believes in conspiracy theories, and in psychology, typically it's based around surveys where people indicate their belief in real world conspiracy theories. For example, people are asked how much they believe that climate change is a hoax, whilst also indicating a more general tendency to engage in conspiracy theorizing and believing that

² Karen M. Douglas, et al., *Understanding Conspiracy Theories*, 40 *ADVANCES POL. PSYCH.* 3, 4 (2019).

³ *Id.*

⁴ J. Eric Oliver & Thomas J. Wood, *Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion*, 58 *AM. J. POL. SCI.* 952 (2014).

⁵ Esther Addley, *Study Shows 60% of Britons Believe in Conspiracy Theories*, *GUARDIAN* (Nov. 22, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/23/study-shows-60-of-britons-believe-in-conspiracy-theories>.

hidden forces are involved in plots and schemes. There are actually limited reliable demographic differences. Typically, there are no real male and female differences. Some studies do find that males more than females believe in conspiracy theories; some females more than males; some find absolutely no difference. In my own personal work, I found no difference in some of my experiments, so there is no real indication that gender is playing a role. I think it is very specific depending on the context involved.

Younger people do seem to have a greater proclivity to conspiracy beliefs than older persons.⁶ Some recent work that I have been involved in has conducted the first real bit of research with young people in the UK, polling their belief in conspiracy theories. There has been a lot of work on adults, but we know absolutely nothing about young people and whether they are also engaged in conspiracy theorizing. What we found in our work was that age fourteen seemed to be a real peak time for conspiracy theorizing, and this was heightened compared to adults.⁷ Generally around this age, young people rely less on emotional regulation; they're feeling more anxious, they're more likely to pull away from their family and be more influenced by their friends. Potentially it could be a peak time for conspiracy belief.

For me, an important question is to understand more about the psychology of this age group, and how it is interacting with their conspiracy beliefs. One consistent difference does seem to be minority group status. For example, some early work found that AIDS conspiracy theories were more common amongst minority group members: the idea that AIDS and HIV are human-made.⁸ A potential reason that was suggested back then was that since minority groups already suffer from discrimination, this may make them more likely to distrust authorities.⁹ In essence, they are using their past experience to govern how they see the future; they have been discriminated against in the past, so that is what they expect in the future. Indeed, I found some empirical evidence recently that supports this idea. We found that discrimination was associated with belief in HIV conspiracy theories, which

⁶ Daniel Jolley, et al., *Measuring Adolescents' Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories: Development and Validation of the Adolescent Conspiracy Beliefs Questionnaire (ACBQ)*, 39 BRITISH J. DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCH. 499 (2021).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Jennifer Crocker, et al., *Belief in U.S. Government Conspiracies Against Black and White College Students: Powerlessness or System Blame?*, 25 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 941 (1999).

⁹ *Id.*

illustrates this empirical link.¹⁰ We also found that HIV conspiracy theories were associated with reduced acceptance of PrEP (Pre-exposure Prophylaxis), a medicine that people who are more at risk of HIV can take.¹¹ This research demonstrates that prior experience being part of a minority group who has been discriminated against in the past may make people more likely to believe in conspiracies, which potentially impacts their health behaviors.¹²

Thinking a bit more about the psychological motives of conspiracy theorizing, Karen Douglas presented a framework to explain why people could be drawn to conspiracy theories.¹³ She argued that it could be for one of three reasons: the desire for understanding and certainty, the desire to feel secure and in control, and to maintain a positive self-image and positive image of the social group.¹⁴ Potentially, these desires could be provoked by a prior experience, such as discrimination, along with the environment that we find ourselves in, such as a global pandemic.

To take you through each of those sections very briefly, the first is the need for certainty. We all want to feel certain in the world and our lives, and conspiracy theorizing can help maintain our certainty and make us feel better, so it's been found that belief in conspiracy theories increases in situations where people feel uncertain.¹⁵ It's stronger when events are especially large or significant; small scale events that have a more mundane explanation feel unsatisfactory.¹⁶ So, explaining a worldwide pandemic as just a simple something to do with bats, or something really mundane, doesn't really fit the proportionality. Explaining it as a government conspiracy where 5G is involved, where it's a hoax, maintains that proportionality, which means it's quite appealing for someone who's trying to understand a world that is uncertain. Indeed, it has also been shown to be stronger when people

¹⁰ Daniel Jolley & Rusi Jaspal, *Discrimination, HIV Conspiracy Theories and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis Acceptability in Gay Men*, 17 *SEXUAL HEALTH* 525 (2020).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Karen M. Douglas, et al., *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*, 26 *CURRENT DIRECTIONS PSYCH. SCI.* 538 (2017).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Nils B. Jostmann, *Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Influence of Uncertainty and Perceived Morality*, 34 *EUR. J. SOC. PSYCH.* 109 (2013).

¹⁶ Patrick J. Leman & Marco Cinnirella, *Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and The Need for Cognitive Closure*, 4 *FRONTIERS PYSCH.* 1 (2013).

are trying to look for patterns.¹⁷ When people are trying to, in essence, understand what is going on in a very complex situation—when they have this need for certainty—a conspiracy can offer some of those answers. It can make you feel better when you are primed to try and find patterns; it offers a pattern that makes you feel better.

Second, is the need to feel secure and in control. It's been found that individuals who feel more anxious are more likely to find conspiracy theories appealing¹⁸, and some of the work found that anxious attachment style also seems to play a role.¹⁹ Potentially, our upbringing may make us find conspiracy theories appealing, because of the anxious nature of that need to feel in secure control. Again, powerlessness, and feeling personal and social political control, are also strong predictors of belief in conspiracy theories.²⁰ Paranoid thinking also plays a role.²¹ Back in the early days, psychologists did think that paranoia was a strong predictor of conspiracy beliefs; people were seen to be irrational. But that does not bring in the nuances of why so many people believe in conspiracy theories, why they seem to address some of our needs that we have. So, whilst paranoid thinking is associated, it's not the core reason; rather, it's a much more complex profile for why someone believes in conspiracy theories. The need to feel secure and in control is something that, arguably, we all feel.

The final need is the need to have a positive self-image, and a positive image of our group that we belong to. Conspiracy beliefs have been

¹⁷ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, et al., *Connecting the Dots: Illusory Pattern Perception Predicts Belief in Conspiracies and the Supernatural*, 48 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCH. 320 (2018); Jennifer A. Whitson & Adam D. Galinsky, *Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception*, 322 SCI. 115 (2008).

¹⁸ Monika Grzesiak-Feldman, *The Effect of High-Anxiety Situations on Conspiracy Thinking*, 32 CURRENT PSYCH. 100 (2013); Scott Radnitz & Patrick Underwood, *Is Belief in Conspiracy Theories Pathological? A Survey Experiment on the Cognitive Roots of Extreme Suspicion*, 47 BRITISH J. POL. SCI. 113 (2017).

¹⁹ Marina Abalakina-Paap, et al., *Beliefs in Conspiracies*, 20 POL. PSYCH. 637 (1999); Daniel Jolley & Karen M. Douglas, *The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions*, 9 PLoS ONE e89177 (2014).

²⁰ Martin Bruder, et al., *Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire*, 4 FRONTIERS PSYCH. 1 (2013); Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Michele Acker, *The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions*, 29 APPLIED COGNITIVE PSYCH. 753 (2015).

²¹ Roland Imhoff & Pia Lamberty, *How Paranoid Are Conspiracy Believers? Toward a More Fine-Grained Understanding of The Connect and Disconnect Between Paranoia and Belief in Conspiracy Theories*, 48 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCH. 909 (2018).

shown to be heightened with those who are narcissistic²²: those who have a very positive image of themselves who try and maintain that self-esteem, where the conspiracy belief can really highlight the differences between a person and another group.²³ In essence saying: 'I'm the good person, and they're the bad ones, they are trying to do bad things towards me.' Potentially, conspiracy theorizing is arguably a normal process that we all could find ourselves engaging in. Potentially, *there's a conspiracy theorist in each of us*.

Are they harmless? I think this is a really important question, because if they are addressing some of our motives and making us feel in control, do they actually harm society? Research is certainly suggesting that it can impact the smooth running of society, where millions of people believe in conspiracy theories for normal reasons, but it can actually impact themselves and society.²⁴ In themselves, it can change the way they think about events. Researchers found that after exposure to conspiracy theories, people were more likely to endorse the conspiracy account without being aware.²⁵ The hidden impact of conspiracy theories, being exposed to the information on Twitter or Facebook could, after a period of time, make us more susceptible to believe in that narrative.

Indeed, conspiracy theories have been shown to discourage people from voting, reducing their carbon footprint, or getting vaccinated.²⁶ In the context of COVID-19, believing it is a hoax or that Bill Gates is involved, reduces people's protective behavior regarding COVID-19.²⁷ This of course makes sense because if I believe that climate change is a hoax, why would I

²² Aleksandra Chichočka, Marta Marchlewska & Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, *Does Self-Love or Self-Hate Predict Conspiracy Beliefs? Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories*, 7 SOC. PSYCH. & PERSONALITY Sci. 157 (2016).

²³ Aleksandra Chichočka, Marta Marchlewska, Agnieszka Golec de Zavala & Mateusz Olechowski, *'They Will Not Control Us': Ingroup Positivity and Belief in Intergroup Conspiracies*, 107 BRITISH J. PSYCH. 556 (2016).

²⁴ Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Karen M. Douglas, *Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Basic Principles of An Emerging Research Domain*, 48 EUR. J. SOC. PSYCH. 897 (2018).

²⁵ Karen M. Douglas & Robbie M. Sutton, *The Hidden Impact of Conspiracy Theories: Perceived and Actual Influence of Theories Surrounding the Death of Princess Diana*, 148 J. SOC. PSYCH. 210 (2008).

²⁶ Daniel Jolley & Karen M. Douglas, *The Social Consequences of Conspiracism: Exposure to Conspiracy Theories Decreases Intentions to Engage in Politics and To Reduce One's Carbon Footprint*, 105 BRITISH J. PSYCH. 35 (2014).

²⁷ Daniel Jolley & Karen M. Douglas, *The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions*, 9 PLOS ONE e89177 (2014).

want to reduce my carbon footprint? Similarly, if I feel that vaccines are dangerous and this has been covered up, I would not want to engage in vaccination. It can also, however, have more of an indirect effect, interfering with inter-group relations, whereby conspiracy theories can increase prejudice towards different powerful groups who are perceived to be conspiring.²⁸ This could even generalize to other groups, who are seen to be out-groups, but not involved in the alleged conspiracy.²⁹ Potentially, the impact of conspiracy theorizing is wide-ranging.

I also wanted to touch upon the link with violence and extremism. There has been extensive discussion about conspiracy theories and extremism, and there are many arguments that actually these two things go hand in hand. Empirically, this does seem to be playing out. Some early work highlighted that people high in conspiracy thinking were more supportive of political violence, and more in favor of gun ownership laws.³⁰ Similarly, when people took the perspective that society is governed by conspiracies, people were more supportive of violent extremism.³¹ Last year in the United Kingdom, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there was a whole spate of 5G towers being set ablaze. It was suggested by the police that this was caused by 5G conspiracy beliefs. We were interested to poll people to see whether the belief that 5G causes COVID is associated with more support for violence, to try and understand whether a link actually exists. We found empirical evidence that having the belief that 5G causes COVID is associated with greater identification and willingness to engage in real life and hypothetical violence.³²

By highlighting that conspiracy theories could motivate people to want to engage in offline action, we tried to test a model to see why that was

²⁸ Roland Imhoff & Martin Bruder, *Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalized Political Attitude*, 28 EUR. J. PERSONALITY 25 (2014).

²⁹ Daniel Jolley, Rose Meleady & Karen M. Douglas, *Exposure to Intergroup Conspiracy Theories Promotes Prejudice Which Spreads Across Groups*, 111 BRITISH J. PSYCH. 17 (2020).

³⁰ Joseph Uscinski & Joseph M. Parent, *People Who Believe in Conspiracy Theories Are More Likely to Endorse Violence*, WASH. POST (Feb. 5, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/02/05/are-conspiracy-theorists-plotting-to-blow-up-the-u-s/>.

³¹ Roland Imhoff, et al., *Resolving the Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview and Political Activism: Belief in Secret Plots Decreases Normative but Increases Non-Normative Political Engagement*, 12 SOC. PSYCH. & PERSONALITY SCI. 1 (2020).

³² Daniel Jolley & Jenny L. Paterson, *Pylons Ablaze: Examining the Role of 5G COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs and Support for Violence*, 59 BRITISH J. SOC. PSYCH. 628 (2020).

occurring. We found that people who had higher belief in conspiracy theories indicated that they were angrier, and this anger was then associated with a higher level of violent response.³³ The link between anger and violence was more pronounced for those who were indicating higher levels of paranoia, so potentially there is an indication that there is interaction going on between people's beliefs and emotions, which I think is a very important finding.³⁴

The last part I want to mention is about interventions. If conspiracy theories are believed for normal everyday reasons, but they can have a real-world impact, what can we do to try and empower people to not rely on conspiracy narratives? One way could be the use of counterarguments, by directing them at potential consumers of conspiracy theories in order to inoculate them against accepting such theories in the future.³⁵ We found in 2017 that in the context of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, if people were given counterarguments *before* being exposed to conspiracy theories, this improved their intentions to vaccinate.³⁶ Giving people who are more susceptible to be exposed to conspiracy narratives counterarguments against the conspiracy upfront, could potentially inoculate them against believing the narratives if they saw them online. In essence, doing some “pre-bunking” before they get to that stage.

Another intervention is a bit more proactive, and it is trying to deal with some of the needs and skillsets that make someone be more susceptible to engage in conspiracy theorizing. Some techniques, for example, could be promoting critical thinking as a way to reduce belief in conspiracy theories.³⁷ We know from other research that those who have lower levels of critical thinking are more likely to believe in conspiracies, so trying to develop this skill set has been shown to be a proactive intervention tool.³⁸ Other techniques could be trying to deal with some of the needs that we have. Making someone feel more empowered and in control can reduce belief in

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ Cass R. Sunstein & Adrian Vermeule, *Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*, 17 J. POL. PHIL. 202 (2009).

³⁶ Daniel Jolley & Karen M. Douglas, *Prevention is Better Than Cure: Addressing Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories*, 47 J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCH. 459 (2017).

³⁷ Viren Swami, et al., *Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories*, 133 COGNITION 572 (2014).

³⁸ *Id.*

conspiracies.³⁹ Thus, effective strategies are trying to address some of the predictors of what could draw someone into a conspiracy narrative, ensuring that they have the environment and mindset to think through evidence, so they can ask questions which we must ask, along with evaluating the evidence.

To summarize the psychology of conspiracy theories: they can be tricky to define, and there are many definitions; but they concern a powerful group acting in secret; they are popular as millions of people endorse them; and arguably, from our view, it is because everyone is potentially susceptible. They address some of our important needs that we have, such as the need to feel in control and secure. But they can have a tangible impact on ourselves and society where, for example, they have been shown to be linked with extremism and violent responses. Interventions, where we instill skill sets such as critical thinking so people can ask questions but also evaluate, is also extremely timely.

³⁹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Michele Acker, *The Influence of Control on Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Conceptual and Applied Extensions*, 29 APPLIED COGNITIVE PSYCH. 753 (2015).