

Are conspiracy theories just harmless fun?

Daniel Jolley with the latest in our series for budding writers (see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information)

Conspiracy theories are a popular topic of conversation. Widespread in society, almost everyone has an opinion on them. But what is a conspiracy theory? Who believes them? And, arguably most importantly, are they just chatter of little concern, or do they have real behavioural outcomes that should bother us?

What is a conspiracy theory?

Conspiracy theories can be defined in a variety of ways, and it appears each scholar refers to their own definition. One definition is that of McCauley and Jacques (1979), who broadly define conspiracy theories as an attempt to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces, rather than as overt activities or accidents. Another definition, used in a variety of publications, is that of a proposed plot by powerful people or organisations, working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal (e.g. Coady, 2006; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994; Wood et al., 2012). Both definitions base conspiracy theories around those who can be perceived as powerful.

Conspiracy beliefs can come in many different forms, and can be observed in a wide variety of different countries and cultures (e.g. Swami, 2012; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Indeed, many significant political and social events have been shown to have accompanying conspiracy theories, such as theories suggesting the

9/11 attacks were planned (Kay, 2011), or that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the government (McCauley & Jacques, 1979). Further, these events have also been shown to be accompanied by several contradictory conspiracy theories. For example, some conspiracy theories argue that Princess Diana was murdered by the royal family;

whereas others argue that she faked her own death (Wood et al, 2012). It is also important to note that some conspiracy theories have been proven to be true. For example, the Watergate inquiry, where the US home defence were planning to orchestrate terrorism and blame it on Cuba (Swami & Coles, 2010).

Beliefs in conspiracy theories are relatively widespread (Swami & Coles, 2010). Some scholars perceive this as surprising since conspiracy theories are often seen as foolish and illogical (e.g. Melley, 2002). Nonetheless, this popularity has been documented in several sources. For example, in a 2008 survey of 16,063 people in 17 nations, only 46 per cent believed the official account that Al Qaeda was behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with the majority either believing it was orchestrated by the US government or Israel, or reporting that they did not know (Allen, 2008).



Conspiracies can be contradictory (e.g. Osama Bin Laden is both dead and alive)

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Additionally, several polls have indicated that between 70 and 85 per cent of Americans doubt the official account that President Kennedy was assassinated by a lone gunman (e.g. see tinyurl.com/67gk38e).

Furthermore, conspiracy theories have been documented to be steadily increasing in popularity over time (Swami & Coles, 2010). There are a variety of reasons for this, one being the availability of the internet, which increases exposure to these theories. Scholars such as Coady (2006) argue that people are constantly bombarded with information relating to conspiracy theories, and there is an increasing ease with which information about such theories can be distributed. New conspiracy theories are easily created and debated by a wider audience than ever before (Leman, 2007). In 2008 there was a 125 per cent increase in usage of the Google keywords 'global warming + hoax', compared to the previous year (Grandia, 2009). Moreover, Leman (2007) reports that a conspiracy-based website built around the death of Princess Diana was online within hours of her death.

Who believes them?

Despite the increased popularity of conspiracy theories, there has been limited empirical research carried out on the phenomenon, in comparison to other areas of social psychology (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Nonetheless, there have been intriguing pieces of research carried out, which provide us with a better picture of those who believe in conspiracies.

A large amount of the early work into conspiracy theories focused on classifying believers as paranoid individuals (Hofstadter, 1971), or suggesting that conspiracy theories were the product of delusional ideation (e.g. Groh, 1987). Whilst some recent work has supported

this view, others have taken a slightly different approach, as it is unlikely that millions of conspiracy believers all suffer from pathological problems (Jolley & Douglas, in press). Therefore, links with more everyday aspects of personality, such as distrust in authority, lower self-esteem, low levels of interpersonal trust (e.g. institutions, neighbours, friends), anomie and powerlessness, have become the focus (e.g. Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994).

“conspiracy theories can have a hidden impact on the way you think”

Interestingly, there are few socio-demographic factors that predict conspiracy theories; there appear not to be

any gender, race, religious or educational status differences in conspiracy endorsements. However, ethnicity does appear to be important, with research (e.g. Goertzel, 1994; Hoyt et al., 2012) suggesting that beliefs are more apparent amongst black populations, and lower amongst whites. Perhaps this difference could be due to minority groups already being susceptible to distrusting authorities.

Moreover, a popular and consistent finding in much of the research is that the belief in a particular theory is strongly predicted by belief in other theories (e.g. Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994). For example, someone who believes that the American government was behind the 9/11 attacks is more likely to believe that Princess Diana was deliberately assassinated (Wood et al., 2012). Possible reasons have been suggested for these beliefs. For example, if one is willing to accept that one near-perfect conspiracy could be executed, then many other plots are also possible.

However, following on from this, research by Wood et al. (2012) has found that beliefs in several mutually incompatible conspiracy theories were possible. For example, even when conspiracies are contradictory (e.g. Osama Bin Laden is both dead and alive),

participants still reported beliefs in both of these theories. Therefore, Wood et al. (2012) went on to argue that these mutually incompatible theories are positively correlated because both are associated with the view that authorities are engaged in a cover-up and are hiding something. This suggests that conspiracy theories form a monological belief system, which draws coherence from a central belief system. For example, these individuals hold the belief that 'powerful' forces are involved in deceiving the public, so they will endorse any account which supports this central belief; even if these multiple beliefs are contradictory. Hence, as also argued by Goertzel (1994), beliefs in conspiracy theories may be centrally linked.

Are they just harmless fun?

Current research has begun to explore this question, and has made some intriguing findings. For example, Douglas and Sutton (2008) had participants read materials containing conspiracy theories about Princess Diana's death, before rating their own and others' agreement with conspiracy statements. It was found that participants significantly underestimated how much the conspiracy theories influenced their own attitudes. They conclude that conspiracy theories can have a 'hidden impact' on the way you think about events.

Moreover, current research has shown that conspiracy theories are associated with negative attitudes. For example, Swami (2012) has demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are associated with greater racist attitudes. Further, some scholars have also shown negative impacts on behavioural intentions. For example, endorsement of birth control and HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, which proposes that HIV/AIDS is a form of genocide against African Americans, has been associated with increased negative attitudes towards contraceptive behaviours (e.g. the use of condoms) (e.g. Bogart & Thorburn, 2006). Similar results

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have been found in research conducted by Hoyt et al. (2012), who found HIV conspiracy beliefs were associated with increased risk relating to HIV. This therefore suggests that conspiracy theories can have potentially negative consequences for the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted illnesses.

Thus far, there is a big limitation of the research exploring conspiracy theories: the majority of evidence is only correlation-based. This does not allow cause and effect to be explored. For example, when considering the correlation between feelings of powerlessness and conspiracy theory endorsement, there are two possible explanations. First, this might be because conspiracy theory beliefs makes people feel powerless; or second, because someone who feels powerless is more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. This limitation also extends to the research on behavioural impact: belief in HIV conspiracy theories may lead to increased risky behaviour, or it may just be that those prone to such beliefs are also more likely to be risk takers.

Nonetheless, a handful of scholars have investigated the impact of conspiracy theories in an experimental manner. This has allowed for a new line of research to be developed that explores the direct consequences of conspiracies upon the individual, and society.

Some of the first experimental work was conducted by Butler and colleagues (1995). The researchers explored the effects of exposing subjects to Oliver Stone's JFK film, which argues that the assassination of JFK was a conspiracy by the government. It was found that exposure to the film made people endorse the conspiracy to a greater extent, relative to those who had not viewed the film. In addition, increased conspiracy theory endorsement was associated with lower intentions to vote. Therefore, for the first time, this research shows some initial

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HIV conspiracy beliefs were associated with increased risk relating to HIV

evidence of cause and effect, with conspiracy theories reducing one's behavioural intentions.

More recently, a study conducted by Jolley and Douglas (in press) has explored this effect further, by exposing participants to pro-conspiracy information concerning government involvement in significant events, such as the death of Princess Diana (versus information-refuting conspiracy theories). Results revealed that exposure to information supporting conspiracy theories reduced participants' intentions to engage with politics (e.g. voting). Furthermore, this was found to be caused by feelings of powerlessness (i.e. beliefs that one's actions will not make a difference). Therefore, this research sheds more light on the specific dynamics in which conspiracy theories might lead to potentially negative effects.

In a follow-up experiment, we then exposed another set of participants to pro-conspiracy information concerning climate change (versus information refuting conspiracy theories). Results revealed that exposure to information supporting the conspiracy theories reduced participants' intentions to reduce their carbon footprint. This effect was caused by powerlessness and uncertainty

with respect to climate change, and disillusionment with climate scientists. That is, the conspiracy theory made one feel powerless, uncertain and disillusioned, which subsequently lessened their intentions to reduce their carbon footprint.

Together, the research carried out by Butler et al. (1995) and Jolley and Douglas (in press) points to the conclusion that conspiracy theories can have some potentially serious consequences on individuals' behaviours, and opens up new research questions concerning what other types of behaviours and feelings could be influenced by conspiracy theories. Are beliefs in conspiracy theories just harmless fun? Current research thus far suggests this is not the case, and calls for further empirical work to be carried out exploring the consequences of conspiracy theories.



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