

The truth is out there

Viren Swami and Rebecca Coles look at belief in conspiracy theories

Given the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories, it is surprising that little empirical research has addressed the reasons why some people are more likely to adhere to such beliefs than others. This article reviews the available literature on the sociological and psychological antecedents of conspiracy theories, and concludes by examining the positive and negative impacts of conspiracy theories. For scholars, studying conspiracy theories may prove useful in better understanding the needs of individuals that conspiracy theories accommodate, while also allowing for a better conceptualisation of the everyday effects of such theories.

question

From a psychological point of view, is it important to distinguish between conspiracy theories and genuine political conspiracies?

resources

Hofstadter, R. (1966). The paranoid style in American politics. In R. Hofstadter (Ed.) *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays* (pp.3–40). New York: Knopf.

The truth', the TV show *The X-Files* told us, 'is out there'. Millions of people worldwide seem to agree, disbelieving official accounts of important social and political events. In the United States, for example, scholars have noted a steady increase in the number of poll respondents who believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in killing John F. Kennedy (Goertzel, 1994; McHoskey, 1995). In the wake of 9/11, commentators highlighted the proliferation of conspiracy theories about the event (e.g. Goldberg, 2004), with polls suggesting that more than a quarter of respondents believe the US government knew in advance (Zogby International, 2004), participated in, or took no action to stop the attacks (Hargrove & Stempel, 2006).

But conspiracy theories are not a uniquely American phenomenon: in a poll of seven predominantly Muslim countries, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004) reported that almost four fifths of respondents did not believe the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Arabs, believing instead that it was the work of the US or Israeli governments (for other conspiracy theories in the Middle East, see Zonis & Joseph, 1994). In Britain, the BBC's documentary series *The Conspiracy Files* has examined a range of theories in current circulation, including those about the deaths of Princess Diana and UN weapons inspector David Kelly, the bombing of PanAm Flight 103, and the London bombings of 7 July 2005.

Given such widespread belief in conspiracy theories across the globe, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that there remains a dearth of empirical

research on the topic (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Part of the problem may be that academics have traditionally not engaged with conspiracy theories for fear of being branded as conspiracy theorists themselves. Until recently, it was not uncommon to find accounts of possible or real conspiracies prefaced by disclaimers of the kind that Ramsay (1990) notes: 'In intellectually respectable company, it is necessary to preface any reference to... conspiracies with the disclaimer that the speaker "doesn't believe in the conspiracy theory of history (or politics)".'

A related problem is in distinguishing between a conspiracy theory and an awareness of genuine political conspiracies. A broad definition of the former was provided in Hofstadter's (1966) seminal essay, 'The paranoid style in American politics', where a conspiracy theory was described as a belief in the existence of a 'vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character' (p.14; for extended discussions, see Bale, 2007; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). That such beliefs are relatively widespread suggests that they fulfil certain social functions or psychological needs; given this role, conspiracy theories are deserving of the same academic study as other religious, political or social beliefs (Bale, 2007).

The remainder of this article discusses both early work in sociology and cultural studies on the causes of conspiracy theorising, and emerging psychological research focused on the individual difference antecedents of conspiracy theories. We conclude with reasons why further research on conspiracy theories is important, both in terms of academic research and sociopolitical practice.

Early sociological work

Hofstadter's (1966) essay on the 'paranoid style', in which he examined right-wing conspiracy theories, effectively set the tone of much of the research that was to

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follow. The paranoid style, Hofstadter (1971, pp.2–3) argued, was a result of ‘uncommonly angry minds’, whose judgement was somehow ‘distorted’. Following this vein, some scholars came to view conspiracy theories as a product of psychopathology, such as extreme paranoia, delusional ideation or narcissism (e.g. Groh, 1987; Plomin & Post, 1997). In this view, the incorrectness of conspiracy theories was usually assumed *a priori* and, more than this, the delusional aspect of conspiratorial beliefs was thought to result in an incapacity for social or political action (e.g. Hofstadter, 1971).

While it is possible that some people who believe in conspiracy theories suffer forms of psychopathology, this in itself is an incomplete explanation given how widespread conspiracy theories are (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Waters, 1997). Hofstadter, however, has remained influential for his interest in why people acquire conspiracy theories, suggesting that a belief in conspiracy theories was more likely to emerge among those who felt powerless, disadvantaged or voiceless, especially in the face of catastrophe. To use a contemporary example, believing that the 7/7 London bombings were perpetrated by the British or Israeli governments may be, for some individuals at least, a means of making sense of turbulent social or political phenomena.

To the extent that conspiracy theories fill a need for certainty, it is thought they may gain more widespread acceptance in instances when establishment or mainstream explanations contain erroneous information, discrepancies, or ambiguities

(Miller, 2002). A conspiracy theory, in this sense, helps explain those ambiguities and ‘provides a convenient alternative to living with uncertainty’ (Zarefsky, 1984, p.72). Or as Young and colleagues (1990, p.104) have put it, ‘[T]he human desire for explanations of all natural phenomena – a drive that spurs inquiry on many levels – aids the conspiracist in the quest for public acceptance.’

In addition, it is also thought that conspiracy theories offer explanations of the world that are not contradicted by information available to adherents. In the context of extremism, Hardin (2002) has discussed what he calls a ‘crippled epistemology’: in some cases, extremism is not an irrational response, but rather stems from the fact that people have very little correct or accurate information. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) apply a similar perspective to conspiracy theories: those who believe in conspiracy theories may be responding rationally and logically to what little information they receive, even if that information appears absurd in relation to wider, publicly available knowledge.

Other scholars have extended or revised Hofstadter’s original powerlessness conjecture in order to explain how adherents come to hold conspiracy theories. Some have suggested that an inability to attain goals leads to conspiracy theories (Edelman, 1985; Inglehart, 1987), while others view conspiracy theories as affording adherents a means of maintaining

self-esteem (e.g. Robins & Post, 1997), coping with persecution (Combs et al., 2002), reasserting individualism (Davis,

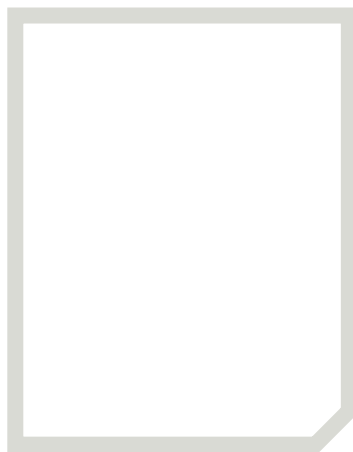
1969; Melley, 2000), expressing negative feelings (Ungerleider & Wellisch, 1979) or reaffirming imagined positions of exclusive knowledge (Mason, 2002). These contrasting theories, however, share the distinguishing assumption that conspiracy theories are a rational attempt to understand complex phenomena and deal with feelings of powerlessness. In this sense, such beliefs reveal not psychopathological minds but the lived experience and consciousness of groups of individuals (Sanders & West, 2003).

Psychological accounts

Early psychological studies often sought to highlight characteristics of conspiracy theories themselves, rather than characteristics of the audience. So, for example, conspiracy theories were described as being characterised by poor or unproven evidence, circular reasoning, repetition of unproved premises, and the creation of false predicaments (e.g. Young et al., 1990; Zarefsky, 1984). On the other hand, once the notion that conspiracy theories serve some psychological need became established, a small number of studies began to explicitly examine the socio-cognitive basis of those beliefs.

For example, one early study examined the effects of exposure to Oliver Stone’s 1991 film *JFK*, in which it is alleged that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a conspiracy at the highest levels of government. The authors found that the film changed beliefs toward accepting the broad conspiracy theory and ‘significantly aroused anger’, which was explained as a function of helplessness (Butler et al., 1995, p.237). Moreover, viewing the film was found to be associated with a decrease in viewers’ (self-reported) intention to vote or make political contributions, suggesting that the message of the film carried over to general political judgements.

Other research activities have focused on the psychological factors and processes associated with belief in conspiracy theories. For example, some early work suggested that conspiracy theories emerged



Commentators highlighted the proliferation of conspiracy theories about 9/11

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because of 'an irrational need to explain big and important events with proportionately big and important causes' McCauley & Jacques, 1979, p.637; see also Leman, 2007). Clarke (2002), on the other hand, has discussed conspiracy theories in the context of the fundamental attribution bias: because of the general tendency to overestimate the importance of dispositional factors and underestimate situational factors, conspiracy theorists are more likely to blame Hofstadter's (1966) 'preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network' even when adequate situational explanations are available. This may be especially true when people are outraged or distressed and seek to justify their emotional state by claiming intentionality of actions even in the absence of evidence (cf. Festinger, 1957).

Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) have suggested that the emotional content of many conspiracy theories plays an important role in their dissemination and acceptance. They cite studies showing that 'urban legends' that are devised to trigger strong emotions are more likely to be spread among populations (e.g. Heath et al., 2001). Applying this to conspiracy theories, they postulate that conspiracy theories create intense emotions that help spread similar beliefs, while also providing a justification for affective states produced by some traumatic event.

Other relevant work has examined the psychological impact of exposure to conspiracy theories, particularly in relation to mass media sources (e.g. Butler et al., 1995), but also in relation to the third-person effect (the tendency for people to believe that persuasive media has a larger influence on others than themselves). In one study, Douglas and Sutton (2008) had participants read material containing conspiracy theories about Princess Diana's death before rating their own and others' agreement with the statements, as well as their perceived retrospective attitudes. They found that participants significantly underestimated how much the conspiracy theories influenced their own attitudes.

In an earlier study, McHoskey (1995)

predicted that conspiracy theories concerning the assassination of JFK, and possibly all conspiracy theories, would continue endlessly because of the processes of biased assimilation and attitude polarisation. In the first instance, when opposing sides were presented with the same evidence, McHoskey (1995) showed that there was a tendency to uncritically accept evidence that was supportive of one's own argument, while scrutinising and discrediting contrary evidence. When participants were presented with mixed evidence, there were signs of attitude polarisation, with participants reporting that they were more in favour of their initial viewpoint, rather than reporting a reversal of their beliefs. In a similar vein, Leman and Cinnirella (2007) found that conspiracy believers judged fictitious accounts of an assassination more plausible if it was consistent with their beliefs, a tendency called 'confirmation bias'. Conspiracy believers found that ambiguous information fitted better with a conspiracist explanation, whereas non-believers believed it suited a non-conspiracist account. In other words, the same piece of information can be used to support very different accounts, depending on who it is presented to.

Individual differences

Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to emerge from the handful of studies to focus explicitly on the individual antecedents of belief in conspiracy theories was Goertzel's (1994) assertion that conspiracy beliefs form part of a 'monological belief system'. This allows conspiracy theorists to easily assimilate explanations for new phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to understand or would threaten their existing beliefs. Recent work supports this, showing that those who more strongly endorsed 9/11 conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories (Swami et al., in press).

Douglas and Sutton's experiment found participants significantly underestimated how much reading conspiracy theories influenced their own attitudes

Related work in this area has provided some support for early sociological work on conspiracy theories. For example, studies have variously reported significant associations between conspiracist ideation and anomie, distrust in authority, political cynicism, powerlessness and self-esteem (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., in press). Interestingly, at least two studies have also reported significant associations between conspiracist beliefs and authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; McHoskey, 1995), which the former study explained as a manifestation of the tendency of believers in conspiracy theories to blame outgroups for problems experienced by the ingroup.

Most recently, Swami and colleagues (in press) found that 9/11 conspiracist beliefs were significantly associated with the Big Five personality factor of Openness to Experience, with the authors suggesting that intellectual curiosity, an active imagination, and a proclivity for new ideas results in greater exposure and subsequent assimilation of conspiracist beliefs. Interestingly, Swami et al. (in press) also found that individuals who more strongly believed in conspiracy theories were more supportive of democratic principles. They went on to argue that, for participants who

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reject the political system as undemocratic, mainstream explanations of social events are unsatisfactory precisely because they are provided by the very sources that these participants doubt.

Good or bad?

What practical impact do conspiracy theories have? Some scholars (e.g. Clarke, 2002) argue that conspiracy theories are ultimately beneficial because they reveal actual anomalies in mainstream explanations and demand greater transparency from governments (see also Leman, 2007). The fact that some conspiracy theories (such as US Department of Defence plans to stimulate acts of terrorism and blame them on Cuba) have turned out to be true certainly bears out this point. Miller (2002) likewise contends that conspiracy theories provide individuals with a public opportunity, otherwise likely denied to them, of addressing the credibility of governments or other socio-political actors. As Fenster (1999, p.109) writes, conspiracies 'must be recognised as a cultural practice that attempts to map, in narrative form, the trajectories and effects of power'. In this view, conspiracy theories may be regarded as the beginnings of social movements that could create positive change and foster solidarity (Sasson, 1995).

The same authors, however, are also quick to caution that conspiracy theories remain limited because their critique of power structures is often highly simplistic. In many cases, conspiracy theories succumb to racist or exclusionary narratives, thus losing any positive thrust. Moreover, conspiracy theories typically threaten to unravel and 'leave unsettled the resolution to the question of power that [they] attempt to address' (Fenster, 1999, p.109). For Fenster (1999) and Miller (2002), in particular, conspiracy theories have the potential to create constructive socio-political change, but also the ability to sow discord, violence and public mistrust, while diverting attention from

political issues of real significance and undermining democratic debate.

Some scholars have also noted the negative practical effects of conspiracy theories on a range of behaviours. Consider, for example, the conspiracy theories held by some that birth control and HIV/AIDS are plots against African Americans (e.g. Bird & Bogart, 2003). Certainly, the history of segregation in the US, the conducting of unethical research with African Americans (such as the Tuskegee syphilis study), and contemporary experiences of racism help explain the existence of such theories. However, adherence to such conspiracy theories has also been associated with less consistent pregnancy prevention and condom use, possibly impacting upon knowledge about HIV/AIDS and AIDS prevention programmes (e.g. Bogart & Thorburn, 2006).

Conclusion

Documenting the prevalence of conspiracy theories only provides a starting point for tackling their negative effects. Because of their nature, beliefs in conspiracy theories have proven very difficult to repudiate (Keeley, 1999): group members may segregate themselves (informationally, though also, sometimes, physically) and over time become increasingly distrustful of the motives of others. Kramer (1994) called this an example of a 'sinister attribution error': because in extreme cases they feel under constant scrutiny, individuals may overestimate personalistic motives among others and see purposeful plots where there are in fact benign actions.

In such a scenario, what should be the

response of scholars and other interested parties? Some authors have recently suggested possible practical means of tackling false and harmful conspiracy theories, such as enlisting independent groups to rebut theories or 'cognitively infiltrate' conspiracist groups (see Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). The assumption here is that beliefs in conspiracy theories reflect insufficiently critical assimilation of knowledge and that practical steps can be taken, albeit with difficulty, to counter that crippled epistemology. On another level, however, many contemporary conspiracy theories also reflect a deep cynicism toward, and diminished faith in, governance (Goldberg, 2004). For example, the finding that almost a quarter of British Muslims believe that the four men blamed for the London bombings did not carry out the attacks (Soni, 2007) reflects, in part at least, the alienation of many British Muslims from mainstream politics and governance. A first and important step in tackling potentially harmful conspiracy theories would be to address such causes of popular discontent.

For scholars, there remain several neglected individual difference variables, including just-world beliefs, locus of control, subjective happiness, and possibly even paranoid beliefs. It may also prove useful to distinguish between beliefs that reflect 'political paranoia' in the traditional sense, and political realism. In doing so, it will be important for scholars to drop the assumption that all conspiracy theories are equally unbelievable. Only by evaluating and understanding 'both the context of the explanation and the effects of the explanation' (Waters, 1997, p.123) will we appreciate to what extent conspiracy theories reflect everyday cognitions.



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