Secrets and lies: The psychology of conspiracy theories

Many people contend [6] that the 9/11 attacks were an 'inside job', that climate change is a hoax, and vaccines cause autism.

Such theories are very popular, and about half of the US population [7] appears to believe at least one. In fact, millions of people disbelieve official explanations for significant political and social events in favour of such alternative accounts, otherwise known as conspiracy theories.

In recent years psychologists have begun to investigate what makes these conspiracy theories appealing to so many people by asking four key questions: Who believes in conspiracy theories? Why do they believe in conspiracy theories? Does belief in conspiracy theories have consequences? And what can we do about them?

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Read More: MMR vaccine: Science exposes the biggest myths[8]

Who believes in conspiracy theories?

Much of the psychological research in this field has focused on the question of who believes in such theories, in an attempt to work out if there is one type of person who is particularly drawn to them.

Research [9] has identified a number of personality traits and characteristics that are now known to be associated with belief in conspiracy theories such as paranoia, cynicism, mistrust, feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Some demographic factors [10] are important too. For example, people with lower levels of education seem more susceptible to conspiracy theories, whereas those inclined to think more analytically are less likely [11] to believe in them. Also, people who lie at the extremes in terms of their political orientation [12] are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories.

So now we have an idea about who is likely to believe in conspiracy theories, the next question is why?

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Why do we believe in conspiracy theories?

We now know that a range of psychological processes are associated with beliefs in conspiracy theories. In
fact, research has shown that a number of cognitive tendencies and thinking styles can predict how likely we are to be attracted to conspiracy theories.

Many of these are basic cognitive biases such as the tendency to perceive patterns or agency and intentionality where none exist. That is, belief in conspiracy theories can be explained, in part, by the simple ways in which people are predisposed to organise information, like noticing faces in clouds, or thinking that machines have emotions.

Other psychological processes such as feeling bored, experiencing a personal willingness to conspire yourself, and a motivation to feel unique and stand apart from others can all lead to a heightened belief in conspiracy theories.

Read More: Religious and superstitious people understand the physical world less than atheists

Does belief in conspiracy theories have consequences?

The simple answer to this question is “yes.” Psychologists are still trying to work out how specific types of conspiracy theories might have different consequences, but research to date suggests that, in general, the consequences are negative.

While it could be argued that conspiracy theories should mobilise people to get together and force political change, most of the research suggests that conspiracy theories actually have the opposite effect.

For example, political conspiracy theories seem to make people less likely to want to engage in the political system. Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories appear to discourage people from vaccinating their children against diseases. Climate change conspiracy theories appear to discourage people from taking action to reduce their carbon footprint.

Even in the everyday context of the workplace, perceiving conspiracies can have potential dangers, decreasing job commitment and satisfaction, and increasing the desire to leave.

Thus far, then, research suggests that conspiracy theories seem to do more harm than good.

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What can we do about them?

Psychologists are now starting to turn their attention to what, if anything, could or should be done to combat the potentially negative effects of conspiracy theories.

Some research suggests that people often remain convinced by conspiracy theories, even when they have been given information that refutes them. However, exposing people to counter-arguments before they read about conspiracy theories has been shown to ‘inoculate’ them against the conspiracy theories.

Other research suggests that exposing people to rational arguments, or even framing the very idea of the conspiracy theory as ridiculous might reduce beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Read More: To tackle the post-truth world, science must reform itself

Conspiracy theories are more prevalent than ever

Psychology can tell us a lot about who believes in conspiracy theories, why some people might be more
susceptible than others, and even highlights some of the negative consequences of conspiracy theories.

But much more research is needed to work out what to do about them.

In this current age of ‘post-truth politics’ in which conspiracy theories are said to be flourishing, knowing the answers to these questions is more important than ever.

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Read this article in Danish at Forskerzonen, part of Videnskab.dk. [25]

- Research has identified a number of personality traits and characteristics that are now known to be associated with belief in conspiracy theories such as paranoia, cynicism, mistrust, feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and uncertainty. (Photo: Shutterstock) [26]
- Karen Douglas, University of Kent, UK, will discuss the psychology of conspiracy theories this Saturday in Copenhagen, Denmark. (Photo: Karen Douglas) [27]
- Research has identified a number of personality traits and characteristics that are now known to be associated with belief in conspiracy theories such as paranoia, cynicism, mistrust, feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, and uncertainty. (Photo: Shutterstock) [28]

Fact box

Science and Cocktails
A popular event combing science and cocktails, held in **Copenhagen, Denmark**.

The **program** [30] consists of top scientists from around Denmark and the world.

You can also watch this lecture online. A video will be uploaded after the event.

**Next Event:**

20:00, Saturday 25. November 2017  
Byens Lys, Christiania, Copenhagen  
Karen Douglas, University of Kent, UK  
Secrets and lies: The psychology of conspiracy theories

Read More at [Science and Cocktails][31]

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ScienceNordic teams up with Science and Cocktails [32] Science should be a part of our nightlife [33]  
Human organs-on-chips may one day replace animal testing [34] Will we ever be able to grow organs in a Petri dish? [35] Scientist: We could find intelligent life in space within two decades [36]  
Karen Douglas [37]

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Science and Cocktails is held in **Copenhagen, Denmark**.

This year, scientists from around the world will head to Copenhagen to present their research.

ScienceNordic will bring articles from some of the scientists involved throughout the year.

You can also watch the lectures **online**. Videos will be uploaded to each of these articles after the event.

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See the full program [30] at Science and Cocktails.
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