

# A review of different approaches to study belief in conspiracy theories

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**C**ONSPIRACY THEORIES are defined by an 'attempts to explain the ultimate cause of an event (usually one that is political or social) as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organisations, rather than as an overt activity or natural occurrence' (Douglas & Sutton, 2008, p.211). In recent years, a growing number of social psychologists intended to understand and to explain the popularity of the conspiracy theories (Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013). Belief in conspiracy theories can be studied by different approaches, and each of these approaches requires a specific methodology.

Historically, the first empirical works that we could notice are correlational studies in which the interest was to explore the relation between belief in conspiracy theories and several personality variables (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). For example, belief in conspiracy theories is positively related to openness to experience (Swami et al., 2011, 2013), political cynicism (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011), and paranormal beliefs (Darwin, Neave & Holmes, 2011; Swami et al., 2011). We also know that belief in conspiracy theories is negatively related to level of trust of others (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Wagner-Egger & Bangerter, 2007), self-esteem (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011), and agreeableness (Swami et al., 2010, 2011). Of course, the correlational approach is limited because it could not ensure the causal direction of these effects.

Another approach of the study of belief in conspiracy theories is to explore the determinants of the belief in conspiracy theories, or in other words, to understand why some

people tend to be inclined to belief in conspiracy theories. This question could be tested by using experimental design. For example, Douglas and Sutton (2008) has shown that, in comparison to a control condition, the simple fact of reading statements about conspiracy theories relative to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, conduces to increase the level of belief in conspiracy theory about Diana's death. In the same vein, being exposed to information supportive the theory that National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) fakes the moon landing resulted in stronger adhesion to belief in the moon landings conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2013). Taken together, these researches show that the simple fact to be exposed to conspiracy narratives increases the belief in various conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, there may be more distant determinants of the conspiracism. For example, being experimentally induced to feel a lack of control (compared to a control condition) lead participants to be more likely to interpret that a personal conspiracy has been made against them (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Other studies conducted in Poland have shown that conspiracy thinking about ethnic and national groups increases just before parliamentary elections (Kofta & Sedek, 2005) or university examination (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013). This indicates that conspiracy thinking could be a mean of collective self-defense against an impression of threat on the part of an outgroup (Kofta & Sedek, 2005).

Another approach is to determine what the psychological consequences (e.g. attitudes and behaviours change) that follow an exposure to such conspiracy theories are. This question is important, especially since

we seem to underestimate the extent to an exposure to such conspiracy theories can influence us (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). For example, compared to people who read articles about refutation of governmental or climate change conspiracy theories, people who read articles about governmental or climate change pro-conspiracy theories are less inclined to engage in political behaviours or, respectively, climate change behaviours (Jolley & Douglas, in press).

Recently, understanding the functional roles of conspiracy theories approach is the source of growing interest on the part of researchers (Newheiser, Farias & Tausch, 2011; Swami et al., 2013). The question behind is why people endorse conspiracy theories, and what are the psychological functions it serves? There might be socio-cognitive reasons, for example, the reasoning that a major event has a major cause (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007; McCauley & Jacques, 1979). Some authors think that belief in conspiracy theories potentially

allows ‘people to alleviate or cope with threats to their sense of meaning and control.’ (Newheiser et al., 2011, p.1011).

In conclusion, this review is not intended to be exhaustive; moreover we could easily imagine a mixture of different approaches. More specifically, it should be underlined that in some cases, it may be difficult to distinguish the determinants of the conspiracy belief from the functional role of conspiracy belief. It may be expected that in the future, more integrative models are going to be made to give meaning of this phenomenon (i.e. belief in conspiracy theories), with respect to its complexity.

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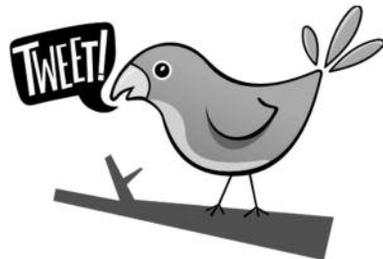
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