

## **Beliefs in Conspiracies**

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*This study used canonical correlation to examine the relationship of 11 individual difference variables to two measures of beliefs in conspiracies. Undergraduates were administered a questionnaire that included these two measures (beliefs in specific conspiracies and attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies) and scales assessing the 11 variables. High levels of anomie, authoritarianism, and powerlessness, along with a low level of self-esteem, were related to beliefs in specific conspiracies, whereas high levels of external locus of control and hostility, along with a low level of trust, were related to attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies in general. These findings support the idea that beliefs in conspiracies are related to feelings of alienation, powerlessness, hostility, and being disadvantaged. There was no support for the idea that people believe in conspiracies because they provide simplified explanations of complex events.*

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History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power. (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 29)

Conspiracies involve multiple actors working together in secret to achieve hidden goals that are perceived to be unlawful or malevolent (Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Beliefs in conspiracies abound in our society, as they do in other societies (Graumann & Moscovici, 1987; Hofstadter, 1965; Moynihan, 1985; Robins & Post, 1997; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). For instance, national opinion polls generally find that 85 to 90% of Americans believe that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in killing President Kennedy (Goertzel, 1994). A random sample of New Jersey

residents found that 46% believed the Japanese are conspiring to destroy the American economy, and 41% believed the Air Force is hiding evidence of flying saucers (Goertzel, 1994). In a study of African American church members, 35% believed that the AIDS epidemic is a form of genocide (Thomas & Quinn, 1991). Given what appears to be a widespread belief in conspiracies, it is surprising that little empirical research has been done on the factors associated with beliefs in them.

Hofstadter (1965) suggested that beliefs in conspiracies can be traced to feelings of powerlessness among people who believe that they cannot "make themselves felt" (p. 39). According to Hofstadter, conspiracy beliefs help people to make sense of a world containing evil forces beyond the control of individuals. Conspiracy beliefs also provide an outlet for the expression of negative feelings: "Much of the function of the enemy lies . . . in what can be wholly condemned" (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 34). In addition, Hofstadter argued that conspiracy theories offer "seemingly coherent" explanations for complex social events, a view echoed by Zonis and Joseph (1994), who wrote that such theories represent a "narrow, distorted, oversimplified view of the social and political world" (p. 450).

Young (1990), in his discussion of American identity movements (e.g., the Aryan Nation), suggested that beliefs in conspiracies serve self-esteem maintenance purposes. He believed that "adherence to a conspiracy theory allows a person to see himself or herself as perfect and infallible in comparison to others who are seen as evil and defective" (p. 156). He also suggested that identity movement cults help members to find outlets for their hostile impulses by directing them toward the perpetrators of conspiracies. A study consistent with this view found that cult members had high scores on a measure of hostility (Ungerleider & Wellisch, 1979).

Goertzel (1994), in one of the few studies to examine the correlates of beliefs in conspiracies, found that such beliefs were related to low levels of trust and high levels of anomie. He argued that beliefs in conspiracies permit people to externalize their angry feelings by providing them with enemies to blame for their problems.

In their discussion of political paranoia, Robins and Post (1997) suggested that hostile and angry people often subscribe to conspiracies because they enable them to "defend against their rage by viewing themselves as the victims of persecutors" (p. 14). They also argued that people who are paranoid are beset by self-doubt, and that believing that one is the object of a conspiracy provides "solace for a wounded ego" (p. 15). Further, they noted that feelings of powerlessness and a willingness to follow authoritarian leaders may contribute to beliefs in conspiracies.

This brief review of the theoretical and empirical literature on conspiracies suggests that there are five types of reasons that people believe in conspiracies: (a) they are alienated, (b) they feel powerless, (c) such conspiracies simplify a complex world, (d) conspiracies can be used to explain their problems, and (e) such beliefs provide an outlet for their hostility. We review each reason in turn and specify some personality dimensions that should be related to these reasons for believing in conspiracies.

One reason that people may believe in conspiracies is that they feel alienated and are distrustful of others, especially people in authority (Goertzel, 1994; Kramer, 1994). They may believe that individuals in authority lie or cover up events to suit their own purposes. Such people may favor explanations of events that refer to sinister forces (the sinister attribution error; Kramer, 1994).

People who feel powerless may find comfort in conspiracy theories because these theories help them to accept and explain their predicaments (Hofstadter, 1965). If the banking industry is controlled by Jews, it becomes easier to understand why so many non-Jews are doing poorly in the economy. Similarly, people who feel that they are externally controlled may find conspiracy theories compelling because they are so consistent with their perception that external forces influence their lives.

Many conspiracy theories offer simplified explanations of complex events that may appeal to people who prefer cognitive simplicity over complexity. In the words of Groth (1987), a "conspiracy theory . . . allows one to reduce complexity" (p. 5). Believing that the mass media are dominated by liberals simplifies the complexity of interpreting media messages. People who are low in need for cognition may find it easier to accept conspiracy theories as explanations of complex events than to face the ambiguities and subtleties of the real world. In a related vein, people who have a low tolerance for ambiguity may prefer the simplified explanations that conspiracy theories often offer over the multiple explanations offered by legitimate authorities. For instance, it is easier to explain the vagaries of the stock market or the economy by ascribing them to monolithic forces than to process the complex array of explanations offered by economists. People who prefer not to analyze the causes of events in the world around them may also be drawn to conspiracy theories. These theories provide ready-made causal attributions for events that might otherwise seem undecipherable. Attributing some of our international problems to Arabs, for example, provides a simplified explanation for a complex set of events.

Another reason conspiracies may be attractive to some people is that they can be used to explain their disadvantaged positions. For instance, people who are high in authoritarianism have a strong tendency to blame outgroups for their problems. They may easily fall prey to charismatic leaders of disaffected social groups, such as the American militia movement, the Ku Klux Klan, or other hate groups who explain the problems in our society by blaming them on minority groups. Similarly, people with low self-esteem may be attracted to conspiracy theories because they can be used to avoid self-blame for their predicaments. In this instance, it is not one's group but the individual who is regarded as disadvantaged and wishes to hold himself or herself blameless.

For some people, believing in conspiracy theories may provide an outlet for their hostility and aggression. The government itself can easily become a target of this kind of hostility, to the extent that it frustrates people in the fulfillment of their desires. Some ranchers and loggers of the American West believe that the government threatens their way of life, and they think there is a conspiracy to deprive

them of their lands, livelihood, and rights. As Moscovici (1987) put it, "Resentment fuels the conspiracy mentality" (p. 162). People who regard the world as a malevolent place in which to live may subscribe to conspiracies that allow them to direct their anger at specific individuals who they feel are out to harm them.

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. To the extent that people believe in conspiracies because they mistrust authority, their beliefs should be positively correlated with alienation and negatively correlated with trust.

2. If feeling powerless leads to beliefs in conspiracies, these beliefs should be positively correlated with powerlessness and associated with an external locus of control.

3. If beliefs in conspiracies help to simplify a complex world, beliefs in conspiracies should be negatively correlated with need for cognition, tolerance of ambiguity, and attributional complexity.

4. If conspiracies are used by people to explain their disadvantaged positions, beliefs in conspiracies should be positively correlated with authoritarianism and negatively correlated with self-esteem.

5. To the extent that beliefs in conspiracies provide an outlet for hostility, such beliefs should be positively correlated with measures of hostility and beliefs that the world is malevolent.

To assess these predictions, we developed two measures of beliefs in conspiracies. The first measure (beliefs in specific conspiracies) was designed to tap the number of different conspiracies that people endorse. The premise for this measure was that there may be people who are prone to believe in an array of specific conspiracies because of the functions such beliefs serve. The greater their needs, the larger the number of conspiracies they should endorse. The second measure (attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies) taps into a general propensity to believe in conspiracies. The premise in this case was that some people may have favorable attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies in general, and that for them the exact nature of the conspiracies may be less important. One goal of the present study was to determine whether the two types of beliefs in conspiracies serve different functions.

## Method

The participants were 156 students at New Mexico State University. The average age of the students was 20 years (range, 18 to 34). The ethnic composition was 50% Anglo-American, 29% Hispanic, 6% Native American, 6% mixed heritage, 4% African American, and the remainder from other ethnicities. There were 50% males and 50% females in the sample; 44% of the participants were Catholic, 15% were Protestant, 2% were Jewish, 1 student was Muslim, and the remainder did not indicate their religion. The participants completed the questionnaire in partial fulfillment of a requirement for a class in introductory psychology.

The questionnaire contained 13 measures, described below, as well as demographic items.

*Beliefs in specific conspiracies.* This measure consisted of 22 items, each addressing beliefs in a different conspiracy. Sample items are "There was a conspiracy behind the assassination of former President John F. Kennedy" and "The U.N. is trying to take control of the United States." Among the other conspiracies included were government cover-ups of alien landings, the control of the banking system by Jews, the government depriving people of the right to bear arms, terrorists infiltrating the United States, the government depriving people in the American West of their rights to the land, AIDS as a plot to wipe out minority groups, the World Wide Web, the Mafia, fluoridation of drinking water, and the government storing information in computer files to use against its citizens. The response format was a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly." The Cronbach  $\alpha$  for this measure was .89.

*Attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies.* This measure consisted of 19 items, each addressing attitudes concerning the existence of conspiracies in general. Sample items are "Underground movements threaten the stability of American society" and "People who see conspiracies behind everything are simply imagining things" (reverse-scored). The response format was the same as for the first measure ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

*Tolerance of ambiguity.* This scale was developed by Budner (1962) and consists of 16 items ( $\alpha = .50$ ).

*Internal versus external locus of control.* For this measure, we used the Rotter I-E scale (Rotter, 1966). The scale consists of 23 forced-choice questions.

*Self-esteem.* This scale was developed by Rosenberg (1965) and contains 10 items ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Malevolent world.* This scale was created for the purposes of this study and consisted of 10 items. Sample items are "The forces of evil are more powerful than the forces of good" and "Overall, the world is a hostile and unfriendly place." A 7-point Likert response format was used for this measure ( $\alpha = .57$ ).

*Need for cognition.* This scale was the short version created by Sadowski (1993). It contains 15 items ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Hostility.* This measure was derived from Buss and Perry (1992) and included 12 items that were selected from the original measure because they tapped a willingness to display hostility toward others ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

*Attributional complexity.* This measure was derived from a measure developed by Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, and Reeder (1986). From the 28 items in this scale, we selected the 5 items we have found to be most highly correlated with the overall scale in previous research (Stephan, Ageyev, Coates-Shrider, Stephan, & Abalakina, 1994) ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Powerlessness.* This scale was developed by Pearlin, Lieberman, Meaghan, and Mullan (1981) and consists of seven items ( $\alpha = .41$ ).

*Anomie.* This nine-item scale was developed by Srole (1956) ( $\alpha = .76$ ).  
*Trust.* This measure was developed by Wrightsman (1964) and contains 14 items ( $\alpha = .67$ ).  
*Authoritarianism.* For this measure, we used the short scale derived by McFarland, Ageyev, and Abalakina-Paap (1992) from the Altemeyer (1988) measure. It consisted of 12 items ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

Results

To determine the extent to which the respondents believed in conspiracies, we first examined the number of conspiracies they endorsed. The beliefs in specific conspiracies measure listed 22 specific conspiracies. On average, the respondents endorsed 5.73 of these conspiracies ( $SD = 4.42$ ).

Only one of the demographic variables was related to beliefs in specific conspiracies. Caucasians had lower scores on beliefs in specific conspiracies ( $M = 3.28$ ) than did Hispanics ( $M = 3.70$ ) and other minority students ( $M = 3.71$ ) [ $F(2, 152) = 4.63, p < .05$ ]. None of the demographic variables was related to attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies.

The moderate correlation between beliefs in specific conspiracies and attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ) suggested that the two measures were neither orthogonal nor redundant. Therefore, we performed a canonical correlation using the 11 individual difference measures to predict the criterion variables of beliefs in specific conspiracies and attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies. Two significant canonical variates emerged in this analysis (Table I). The squared canonical correlations for the first and second canonical variates were .30 and .17, respectively; both were highly significant [ $F(22, 282) = 3.98, p < .00001$  and  $F(10, 142) = 2.90, p < .005$ ]. Table I shows that beliefs in specific conspiracies loaded heavily on the first canonical variate, whereas attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies loaded heavily on the second canonical variate.

The standardized canonical coefficients for the predictor variables indicate that anomie is most strongly related to the first canonical variate (beliefs in specific conspiracies), followed by self-esteem, authoritarianism, and powerlessness (Table II). In contrast, for the second canonical variate (attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies) the strongest standardized canonical coefficient occurred for lack of

Table I. Canonical Variate Loadings

Criterion variable	First canonical variate	Second canonical variate
Beliefs in specific conspiracies	-1.07	0.37
Attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies	-0.17	1.12

trust, followed by internal versus external locus of control and hostility (Table II). The remaining four predictor variables (tolerance of ambiguity, need for cognition, malevolence, and attributional complexity) had low standardized canonical coefficients for both canonical variates.

Because the variables loading on the two criterion variables were relatively independent of one another, we ran two follow-up stepwise regression analyses using the 11 individual difference variables to predict only beliefs in specific conspiracies or only attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies (Tables III and IV). The 11 predictor variables were entered one at a time, in accordance with the amount of variance they accounted for. These regression analyses strongly supported the pattern of results obtained from the canonical correlation analysis.

The stepwise regression for beliefs in specific conspiracies indicated that four variables were significant predictors: anomie ( $p < .0001$ ), authoritarianism ( $p < .02$ ), self-esteem ( $p < .10$ ), and powerlessness ( $p < .05$ ). These four variables accounted for 28% of the variance in beliefs in specific conspiracies (Table III).

Table II. Standardized Canonical Coefficients

Predictor	First canonical variate	Second canonical variate
Authoritarianism	.28	.07
Anomie	.80	-.06
Hostility	-.12	.55
Internal vs. external locus of control	.11	-.63
Trust	.11	-.70
Powerlessness	.24	-.01
Self-esteem	-.36	-.14
Malevolence	.13	.07
Tolerance of ambiguity	-.20	-.04
Attributional complexity	.11	-.20
Need for cognition	.04	.14

Table III. Stepwise Regression for Beliefs in Specific Conspiracies

Predictor	Parameter estimate	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Anomie	.39	41.63	.001
Authoritarianism	.21	6.24	.02
Self-esteem	-.16	2.79	.10
Powerlessness	.16	4.08	.05
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.28	

**Table IV.** Stepwise Regression for Attitudes toward the Existence of Conspiracies

Predictor	Parameter estimate	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Trust	-.24	14.79	.001
Internal vs. external locus of control	-.87	5.73	.02
Hostility	.12	4.12	.05
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.16	

The stepwise regression for attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies indicated that three variables were significant predictors: trust ( $p < .0005$ ), internal versus external locus of control ( $p < .02$ ), and hostility ( $p < .05$ ). These three predictors accounted for 16% of the variance in attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies (Table IV).

An examination of the collinearity diagnostics for both analyses indicated that multicollinearity was not a problem in either analysis.

**Discussion**

The hypotheses that suggested that beliefs in conspiracy theories would be associated with distrust of authority, hostility, feeling powerless, and being unfairly disadvantaged all found support in the results. However, the idea that beliefs in conspiracies or attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies are related to a need to seek simple explanations for complex events was not supported in this study.

The link between anomie and beliefs in specific conspiracies may stem from the fact that people who are alienated from society do not accept the prevailing societal views on a wide variety of topics. Most people understand that there are important events occurring in the world around them that are beyond their control, but they accept the explanations for such events provided by legitimate authorities. For people who are alienated from the normative social order, conventional explanations of events do not suffice, because they reject the legitimacy of the sources of these explanations. It is worth noting that Goertzel (1994) also found that beliefs in conspiracies were related to anomie. Similarly, people who feel powerless may be tempted to believe that forces beyond their control influence their lives (Hofstadter, 1965). For people who feel powerless, beliefs in specific conspiracies allow them to avoid thinking that the world is chaotic. Instead, they can believe that covert forces are in operation, and this helps them to understand why they lack the power to control their own lives. Likewise, people who are low in self-esteem may subscribe to specific conspiracies because this permits them to blame others for their problems.

The facet of authoritarianism that appears to explain its relationship with beliefs in specific conspiracies is the tendency of people who are high in authoritarianism to blame outgroups for their problems (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik,



Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). One of the great advantages of most conspiracy theories is that they involve blaming specific outgroups for problems the ingroup is experiencing, such as blaming Jews for controlling the banking system. If outgroups can be held responsible for such events, it makes these events, and the world, seem more comprehensible.

The finding that minority groups were higher in beliefs in specific conspiracies than members of the majority group is consistent with results obtained by Goertzel (1994). And, as in his study, these beliefs may well be related to feelings of anomie, distrust, and powerlessness. Minority groups often lack power because of the discriminatory behavior of the majority group, hence they are frequently alienated from and mistrustful of the majority group. Thus, they may be skeptical of explanations given by the majority and may find beliefs in conspiracies more attractive as a consequence.

People who are low in trust of others are likely to believe that others are colluding against them, which may predispose them to endorse the existence of conspiracies in general. A belief in conspiracies in general would support their worldview (Goertzel, 1994). In a similar vein, people who are hostile may believe that others in general are out to harm them and they must therefore protect themselves. Their anger and resentment may take the form of believing that "others" are conspiring against them (Moscovici, 1987). Robins and Post (1997) have noted that hostility is also characteristic of the politically paranoid.

People who score high in external locus of control believe that many events in the world are beyond their control. From their perspective, unnamed, powerful others dictate the course of events. They may prefer general beliefs in conspiracies to beliefs in specific conspiracies because endorsing specific conspiracies implies that particular individuals are responsible for events in the world. If specific others are in control, then influencing or counteracting them is not out of the question, but if large-scale, unseen forces control events, then there is little hope for acquiring control.

Why would different variables predict beliefs in the prevalence of specific conspiracies and attitudes toward the existence of conspiracies in general? It appears that people who feel alienated and powerless search for specific groups to blame for their situations. Likewise, people with low self-esteem may blame particular individuals or groups for their problems. A hallmark of authoritarianism is a need to have scapegoats to blame for their woes. Thus, the motivating force for beliefs in specific conspiracies may be a desire to blame others for negative events.

In contrast, people who are mistrustful and hostile appear to believe that the world in general is out to do them harm. Their mistrust and hostility are diffuse, rather than being focused on specific groups. One dimension of internal versus external locus of control concerns the influence exerted by powerful others who exert control in ways that cannot be countered. People who are mistrustful, hostile, and have high scores on external locus of control share a common worldview, one in which other people cannot be relied on to have one's best interests in mind. Thus,

people may believe in conspiracies in general because believing that the world is dominated by the forces of evil is consistent with their negative worldview.

The findings of this study extend our knowledge of the types of people who tend to subscribe to conspiracies in several ways. First, we found that different sets of traits were related to the two types of beliefs in conspiracies that we assessed. These results provide evidence that the two measures are assessing distinct constructs. Second, we explored a wider range of personality traits than has been explored in previous research, thereby yielding a more thorough understanding of the variables that are associated with beliefs in conspiracies. Third, we found little support for one of the commonly cited reasons that people subscribe to conspiracy theories (i.e., to provide simple explanations for complex events). It is likely that variables other than those explored in this study also contribute to beliefs in specific and general conspiracies, and one task of future research is to ferret out these variables. It would also be valuable to know whether the variables found to be significant in this study would predict conspiracy beliefs in other populations that differed in age, education, ethnicity, and nationality.

History may well be a conspiracy, but apparently only certain types of people endorse this view.

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