Chapter 12
Conspiracy theories

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Contents

1 Introduction

Many dramatic events in the world – deaths of public figures, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, plane crashes, political assassinations, military conflicts, meteorological anomalies and disease outbreaks – generate a certain amount of speculation about possible conspiracies behind them. Since the late 1990s the main medium for the transmission of conspiracy theories has been the internet, although outlandish claims of hidden agendas and secret plots receive surprisingly regular coverage on television news channels, in newspapers and magazines, on radio talk shows, and so on (Byford, 2011). Admittedly, most conspiracy theories tend to be short lived (who today remembers the conspiracy theories about the death of Michael Jackson in 2009, for example?) or of local, rather than global, consequence. Nevertheless, some – including those about the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, the assassination in 1963 of the American president John F. Kennedy, or supposed secret societies ruling the world's finances and politics – have become part of a more robust set of beliefs. These beliefs, as well as being widespread and persistent, have acquired symbolic significance and the capacity to mobilise sections of the public around the world (Heins, 2007).

Given the apparent popularity of conspiracy theories, it should come as no surprise that over the years they have attracted interest from psychologists. Conspiracy theories, as forms of explanation, pose important questions about the human mind and behaviour, some of which you have already encountered in previous chapters. How do people understand the world around them? How do they process information and interpret evidence? Why do some people respond to a dramatic event by attributing its causes to a conspiracy, and what might be the psychological dynamic behind this?

In this chapter you will learn about some of the research on the psychology of conspiracy theories. As you will discover, the central questions that have preoccupied psychologists interested in this topic are why some people are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than others, and what psychological variables differentiate believers from sceptics. Throughout this chapter you will engage critically with these questions, as well as exploring a different way of understanding the continuing appeal of conspiracy theories. This alternative approach focuses not so much on the psychological characteristics of the

conspiracy theorist, but on the conspiracy theories themselves and the role they play, as social explanations, in the everyday practice of making sense of the world.

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- explain what is meant by the term 'conspiracy theory'
- outline some studies and methods that researchers have used to identify possible psychological characteristics of believers in conspiracy theories
- discuss some of the limitations of questionnaire-based studies of conspiracy theories
- summarise the differences between studies that focus on the personality characteristics and disposition of conspiracy theorists and those that explore the conspiracy theories and their social and psychological functions.

2 What exactly are ‘conspiracy theories’?

Before you begin to explore the psychology of conspiracy theories, first take a moment to think about what exactly is meant by the term ‘conspiracy theory’. At first thought, the meaning of the term might seem obvious, as the word ‘conspiracy’ is well established in the English language. Derived from the Latin *conspirare*, meaning ‘to breathe together’, it signifies the joining together of two or more individuals and their acting in collusion to achieve a desired outcome (and, when used in law, a ‘conspiracy’ involves illegality). In the broadest sense, therefore, a conspiracy theory would be an explanation that attributes the causes of an event to a conspiracy or a plot (Basham, 2003).

However, while any explanation that suggests collusion between individuals is, in a literal sense, a ‘conspiracy theory’, in everyday language the term tends to be used to signify a much narrower class of phenomena. Activity 12.1 illustrates the distinction.

Activity 12.1 Identifying conspiracy theories

Consider the following statements, each of which describes a theory about a conspiracy. Which, if any, of these would you describe as a ‘conspiracy theory’, and why?

1 Over a number of years the management of Volkswagen colluded to cheat on the emissions tests for the company’s diesel cars.
2 Princess Diana was assassinated by rogue elements within the British establishment, and the murder was made to look like a car accident.
3 Security services in the USA and Europe conspired to secretly monitor the telephone and internet communications of their citizens.
4 No human has yet walked on the moon. The footage of the Apollo moon landings, seen by millions around the world, was faked using Hollywood-style effects.
5 The symptoms of Covid-19 are caused by 5G technology, and this is being covered up by the government.
6 Members of the al-Qaeda terrorist group conspired to carry out a series of deadly attacks on US soil on 11 September 2001.

Discussion

Did you notice the difference between examples 1, 3 and 6 on the one hand, and examples 2, 4 and 5 on the other? Generally, the former tend not to be referred to as 'conspiracy theories', even though they describe a conspiracy. This is for the simple reason that they did, in fact, occur and so are widely accepted by most people as true. Managers at Volkswagen have been caught and the company was fined for secretly fixing emissions scores; security services have colluded in the monitoring of communications; and the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks did conspire to do so. In contrast, claims about Princess Diana being assassinated, about Covid-19 and 5G, and about the faking of the moon landings – all of which have attracted the label 'conspiracy theory' – go against what are deemed to be the authoritative and substantiated versions of these events. Thus, in everyday language, the term 'conspiracy theory' tends to be reserved for those allegations of conspiracy that go against conventional wisdom, available evidence or scientific knowledge. Conspiracy theories in this sense also tend to view deliberate, long-standing and well-concealed plots, schemes or groups as the motive force behind events in the world.

(a) (b)

Figure 12.1 Which of these was the site of a conspiracy? (a) NASA Mission Control; (b) the headquarters of Volkswagen

An important characteristic of the term 'conspiracy theory', which stems from this definition, is that it is not a neutral label used merely to describe a certain type of explanation. It is an evaluative term with significant pejorative connotations. To allude to an account as a

'conspiracy theory' implies that it is untrue, and insinuates that it is based on insufficient evidence, faulty reasoning, poor judgement, irrationality or prejudice (Coady, 2006). Michael Barkun (2006) referred to conspiracy theories as a form of 'stigmatised knowledge', alongside astrology and belief in the paranormal or in visitations by extraterrestrial life, in the sense that they consist of assumptions about the world which, while reasonably common, are nevertheless regarded as unwarranted, and are often ridiculed, by the mainstream of society.

The negative connotations carried by the label 'conspiracy theory' are important with respect to the interest that psychologists have shown in this phenomenon. In some of the classic literature on conspiracy theories, written mainly by non-psychologists, there has been a tendency to account for people's susceptibility to outlandish and often bizarre conspiracy claims by resorting to psychological vocabulary, and by questioning the reasoning ability, or even the sanity, of believers (e.g. Cohn, 1967; Hofstadter, 1967). Although psychologists who have studied conspiracy theories have, on the whole, taken a more measured approach, they have nevertheless accepted the view that there are important psychological differences between believers in conspiracy theories and non-believers, and have sought to identify what these differences are.

2.1 Why study conspiracy theories?

Over the years, conspiracy theories have attracted considerable interest from researchers working in a variety of disciplines, mainly in the social sciences. What has motivated them to explore conspiracy theories has not been just the desire to understand why people sometimes believe bizarre and unlikely things that go against the available evidence. It has also been the realisation that conspiracy theories have negative, sometimes tragic, social and political consequences.

Consider the following example. Since the 1980s the 'AIDS denialist movement' has questioned the well-established link between HIV and AIDS, attributing public concern about the spread of AIDS to a vast conspiracy involving the pharmaceutical industry and government agencies. AIDS denialists have also claimed that antiretroviral drugs used to treat HIV are more damaging than the virus itself, and therefore that patients should refuse them (Kalichman, 2009, reviews such claims in detail). In the early 2000s, the influence that denialists exercised over the then South African president Thabo Mbeki and his

government caused substantial delays to the administration of medicines used in the treatment of HIV in South Africa. According to one estimate, this contributed to the death of as many as 330,000 HIV patients (Nattrass, 2008), all because of belief in a conspiracy theory.

Also, conspiracy theories have an important political dimension. Throughout the world, stories of conspiracy feature prominently in the propaganda of oppressive regimes and are a staple ingredient of extremist politics. Populist leaders regularly use the motif of international conspiracy as a means of reinforcing their grip on power, and as a source of excuses for economic and political problems. Importantly, conspiracy theories are held by people at both ends of the political spectrum, on the far left as well as the far right (Byford, 2011).

Of course, it is not being suggested here that all conspiracy theories are necessarily dangerous. Some, such as the one about the moon landings, could be said to be quite innocuous and politically neutral. It is similarly not being suggested that everyone who believes a conspiracy theory is an extremist, or should be regarded as ideologically suspect. Having said that, the history of conspiracy theories has convincingly demonstrated what Richard Hofstadter (1964, p. 77) referred to as their 'greater affinity for bad causes than good'. For that reason, the social, cultural, political and psychological dynamics behind conspiracy theories and their continuing appeal represent important avenues for research.

3 The psychological profile of a conspiracy theorist

A common source of evidence about the popularity of conspiracy theories in the world today is opinion polls, which suggest that a substantial proportion of the population, both in the Western world and elsewhere, readily admit to believing in some form of conspiracy theory (Byford, 2011). For example, an opinion poll carried out on a representative sample of US citizens in March 2020 found that 43 per cent of respondents believed that 'an extrajudicial deep state is secretly embedded in our government', 20 per cent agreed that Barack Obama faked his citizenship in order to become president of the United States, and 31 per cent believed that the coronavirus that caused the 2020 global pandemic was created in a laboratory and spread on purpose (Uscinski and Enders, 2020). A similar study from 2018, which looked at the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs in Europe, found that 60 per cent of Britons, and as many as 85 per cent of Hungarians, believed at least one conspiracy theory about how their country is run (Addley, 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted many conspiracy theories, including that the SARS-CoV-2 virus does not exist, that it is a manufactured bioweapon, and that the vaccines do not work but unproven 'treatments' do

What these findings clearly indicate is that some people, sometimes a sizeable percentage of the population, appear to believe in conspiracy theories that are not supported (and are often directly refuted) by the available evidence. Could these people be more susceptible to conspiracy theorising than others? This question has led psychologists to search for possible psychological factors that distinguish believers in conspiracy theories from non-believers. Marina Abalakina-Paap and colleagues (1999, p. 646) captured the essence of this strand of research when they wrote that 'history may well be a conspiracy, but apparently only certain types of people endorse this view'. The goal has been, therefore, to uncover who these 'certain types' are, and to create a 'profiling model of conspiracist individuals' (Swami et al., 2010, p. 751).

3.1 Individual differences in conspiracy beliefs

The classic stereotype of the conspiracy theorist would probably resemble Mel Gibson's character, Jerry Fletcher, in the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*: someone who is eccentric, obsessive and suspicious to the point of paranoia (although – spoiler alert – in the film some of Jerry's suspicions turn out to be justified). The film's characterisation is, of course, a Hollywood creation, but psychologists have studied whether there are particular personality characteristics that are typical of conspiracy theorists. For example, one variable that features prominently in the literature is authoritarianism. In their early work on the **authoritarian personality**, Theodor Adorno and colleagues (1950) postulated a link between the kind of deference to authority found in people with an authoritarian personality and belief in conspiracy theories, suggesting that authoritarian individuals are more likely to believe in conspiracy claims.

Authoritarian personality
A kind of personality typified by obedience to authority, strict adherence to rules, and hostility to anyone different from oneself.

Some psychologists have set out to test this proposed link empirically and explore whether differences in authoritarianism might account for differences in susceptibility to conspiracy theories (e.g. McHoskey, 1995; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2010). Psychologists have also studied whether other, more general, personality variables might also account for individual differences in conspiracy beliefs. For example, Viren Swami and colleagues (2010) and Robert Brotherton and colleagues (2013) looked at whether scores on tests of the five-factor model of personality (e.g. Costa and McRae, 1992), which conceptualises personality in terms of five broad factors named

openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism, were correlated with the extent of people's beliefs in conspiracy theories. Box 12.1 outlines this model of personality.

Over the past three decades psychologists have examined a host of variables other than personality that might account for why some people believe in conspiracy theories. These include factors like a sense of powerlessness, anxiety, superstition, need for certainty, and so on, or demographic variables such as ethnic background, age, gender or educational level (see Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka, 2017 for a review).

Box 12.1 Paul Costa and Robert McRae's five-factor model of personality

Costa and McRae (1992) identified five aspects of personality that they argue provide an overall description of a person's character and how they interact with the world. These five factors can be briefly described as:

- *openness*: how open to experiences and ideas, especially new ones, a person tends to be
- *conscientiousness*: the extent to which a person is self-disciplined, ordered and strives to honour their commitments
- *extraversion*: how socially outgoing a person is and the extent to which they seek excitement
- *agreeableness*: how kind, modest, compliant and trusting a person tends to be
- *neuroticism*: how anxious, angry, depressed or impulsive a person tends to be.

There are individual differences between people on these five aspects of personality (e.g. some people are more conscientious than others), but people are assumed to be fairly consistent over time (e.g. someone who is very conscientious now will probably still be very conscientious in the future). An individual's personality will also be reflected in their behaviour: for instance, someone high in conscientiousness would make greater efforts to be on time for appointments than someone low in conscientiousness.

The personality factors identified in the five-factor model are sometimes referred to as the 'big five', and you may find this term used for them in some of the literature. However, this is not strictly

accurate, and can cause confusion, as there is a different model of personality with that name (proposed by Goldberg, 1993).

How far have psychologists got in the quest for the 'psychological profile' of the conspiracy theorist? The simple answer to this question is, at the time of writing, not very far. Although some individual studies have reported statistically significant correlations between conspiracy beliefs and other psychological variables, overall, the results have been somewhat mixed, allowing only tentative conclusions. For example, some studies that have looked at the link between conspiracy theories and the authoritarian personality have found a positive correlation, indicating that, just as Adorno and colleagues (1950) suggested, authoritarian individuals tend to be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Grzesiak-Feldman and Irzycka, 2009). However, other studies have found no correlation between the two variables (McHoskey, 1995), while one recent study found that people who are distinctly *non*-authoritarian are also susceptible to conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2010).

Studies exploring the general personality traits of conspiracists have proven equally inconclusive. Swami and colleagues (2010), looking specifically at beliefs in conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks, found that only one personality trait was related to conspiracist belief: participants who scored low on agreeableness were marginally more likely to believe these theories than those scoring high on agreeableness. The authors attributed this finding to the fact that suspicion of others (typical of conspiracy theories) is one of the features of people who score low on agreeableness. However, this finding has not been replicated in subsequent studies, leading Brotherton and colleagues (2013, p. 11) to conclude that the influence of personality on conspiracy beliefs, if any, is 'small and somewhat unstable'.

A similar picture emerges from studies that have explored the role of demographic factors. So far these studies appear to agree that educational level, gender and age are not useful factors in determining whether or not someone will believe in conspiracy theories, but a number of researchers have reported that members of minority ethnic groups tend to be more prone to conspiracy theorising than members of majority ethnic groups (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1999). However, there is still much disagreement in the literature

about the nature and extent of this relationship and why it might occur. For example, the apparent susceptibility to conspiracy theorising does not apply to all minority groups equally, and some conspiracy theories are specific to particular segments of the population. For example, in the USA, AIDS-related conspiracy theories are more common among members of African American communities than among other minority groups. This suggests that factors to do with the specific experiences of African Americans (including a long history of discrimination in the US health system) might be at play, rather than their minority status per se (Bird and Bogart, 2005). Also, it is unclear to what extent the relevance of minority status might reflect the fact that a sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement – which is common among believers in conspiracy theories – tends to be more prevalent among some minority groups, especially those that have been the target of discrimination (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999).

Taken together, these findings suggest that researchers are still far from identifying a specific set of psychological or sociocultural factors that differentiate believers in conspiracy theories from non-believers. In fact, the only consistent and robust findings yielded so far have been that those who believe in conspiracy theories tend to be disenchanted with political authority and harbour a 'feeling of alienation and disaffection from the system' (Goertzel, 1994, p. 739; see also Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). One could argue, however, that this is a fairly obvious finding: suspicion of authority and disenchantment with 'the system' are a large part of what conspiracy theories are all about!

3.2 Conspiracy theories and faulty reasoning

As you read in Section 2, critics of conspiracy theories often portray such beliefs as the outcome of faulty reasoning or a psychological deficit that leads people to misunderstand or misinterpret the causes of world events. This has led some psychologists to investigate whether susceptibility to conspiracy theorising might stem not from personality factors, or things like authoritarianism or minority status, but from some systematic bias in reasoning that leads some people to endorse conspiracist explanations.

One avenue pursued by researchers has been to explore the role of heuristics in conspiracy beliefs. You learned in Chapter 11 that heuristics refer to basic problem-solving and reasoning strategies, (sometimes called 'rules of thumb' or mental short cuts), which are

developed through experience and used in everyday life to make sense of the world. One common heuristic, identified by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1972), is the tendency to assume that major events in the world have a major cause, while more mundane events are likely to have mundane causes. The assumption here is that there should be consistency between the magnitude of an event and its cause, and this assumption will lead people faced with a dramatic social event to seek a dramatic cause, such as a conspiracy (Keeley, 1999). This assumption is sometimes referred to as the **major event–major cause heuristic**.

Major event–major cause heuristic
The assumption that events with dramatic consequences must have dramatic causes.

Activity 12.2 Do major events necessarily have major causes?

Can you think of any major events, particularly ones which have generated popular conspiracy theories, that did *not* have major causes?

Discussion

There are many examples that you could have come up with to answer this question. For example, the death of Princess Diana, felt by many people in the UK to be a major event, had an (unfortunately) everyday cause: a motor vehicle accident involving an intoxicated driver and a victim who was not wearing a seat belt. This mismatch between a major event and a mundane cause may be what led some people to speculate about something much more sinister and elaborate, such as an 'establishment' plot to kill her. In the same way, the assassination in 1963 of US President John F. Kennedy by a lone gunman (Figure 12.2) can also be seen to violate the major event–major cause heuristic, leading to much conspiracy speculation about the involvement of government agencies or the mafia. You may well have thought of several other examples, as many major events are actually the result of fairly mundane, simple causes.

Over the years, a number of psychological studies have examined the link between the major event–major cause heuristic and the endorsement of conspiracy-based explanations (e.g. McCauley and Jacques, 1979; Leman and Cinnirella, 2007). The experiment conducted by Patrick Leman and Marco Cinnirella (2007) is a particularly good example, and worth exploring in some detail. This experiment involved a fairly simple procedure. Sixty-four participants, all of whom were

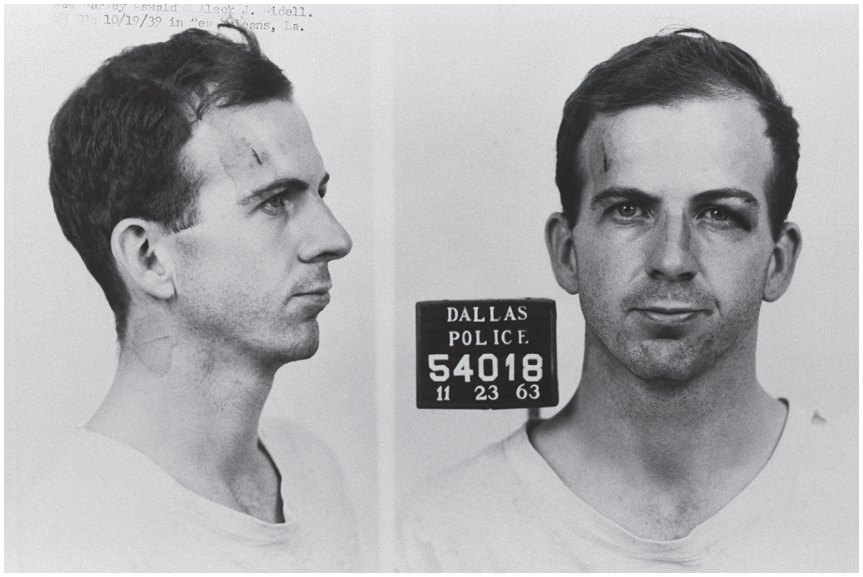

Figure 12.2 The assassination of US President John F. Kennedy gave rise to a number of conspiracy theories, even though the identity of his (lone) killer, Lee Harvey Oswald (pictured above) was known

undergraduate psychology students from a UK university, were asked to read a brief vignette in the form of a newspaper report. The report described a (fictitious) assassination attempt against the president of a small, unnamed country. After reading the report, participants were presented with a series of statements about the possible causes of the event, and were asked to rate the likelihood of each statement being true (e.g. 'The gunman was part of a conspiracy to assassinate the president' and 'The gunman was a madman, acting alone'). These statements assessed the extent to which participants attributed the causes of the event described in the vignette to a conspiracy. In addition, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which measured their belief in conspiracy theories generally.

Although all 64 participants underwent the same procedure, they did not all read the same scenario. There were four different versions of the vignette. They were identically worded except for some crucial points of detail, namely (a) whether or not the president survived the assassination attempt, and the consequences for the country involved, and (b) whether or not the assassin's bullet hit or missed the target. The four conditions in this experiment are presented in the table below, followed by an example of two of the four vignettes.

Table 12.1 The four conditions in Leman and Cinnirella's (2007) experiment

Condition A	**Condition B**
President is shot and killed	President is shot at, but the bullet misses and he survives
Condition C	**Condition D**
President is hit by the bullet but survives	President is shot at, but the bullet misses. However, president dies from an unrelated cause (heart attack)

Vignette in condition A

The small nation of XXX was thrown into civil chaos last night following the assassination of President XXX. The newly-elected president, who had won 54 per cent of the votes in last month's general election, was shot as he climbed down from the stage at the end of a speech to supporters in the capital, XXX. Although medics were quickly on the scene, one bullet had penetrated the president's heart – he died almost instantly. XXX police were yesterday giving no details of their investigation. But it is widely believed that a 35-year-old man, detained shortly after the incident and suspected to be the gunman, is currently being held in custody.

Vignette in condition C

The small nation of XXX was breathing a collective sigh of relief last night following the failure of an assassination attempt on President XXX. The newly-elected president, who had won 54 per cent of the votes in last month's general election, was shot as he climbed down from the stage at the end of a speech to supporters in the capital, XXX. By pure chance, it appears a single bullet narrowly missed the president's heart. Medics reported that XXX had been released from hospital last night suffering only a minor wound to the shoulder – he will wear a sling for the next two weeks. XXX police were yesterday giving no details of their investigation. But it is widely believed that a 35-year-old man, detained shortly after the incident and suspected to be the gunman, is currently being held in custody.

(Source: Leman and Cinnirella, 2007, p. 27)

By varying the information presented in the vignettes, researchers were effectively manipulating the magnitude of the event: the scenarios where the president dies describe more dramatic consequences (the country is said to have descended into 'civil chaos') than those where he survives (where the outcome is a 'collective sigh of relief'). The authors of the study predicted that, because of the influence of the major event–major cause heuristic, the perceived magnitude of the event (the president dying versus the president surviving) would have an effect on the participants' likelihood of attributing the assassination to a conspiracy. They were also interested in whether there would be a difference between conditions B and C, that is, between the scenario where the gunman hits the president but the president survives, and the scenario where the gunman misses. Any differences between the two conditions would indicate that participants were not just drawing conclusions on the basis of the major event–major cause heuristic, but were also making a judgement about the competence of the shooter. Similarly, they were interested in any differences between conditions A and D. In condition D, the event described is dramatic (the president dies), but the death is not related to the assassination attempt (he died 'from a massive heart attack brought on, in part, by his rigorous schedule in the weeks preceding the election'). Thus, in this scenario, unlike the one in Condition A, there is no causal link between the death of the president and the assassination attempt. Take a moment before reading on to do Activity 12.3.

Activity 12.3 Thinking about the Leman and Cinnirella (2007) study

What would you predict the results of this study to be? In which of the scenarios do you think people would be most likely to endorse a conspiracy theory? Remember the influence of the major event–major cause heuristic when making your prediction.

Discussion

The only significant difference in participants' responses that Leman and Cinnirella found was between the scenarios in which the president died (Conditions A and D) and those in which he survived (Conditions B and C). Participants were more likely to endorse the conspiracy-based explanation if the president died, regardless of whether he died as a result of the assassination or of a heart attack. Also, the study revealed that whether the shooter hit the president or missed his target made little impact on the participants' responses, as long as the president survived.

This led the authors to conclude that, as predicted, the major event–major cause heuristic does play a role in determining the extent to which people are likely to entertain the possibility of a conspiracy. The magnitude of the event was shown to be more important than both the perceived competence of the attacker and the precise cause of death.

There was another, equally interesting, finding in the Leman and Cinnirella study. You will recall that, as well as asking them to read the vignette and answer questions about it, Leman and Cinnirella (2007) gave all participants a belief in conspiracy theories questionnaire. This was because they wanted to explore whether people who generally believed in conspiracy theories would be more susceptible to the major event–major cause heuristic, compared with sceptics. The results showed this not to be the case: people appeared to rely on the major event–major cause heuristic regardless of whether or not they generally believed in conspiracy theories. This is an important finding, because it suggests that cognitive biases such as the major event–major cause heuristic can better explain what kinds of *events* are likely to become the object of conspiracist speculation, rather than what kinds of *people* will be susceptible to it. In simple terms, any event that has highly dramatic consequences is likely to generate conspiracy theories that suggest a cause of equivalent scale, even when the real cause was an individual acting alone, as in Leman and Cinnirella's study, or the actions of a small group (e.g. the 9/11 attacks, Figure 12.3).

Biased assimilation
A tendency to uncritically accept evidence supporting a pre-existing view, while rejecting any disconfirming information.

A similar conclusion has been drawn from studies that looked at whether or not believers in conspiracy theories are more susceptible to what is known as **biased assimilation**, which is the tendency to uncritically accept evidence supporting a pre-existing view, while rejecting any disconfirming information (Lord et al., 1979; Butler et al. 1995). Biased assimilation is essentially the same concept as confirmation bias, which you learned about in Chapter 8, with the very subtle distinction that confirmation bias refers more to how people *seek out* information (seeking out information that supports their existing views or the conclusion they want to reach, avoiding information that does not), whereas biased assimilation refers more to the way people *process* whatever information they encounter (believing information that supports their existing views, disbelieving information that does not). To illustrate how subtle the distinction is, an example

of confirmation bias would be choosing to read a newspaper article if you think you will agree with it and deciding not to read it if you think you will disagree with it, whereas biased assimilation would be reading a newspaper article and believing it if you agree with it and disbelieving it if you disagree with it. In practice, the distinction between the two is rarely made, as the concepts are so closely related and people generally do both together, and so the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Figure 12.3 The major event–major cause heuristic would cause people to think that an event this major could not have been carried out by a small group of lightly armed men

Biased assimilation is thought to be particularly relevant to conspiracy theories, given that conspiracy theorists are notorious for their tendency to gather and interpret evidence selectively while ignoring important information that supports other explanations (Byford, 2011). However, John McHoskey (1995) found that biased assimilation, although present among believers in conspiracy theories, is by no means limited to them. It is also present among non-believers, who are just as susceptible to systematic privileging of evidence that confirms their views.

Both of these findings suggest that conspiracy theorists might not, in fact, be as cognitively distinct as it is sometimes tempting to think. As Albert Harrison and James Moulton Thomas (1997, p. 15) put it, 'beliefs in conspiracies rest less on emotional upheaval and gross

distortions of reality … than on normal, primarily rational information processing strategies that are accountable also for other beliefs'.

3.3 Looking beyond the differences between believers and sceptics

As you have read in the previous sections, identifying specific psychological factors that differentiate believers in conspiracy theories from sceptics has proved surprisingly difficult. Conspiracy theorists have been shown to share with non-believers several reasoning strategies, such as biased assimilation and the major event–major cause heuristic, while the lack of a clear link between beliefs in conspiracy theories and variables such as five-factor personality traits, authoritarianism or minority status suggests that any differences between believers and non-believers may not be straightforward.

It could be argued, of course, that a clearer 'profile' of believers in conspiracy theories will emerge with time, as researchers create more sophisticated ways of studying conspiracy beliefs, or as they embark on more systematic research programmes. In psychology, one often encounters the notion that, while individual studies might offer only modest advancement in the understanding of a phenomenon, the discipline as a whole moves slowly but steadily forward. Yet there are precedents within social psychology that suggest that this is not necessarily so, and that the 'optimistic notion of cumulative progress' (Billig, 1996, p. 106) might never be realised. One example is psychological research on persuasion. Ever since the 1940s, psychologists have sought to identify factors that make a piece of communication effective in influencing the audience (e.g. Hovland et al., 1953). Over the years, hundreds of studies have been devoted to the exploration of, for example, whether messages that arouse fear are more persuasive than neutral ones, whether it is more effective to present a one-sided or a two-sided argument, whether experts are more persuasive than non-experts, and so on. However, over time, the quest for the general rules of persuasion led to a widespread sense of disappointment: for virtually every empirical finding that proposed a general principle there were myriad others that suggested some qualification, exclusion or exception (Billig, 1996). For instance, the initial finding that fear may be necessary to induce action has been found in subsequent studies to depend on a whole host of things, including the amount of fear (too much or too little fear undermines

the persuasiveness of a message); the disposition of the individual who is on the receiving end of the communication (some people respond to fear-inducing messages more favourably than others); and the context in which the message is presented (Hollander, 1981). In other words, years of research and meticulous accumulation of evidence about the rules of persuasion have produced little more than a 'mass of unintegrated findings' (Billig, 2003, p. 223).

There is an important lesson in this for the psychology of conspiracy theories. One might predict that, with further research, the list of psychological factors that can be shown to be associated with conspiracy beliefs will expand, as will the number of variables that apparently mediate those associations. However, as the number of relevant factors increases, the relative importance of each factor will inevitably diminish. With time, the complexity of the psychological profile of conspiracist individuals will undoubtedly grow, but this may only make it more, not less, obscure and intangible.

3.4 Measuring belief in conspiracy theories using scales

A core factor in the different theories and studies that you have learned about so far in this chapter is that they conceptualise conspiracy theories as individual beliefs. Adherence to conspiracy-based explanations is seen as something that can be explained by reference to individual information-processing biases, attitudes or personality characteristics. This treatment of conspiracy theories as individual beliefs is reflected in the use of questionnaires or scales to measure the extent to which a person endorses conspiracy-based explanations. A typical study might involve distributing questionnaires to a sample of the population, who will vary in the extent to which they endorse conspiracy theories. The questionnaires are usually composed of different measures, or scales, similar to the ones you have previously encountered (e.g. the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale that you learned about in Chapter 4). In conspiracy theory research, one of the scales usually assesses the participants' belief in conspiracy theories, while others tap into whatever variables the researcher hypothesises might explain the difference in susceptibility to conspiracy-based explanations, such as the aspects of personality identified in the five-factor model that you learned about in Section 3.1. Statistical procedures are then used to assess the strength of the relationship

between the belief in conspiracy theories and the other variables, all with a view to uncovering psychological factors that underpin what is often referred to as the 'conspiracy mentality' (Moscovici, 1987; Bruder et al., 2013).

A number of scales to measure people's belief in conspiracy theories have been developed, generally consisting of between 5 and 22 items asking about particular aspects of conspiracist belief. In Figures 12.4 and 12.5 you will find examples of two such scales, both of which require each individual participant to indicate their level of belief in a series of conspiracy-based statements. You will reflect on these scales in Activity 12.4.

A powerful and secretive group, known as the New World Order, are planning to eventually rule the world through an autonomous world government, which would replace sovereign government.

Completely false	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Completely true

US agencies intentionally created the AIDS epidemic and administered it to black and gay men in the 1970s.

Completely false	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Completely true

The US government allowed the 9/11 attacks to take place so that it would have an excuse to achieve foreign (e.g. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and domestic (e.g. attacks on civil liberties) goals that had been determined prior to the attacks.

Completely false	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Completely true

Princess Diana's death was not an accident, but rather an organised assassination by members of the British royal family, who disliked her.

Completely false	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Completely true

Figure 12.4 Four of the 15 items from the Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory developed by Swami et al. (2010)

	Definitely not true	Probably not true	Not sure/ cannot decide	Probably true	Definitely true
The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organisation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 12.5 Four of the 15 items featured in the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale developed by Brotherton et al. (2013)

Activity 12.4 Characteristics of conspiracy belief scales

Think carefully about the two scales presented in Figures 12.4 and 12.5. Can you identify any similarities and differences between them, particularly in the kinds of questions they ask? Are there any issues arising from the type of response they ask for? In thinking about this question, you may find it useful to reflect back on the discussion of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), which you learned about in Chapter 4.

Discussion

You probably noticed an important difference between the two scales. The first, the Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory (BCTI, Figure 12.4) requires respondents to rate the extent to which they believe a specific well-known conspiracy theory to be true. The examples above include references to the 9/11 attacks, the death of Princess Diana and the origins of AIDS. In contrast, the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS, Figure 12.5) contains more abstract questions about the role of conspiracies in world history. These questions make no reference to specific events, persons or organisations. Nevertheless, they focus on similar issues as the BCTI: the human origins of infectious diseases, deaths of public figures, shadowy groups pulling the strings of politics, and so on. In terms of the responses, you will have noticed that they ask for an indication of the level of truth or falsehood the person thinks each

statement has, rather than whether they think it is or is not true. Unlike the RSES, which you will remember forces people to choose between low and high self-esteem responses, these examples do have a midpoint on the scale. Would you consider this midpoint to be neutral, though, as a midpoint on a self-esteem scale would be?

The difference between the BCTI (Figure 12.4) and the GCBS (Figure 12.5) reflects two approaches that have developed in the literature over the years. Early scales, developed in the USA, tended to fall into the first category, and included concrete questions about specific conspiracies (e.g. McCauley and Jacques, 1979). However, researchers soon realised that this presented a problem: conspiracy theories are often culturally specific, so scales developed in the USA had to be modified before they could be used elsewhere in the world. Thus, over the years, a number of culturally specific scales have been created for use in various countries including the UK (Leman and Cinnirella, 2007; Swami et al., 2010), Poland (Grzesiak-Feldman and Ejsmont, 2008; Kofta and Sędek, 2005), France (Wagner-Egger and Bangerter, 2007) and Malaysia (Swami, 2012). Also, the fact that new conspiracy theories emerge all the time and the popularity of some of the old ones diminishes means that scales have to be updated from time to time. The problem this creates is that making comparisons between studies becomes difficult. The generic scales, like the one featured in Figure 12.5, were developed to correct this shortcoming: because they do not refer to specific conspiracies, they can be meaningfully used across cultures and across time.

However, the generic scales have their own disadvantages. The items are often *too* generic, to the point where one could easily agree with a statement without necessarily being a conspiracy theorist. Note, for example, the item 'A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest' featured in the GCBS, Figure 12.5. While many believers in conspiracy theories would rate this item as 'definitely true', so would many non-believers, simply because important information often *is* concealed from the public out of self-interest (e.g. governments covering up potential scandals or corporations keeping commercially sensitive information secret). In other words, such items do not necessarily differentiate belief in conspiracy theories from healthy (or, at least, justified) scepticism of

authority and reasonable suspicion towards the actions of those with power.

Regardless of the variations between the different measures, their common outcome is a single score that quantifies the extent to which an individual endorses conspiracy theories (whether specific or general). Psychology's reliance on scales as a measure of conspiracy theories should not come as a surprise, as measures of this kind are common in research on human beliefs. They are used extensively in studies of, for example, religious, mystical or paranormal beliefs (e.g. Thalbourne, 1994), or in research on authoritarianism, stereotypes or prejudice. There is an obvious advantage to using questionnaire-based measures, above and beyond the fact that they are easy and cheap to administer to large samples. Psychological measures offer a practical solution to a problem faced by psychologists interested in social phenomena, such as conspiracy theories: how to 'tailor' a complex social issue into a format that can be measured and quantified (Graumann, 1987). In other words, scales – comprising a small number of fairly simple items – reduce conspiracy theories to their bare essence, and condense them to a single and quantifiable measure of judgement or belief.

3.5 Conspiracy theory scales: a methodological critique

The use of scales to tap into conspiracy beliefs raises important theoretical and methodological questions. For example, one thing you may have noticed in Figures 12.4 and 12.5 is that, regardless of the type of items included in a scale, the belief in conspiracies is conceptualised as a *continuous* dimension. Rather than asking participants to give a 'yes' or 'no' answer, the questions require them to rate items on a sliding scale (from 1 to 5 or 1 to 9 in the above examples), with numbers representing the probability that a conspiracy theory is true (from 'definitely not true'/'completely false' to 'definitely true'/'completely true'). Therefore, although researchers, in most cases, seek to tap into the factors that differentiate 'believers' from 'sceptics', the scales do not produce a clear dichotomy: everyone in the population is assumed to fall somewhere on the continuum between complete credulity and total scepticism.

One issue with the use of continuous scales is that it is not entirely clear what it is that they measure. They certainly do not measure the

same thing as questionnaires or surveys inviting a simpler 'yes' or 'no' answer (Crocker et al., 1999). In the case of continuous scales, a very low score (someone who rates all statements as 'completely false', for example) might usefully point to a definite non-believer, just as a very high score (someone who rates all statements as 'completely true') could help to identify a hard-line believer. However, the meaning of scores in the middle range is more difficult to interpret.

For example, imagine that, in response to the item 'Princess Diana's death was not an accident, but rather an organised assassination by members of the British royal family, who disliked her', someone chooses 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 (completely false) to 9 (completely true). What does this score mean in practical terms? Is this person a believer or a non-believer? You might argue that they are undecided, but what does it mean to be undecided about a conspiracy theory? Should this respondent be treated as a 'borderline' conspiracy theorist, because they endorse the possibility that something other than a car accident caused the death of Princess Diana, or as a non-believer, because they do not *fully* endorse the conspiracist explanation of this event?

This is an issue that researchers using scales to measure conspiracy beliefs have been surprisingly reluctant to address. Nonetheless, it is an important one, because scores in the middle range – which are, in fact, much more common than scores on either extreme – can actually reflect a whole range of different kinds of engagement with conspiracy theories. For example, Jennifer Crocker and colleagues (1999) suggest that such scores might indicate familiarity with particular conspiracy theories, rather than endorsement of them. The argument here is that people are generally less likely to completely dismiss explanations with which they are familiar, even if they do not believe them to be true. Going back to the item 'Princess Diana's death was not an accident, but rather an organised assassination …', the answer '4' on a nine-point scale might indicate that the person has encountered this theory, maybe read about it, or seen it covered in a television documentary, rather than that they somewhat 'believe' it. This is especially plausible given that even among self-proclaimed non-believers there are those who, while rejecting conspiracy-based explanations, nevertheless recognise them as a legitimate opinion for others to hold. Such a position might also translate into a moderate score (Byford, 2011).

Furthermore, psychological scales overlook the possibility that conspiracy theories sometimes manifest themselves as 'quasi-beliefs',

namely beliefs that are of relatively little consequence, and might even be 'fun' to hold, but which, in most cases, do not lead to action or guide behaviour in any significant way (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). People who engage with conspiracy theories might do so with the kind of 'suspicion of phoniness' commonly found among those who read astrology columns (Adorno, 1994, p. 49). They may read and discuss them in a playful, tongue-in-cheek way without necessarily believing them to be true. This kind of engagement with conspiracy theories, however, cannot be unproblematically mapped on to a simple continuum between strong belief and strong scepticism, of the kind found in conspiracy belief scales.

Finally, there is another methodological shortcoming of questionnaire-based research on conspiracy theories that is worth pointing out. Most studies in this area tend to be based on samples from the general population (or, as is common in psychological research, undergraduate students), among whom there are usually very few hard-line conspiracy theorists. It might seem obvious that an enquiry into factors that differentiate believers from non-believers would be based on comparisons between a subset of the population who firmly believe in conspiracy theories (those scoring at the top end of a conspiracy theory scale) and another subset comprising the biggest sceptics (those scoring at the lower end of the scale). However, this has not been the case. Rather than seeking out hard-line conspiracy theorists and giving them questionnaires, researchers have conducted their research on what are usually moderately believing (or, arguably, moderately sceptical) samples, and then simply extrapolated the findings to believers. In other words, the supposition that everyone in the population falls somewhere between firm belief and complete non-belief in conspiracy theories has been taken to mean that any factors that differentiate between, for example, a strong and a moderate non-believer also account for the difference between a strong believer and a strong non-believer. There is a problem with this assumption, above and beyond the fact that it is precisely that: an assumption that has yet to be tested. As noted above, when it comes to conspiracy belief scales, scores that point to 'moderate belief' (or non-belief) might be accounted for by considerations other than simply the strength of the belief in, or attitude towards, conspiracy theories.

Taking all these points together, the possibility emerges that conspiracy theories may simply be too complex a phenomenon to be captured by simple questionnaires, and that an individual focus may be missing

important parts of the picture. Section 4 considers an alternative way of exploring conspiracy theories, one that draws more heavily on social psychology and that goes beyond 'profiling' conspiracy theorists or seeking to account for the differences between believers and non-believers.

4 Exploring conspiracy theories differently: from individual attitude and belief to social explanation

The limitations of questionnaire-based research on conspiracy beliefs, and the somewhat disappointing results, suggest that perhaps psychologists need to explore alternative approaches to the study of conspiracy theories. Maybe the individual differences approach, with its emphasis on the psychological characteristics and reasoning ability of believers, and the measurement of individual beliefs, has tackled conspiracy theories in the wrong way. As Michael Billig pointed out more than 40 years ago:

> when looking at the social psychological dynamics of so bizarre an outlook as the conspiracy theory, it is easy to overemphasise its eccentricities at the expense of noticing what is psychologically common place. It is not necessary to assume that the conspiracy theorist has a completely different cast of mind from the average person and that it must be described from a uniquely psychological perspective. History has shown that at times large numbers of both educated and uneducated people have embraced the conspiracy outlook.
>
> (Billig, 1978, p. 314)

This suggests that psychologists need to look beyond individual explanations of conspiracist beliefs and explore the role of social and cultural factors in conspiracy theories.

4.1 Social and cultural factors in conspiracy theories

The essence of Billig's argument, quoted above, is that explaining what distinguishes believers from non-believers might be far less important than accounting for how, why and when everyday thinking becomes influenced by conspiracy theories. For example, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that conspiracy theories can suddenly flourish in societies undergoing major social upheaval (e.g. a war or global pandemic), before receding to the margins when the crisis abates

(Byford and Billig, 2001). The individual differences approach cannot account for these periodic fluctuations in conspiracy beliefs. Similarly, it cannot account for the cultural differences in the prevalence of conspiracy theories. As has already been mentioned, AIDS-related conspiracy theories tend to be more common among African Americans than among White Americans. Similarly, there are parts of the world, including many Muslim countries of the Middle East, where, for various political, cultural and historical reasons, conspiracy theories form part of mainstream political discourse, much more so than in the West. For example, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro (2004) found that people sampled across nine predominantly Muslim countries were less likely to believe that the 9/11 attacks were the work of Islamist terrorists, and more likely to endorse the view that Israel or the USA itself was behind the attacks, if they were primarily exposed to Arab news media than if they were exposed to Western news media or no news media at all. Such *cultural* variations in conspiracy beliefs are certainly not attributable to *individual* differences in personality or cognitive biases.

Also, the attempts to reduce conspiracy theories to items on a scale and treat them as an individual attitude or belief overlook what are perhaps the most important, and the most interesting, aspects of this phenomenon: their *content* and their inherently *social* nature. There is much more to conspiracy theories than the claim that an event in history was the outcome of collusion or a secret plot. A statement such as 'The US government allowed the 9/11 attacks to take place so that it would have an excuse to achieve foreign … and domestic … goals that had been determined prior to the attacks' (see Figure 12.4) does not begin to capture the complexity of the 9/11 conspiracy theories expounded in hundreds of thousands of pages of books, newspapers and internet posts. In other words, conspiracy theories are not merely statements of belief, but intricate, convoluted and often enthralling *stories*. As you learned in Chapter 10, stories are an important part of how people make sense of the world.

It could therefore be argued that conspiracy theories are least interesting as an individual belief or attitude, and much more interesting as *shared* stories about how the world works. After all, in everyday life people do not volunteer their opinion about a conspiracy theory through simple statements, akin to those used in psychological scales, nor do they seek to quantify their belief on a numerical scale. Instead they *talk* and *argue* about conspiracy theories, *discuss* their

different features and merits, *present* arguments and counter-arguments, and *exchange* dismissals and justifications. Engagement with conspiracy theories is therefore a shared endeavour and a social activity. This is an important point, because conspiracy theories have the greatest impact on society not as attitudes that people hold in their heads, but as a shared world-view on the basis of which political projects are forged and power relations challenged and sustained.

It may already have occurred to you that thinking about conspiracy theories in this way invites a different approach to their study from that examined in Section 3 and sets up a different task for the psychologist. It shifts the attention away from the individual mind and disposition of the conspiracy theorist and instead focuses it on the conspiracy theory itself, as a dynamic set of arguments and interpretations which are flexibly drawn on, modified and debated in the course of the everyday practice of making sense of, and telling stories about, the world and events in it.

Consider the following example, which illustrates the difference between the two approaches to the psychology of conspiracy theories. Research focusing on individual differences in conspiracy beliefs implies that when faced with a dramatic event (such as the 2020 coronavirus pandemic), people engage in a complex interpretative process that guides them towards a conclusion about the causes of that event. This process is thought to be influenced by biases in information processing and aspects of a person's disposition, such as their personality, which leads some people to endorse conspiracy theories. However, there is also another way of looking at conspiracy theories: when faced with a dramatic event, people do not need to engage in a complex inference-making process: they have at their disposal culturally available 'reservoirs of available explanations' or 'common sense theories' about why things happen in the world (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983, pp. 121–2), that lead them to almost instantly 'know' what happened. This can be observed clearly in the case of Covid-19 related conspiracy theories that flourished during the 2020 pandemic. Most conspiracy-based explanations of this event were not newly created, but were directly drawing on other conspiracy theories, which had been used in the past to account for similar dramatic events. For example, the idea that the coronavirus was developed in a laboratory and released for some sinister purpose, that its effects have been exaggerated by governments and pharmaceutical companies, and that the vaccine and other remedies are much more

dangerous than the illness caused by the virus, are identical to claims about HIV and AIDS made by conspiracy theorists since the 1980s. Similarly, theories about the Covid-19 vaccine containing microchips, about symptoms being caused by 5G technology, and about lockdown being a pretext for undermining people's freedoms and destroying their way of life, echo motifs that have featured in conspiracy theories for decades.

In other words, previous conspiracy theories about infectious diseases, vaccines, or the threat posed by secret, futuristic technologies, provided a blueprint for making sense of the Covid-19 pandemic as a conspiracy. This continuity in conspiracy theorising highlights the possibility that these explanations are not simply the product of individual information processing. Instead, they are culturally available interpretations that people can draw on, and can also share, debate and modify as they make sense of the world around them.

Inherent in this approach to the study of conspiracy theories is a greater recognition that human thought is the product of culture and history, not just of the individual mind. As Billig and colleagues note, psychologists who are focused on the mindset of individuals 'have been notably remiss in examining how the processes of cultural and ideological history flow through the minds of their laboratory subjects' (1988, p. 2). The point therefore is not to look for individual, cognitive psychological underpinnings of social phenomena, but to look at how aspects of psychology – patterns of thinking and behaviour – reflect established traditions of explanation and storytelling and ways of interpreting events in the world.

4.2 Conspiracy theories and rumours

An area of psychological research that has been attentive to social and cultural aspects of conspiracy theories is the research on rumour. Ever since the first psychological studies on the topic were carried out in the 1940s, stories of conspiracies, plots and subversion were identified as notable examples of rumour and hearsay (Allport and Postman, 1947; Campion-Vincent, 2005; Rödlach, 2006). This is unsurprising given that many conspiracy theories began as rumours and were later incorporated into a more formal 'theory', which in turn fuelled further rumour-mongering, initiating a cycle of mutual reinforcement. For example, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a rumour began to circulate on the internet that 4000 Jews employed in the World Trade

Center failed to turn up for work on the day of the attacks, and other rumours claimed that no Jews were killed in the attacks, because they had foreknowledge of what was about to happen. The implication here was that the destruction of the World Trade Center was a Jewish conspiracy. Later, this motif became part of a more elaborate anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, which is still propagated in parts of the Middle East and on far-right websites in the USA and Europe. In fact, approximately 10–15 per cent of the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center were Jewish (US State Department, 2005), exactly as would be expected given that 12 per cent of the population of New York City at the time was Jewish.

Although rumours are often assumed to be of temporary interest and transmitted by word of mouth (or now, via social media), it is today widely recognised that they can become unusually persistent, and be the object of more systematic and organised dissemination through mass media. Conspiracy theories share many features of these 'solidified rumours' (Allport and Postman, 1947, p. 167), in that they form part of a society's cultural heritage and can be invoked to shed light on events (usually dramatic ones) to which they appear to apply.

An important feature of the research on rumour is that, unlike the individual differences approach examined in Section 3, it is concerned with conspiracy theories as stories that people tell, recognising the inherently social and interpersonal nature of both people themselves and the stories they share. The creation and transmission of rumours is seen as a collective problem-solving or sense-making process, rather than as an outcome of individual psychological processes (Bordia and DiFonzo, 2005). Also, there is greater recognition that rumours, including conspiracy theories, perform certain social and psychological functions. The question arises, then: what psychological benefits do conspiracy theories bring that motivate people to believe in them?

4.3 Motivational factors in conspiracy theories

In the literature on motivational factors that contribute to the popularity of conspiracy theories, an important place is occupied by the notion of self-esteem, which you previously encountered in Chapter 4. Specifically, it has been argued that conspiracy theories allow a group's self-esteem to be protected from potentially damaging inferences. For example, the continuing presence of conspiracy theories about minority ethnic and religious groups (such as about Jewish influence on politics,

Scapegoating
A psychological dynamic whereby, in frustrating and stressful situations, a group displaces its aggression by blaming out-groups for the situation.

the economy, the media, and so on), might be seen as an example of the psychological dynamic of **scapegoating** (e.g. Kruglanski, 1987). Scapegoating is when, in frustrating and stressful situations (e.g. in periods of economic hardship or war) in which the true causes of some social strain are unclear or out of reach, a group displaces its aggression by placing the blame for the situation on out-groups, typically minorities (Hovland and Sears, 1940). Thus, conspiracy theories about minorities represent the rationalisation of the majority group's displaced aggression and a means of externalising feelings of hostility and avoiding self-blame (Young, 1990; Goertzel, 1994).

Another motivational factor that draws people to conspiracy theories is the illusion of control (Bains, 1983). Rumours of conspiracy have been shown to flourish in times of war, social crisis or economic disaster, when available canons of explanation prove inadequate for explaining what is going on (Nkpa, 1975). The driving force behind rumours of conspiracy is that they bring relief to those among whom they are circulated: they restore the sense that the world is ordered. Because conspiracy theories attribute the causes of events to someone's volition and design, they imply that events are ultimately manageable and are not contingent on random and unforeseeable events, or a complex network of uncontrollable causal factors (Bains, 1983; Keeley, 1999; Kalichman, 2009). What is more, they imply a straightforward (although not always easy) solution: all that is needed is for the conspiracy to be exposed and its architects eliminated, and good will prevail over evil. Therefore, although conspiracy theories often seem threatening, they contain within them an optimistic, albeit somewhat naive, message.

However, probably the most important and the most obvious benefit that conspiracy theories bring to those who engage with them is the feeling of 'self-assurance and superiority towards the non-initiated' (Heins, 2007, p. 792). Because conspiracy theorists assume that those who believe the official, non-conspiratorial explanations have fallen victim to the orchestrated campaign of mass manipulation, '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' (Young, 1990, p. 156). The conviction that one is in possession of an unprecedented insight into the working of the world, while everyone else is wrong, is potentially a huge generator of self-esteem. It offers compensation for 'what might otherwise be insupportable feelings of powerlessness' (Barkun, 2006, p. 35).

Scapegoating may serve a useful psychological function for people in stressful situations

Crucially, however, being 'in the know' has its own interpersonal, social dimension: the fact that one is in the know becomes especially important when it is recognised *by others*. As research on rumour-mongering points out, knowledge about how the world works, contained in rumours of conspiracy, operates as the 'currency of power and influence'; it brings prestige and esteem through communication with others (Bordia and DiFonzo, 2005, p. 93). This is why conspiracy theories are never just individual beliefs: they are pieces of information to be traded and exchanged, debated and contested.

The fact that conspiracy theories are shared, especially among communities of believers, means that self-esteem generated through engagement with conspiracy theories has a collective dimension. Conspiracy theorists, although a diffuse group, tend to perceive themselves, as a collective, to be resourceful and competent, and 'part of a genuinely heroic elite group who can see past the official version duplicated for the benefit of the lazy and inert mass of people by the powers that be' (Aaronovitch, 2009, p. 10).

5 Summary

The term 'conspiracy theory' (and, by extension, identifying a person as a 'conspiracy theorist') is not a neutral label, as it is exclusively applied to ideas about conspiracies that do not have a factual basis. Psychologists (and others, such as sociologists) have been interested for many years in why people would believe – often passionately – in things that are demonstrably false, such as the claim that no Jews died in the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks. Much of the research into conspiracy theories has tried to find individual explanations, such as correlations between belief in conspiracy theories and personality characteristics, or differences between conspiracy theory believers and non-believers. So far, however, there is little evidence that such correlations or differences exist: in many studies, people who believe in conspiracy theories do not seem to be very different from people who do not. Part of the explanation for this may be that research using questionnaire methods has not adequately differentiated believers from non-believers, for example by not being clear what 'moderate' belief in conspiracy theories means, and by mainly studying people with moderate or low belief in conspiracy theories. Relatively little research has yet been done on people with extremely strong beliefs in conspiracy theories.

Another important issue is that psychological research on conspiracy theories tends to focus on ordinary, everyday psychological processes, such as biased assimilation (a form of confirmation bias) and the major event–major cause heuristic. It is also necessary to consider social, not just individual, psychological processes. Conspiracy theories are not merely individual beliefs, quietly held, but are shared, discussed, argued and counter-argued. They are cultural products that help people to communicate and understand ideas, and try to make sense of a complex world. They can also serve a protective psychological function, both for groups who can displace blame for adverse events or circumstances by scapegoating and for individuals who can gain personal self-assurance by feeling that they are 'in the know'. This latter aspect of belief in conspiracy theories may be related to self-esteem, perhaps providing a way in which the social and individual elements of conspiracy theories can be reconciled.

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