

Believing or Disbelieving Leaders and Experts – The Dangerous Influence of Conspiracy Theories

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“One key element of any conspiracy theory is pattern perception - an assumption about how people and events are causally connected ... Understanding the world by identifying cause and effect helped our ancestors to recognize threats and opportunities, to foresee the consequences of their actions, and to strategically adjust their behavior to fit the demands of the situation. Whereas many of the patterns that people perceive are real and functional to internalize, **people sometimes mistakenly perceive patterns that do not exist**”. (National Institute of Health, nd1)

Humans are social beings - people have a strong natural tendency to affiliate with others and have a fundamental need to belong to social groups (Van Prooijen, 2018). This need becomes stronger when there is a perceived threat, such as Covid, terrorism or war. As this affiliation process occurs, so our brains form US/THEM dichotomies - the group we are part of and other groups we are not (Robert Sapolsky, 2017), including group differentiation based on race, gender and societal status. Sapolsky describes how quickly and tenuously people connect with and trust others into so-called in-groups and identify with (and distrust) out-groups. In-groups are considered good, and out-groups are generally considered bad and potentially dangerous.

We Are All Just Human

We would suggest that this process of differentiation might be built into the fundamental neural processes that occurs in human beings. Founded in the Amygdala, there is a wired-in ongoing assessment of that which is threatening to us. This assessment, in turn, might be reliant, in turn, on the three “semantic differential” categories identified by Osgood (1957) many years ago. Is the potentially threatening entity positively or negatively oriented toward my personal welfare (good or bad)? Second, is this entity active or passive with regard to their relationship to me? Third, is this entity relatively strong or weak in relationship to me? If group differentiation yields a “Them” that is bad, active and strong, then this group is truly to be feared and can readily become the focus of a conspiracy. In terms used by the so-called “chaos theorists”, the Amygdala-embedded assessment of the menacing “other” can be a “strange attractor” that not only draws our attention, but also our energy, thoughts and emotions.

This process unfolds naturally and largely unconsciously to most people. Douglas and her associates (Douglas, et. al., 2016) conclude that “conspiracy theories result from the basic human tendency to categorize the world into ingroups and outgroups and from the corresponding desire to protect one’s ingroup from powerful outgroups that might be dangerous”. While this process is innate to humans, and has a survival component, it can also have major negative outcomes for both in-groups and outgroups, particularly when people’s susceptibility to conspiracy theories is manipulated by unscrupulous leaders for their own benefit. In particular, how some unscrupulous leaders undermine leaders and experts in out-groups who put forward opposing ideas.

Jan-Willem Van Prooijen (2018) describes the process of development of a conspiracy theory: “The first (step) is that conspiracy theory (believers) demonizes outsiders. Extremist fringe groups make rather sharp distinctions between “us” versus “them”, and conspiracy theories enable these groups to solidify a strong identity among their members by fueling aversion against different groups. The second process is that conspiracy theories enable extremist groups to discredit criticism of the group. Dissenting voices may threaten the cohesion of extremist groups, but conspiracy theories enable these groups to portray critics as part of a hostile conspiracy.

Third, conspiracy theories can give extremist fringe groups the feeling that violence is the only remaining option to protect themselves and their way of life. More specifically, conspiracy theories can add to the sense that the group – or the cause that the group stands for – is under imminent attack by a hostile conspiracy, that there is an urgent need for an adequate response, and that a peaceful reaction is unlikely to be effective” (Van Prooijen, 2018).

Researchers hypothesize that conspiracy theories have been a part of human psychology forever – they are a natural function of people attempting to understand a complex and increasingly fast changing world and developing reasoning in a protective manner. In terms of the formal definition of a conspiracy theory, there is always some form of threat that is omnipresent, multifaceted and complex. People viscerally respond to these threats by attempting to identify patterns, causality and culpability.

“Such illusory pattern perception is a result of the evolved human tendency to make sense of the world and, by extension, could produce a sensitivity to conspiracy theories”
Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms - PMC
(nih.gov)

These threats are almost always perceived to be orchestrated by powerful individuals in out-groups. When leaders and experts associated with these out-groups attempt to explain the dynamics of what is emerging (like Covid19, terrorist threats, economic hardship etc.) they are almost always disbelieved by in-groups – in effect, any expert attempting to explain away a threat, is perceived as part of the threat.

Conspiracy theorists are almost always at odds with experts in the specific field of science involved in dealing with threatening social issues such as Covid, other diseases, terrorism (9/11) and disasters such as war or assassinations (Joseph E. Uscinski (2018a). For example, Uscinski describes, going back to 1956, observers noted that science and experts were often powerless at the hands of conspiracy theories. One can imagine the frustration experienced by experts and medical scientists such as Doctor Anthony Fauci when confronted by angry cynics who reject almost all scientific logic and reasoning ultimately to their own detriment.

The Nature and Function of Conspiracy Theories

Uscinski (2018a) describes a conspiracy theory as an explanation of events – past, current or potential future – that includes the notion that a small group of powerful and secretive people are acting for their own diabolical benefits and to the disadvantage of society in general (or at least to the in-group). These powerful individuals or groups are always considered dangerous – they have power and will leverage

that power over others that don't. Conspiracy theories, by definition, have not been proven – indeed if they are or can be proven, they are no longer considered conspiracy theories. (Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them (p. 48). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition).

Van Prooijen (2018) describes conspiracy theories as having five elements:

1. Connecting patterns – Any conspiracy theory explains events by establishing nonrandom connections between actions, objects, and people. A conspiracy theory assumes that the chain of incidents that caused a suspect event did not occur through coincidence.
2. Agency – A conspiracy theory assumes that a suspect event was caused on purpose by intelligent actors: There was a sophisticated and detailed plan that was intentionally developed and carried out.
3. Coalitions – A conspiracy theory always involves a coalition or group of multiple actors, usually but not necessarily humans (examples of nonhuman conspiracy theories are The Matrix and the “alien lizard” conspiracy theories). If one believes that a single individual, a lone wolf, is responsible for a suspect event, this belief is not a conspiracy theory – for the simple reason that it does not involve a group conspiring against others for their personal benefit.
4. Hostility – A conspiracy theory assumes the suspected coalition to pursue goals that are evil, selfish, or otherwise not in the public interest. Certainly people may sometimes suspect a benevolent conspiracy, and benevolent conspiracies indeed do exist (for example, as adults we conspire every year to convince children of the existence of Santa Claus), but these would not be considered conspiracy theories.
5. Continued secrecy – Conspiracy theories are about coalitions that operate in secret. With “continued” secrecy, ... that the conspiracy has not yet been exposed by hard evidence, and hence its assumed operations remain secret and uncertain. A conspiracy that is exposed and hence proven true is no longer a “theory”; instead, it is an established example of actual conspiracy formation. Conspiracy theories are thus, by definition, unproven.

Looking for threats and finding enemies – we do it automatically

The US versus THEM psychology (creating in-groups and out-groups) involves inflating the positive aspects of US groups – we are better, smarter, more moral and more effective at almost everything than “those other people”. Over time, a sense of reciprocity and re-affirmation develops within the in-group – we want and need to be similar in our thinking and behavior to feel more closely bound together and safe. People in the in-group trust one another. This powerful driver of US/THEM works the opposite in terms of viewing THEMs – who are seen as “threatening, hostile, untrustworthy”.

This unconscious process, in-built to humans, is described by object relations theorists such as Fairbairn and Klein (Ogden, 1986) as a primitive “splitting” function. It begins in early childhood with the separation of the “good mother” (who responds to and fulfills all our needs as a child) from the “bad mother” (who holds back from us and restricts some of our behaviors).

As parents, we need to serve both the “good” and “bad” functions in order to protect our child and help them gradually (by providing a safe container) confront the challenges of “reality.” Yet, the “ghost” of this splitting function lingers with us, even as we mature. Especially under conditions of stress and uncertainty we are pulled back to splitting the world we confront into “good” and “bad” (or perhaps into good/bad, active/passive and strong/weak).

As adults, we find that the splitting function rarely is adaptivity. In fact, it is potentially dangerous and even self-destructive to our well-being. We are now well-served when we automatically distrust and disbelieve out-groups and their leaders and experts simply because they are not part of our in-group. Similarly, we can trust and believe non-experts (and sometimes charlatans) simply because they are members of our in-group. And there is a downward spiral from there – as Dutch psychologist, Jan-Willem van Prooijen (2018) notes, people who are inclined to distrust other people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than people who are inclined to trust other people. Furthermore, people tend to specifically believe in conspiracy theories about groups that are ideologically dissimilar to themselves.

“Conspiracy theory adherence is related to distrust of people in general” (Researchgate.net), and especially scientists and other experts touting information that may contradict an in-groups beliefs. Conspiracy theorists are almost always at odds with experts in the specific field of science involved – for example, going back to 1956, observers noted that science and experts were often powerless at the hands of conspiracy theories. As the Oregonian newspaper noted in 1956 after ten of twelve fluoridation measures across the state were defeated leading to increased tooth decay in towns that banned fluoride in drinking water (Uscinski, 2018b). Of course, we only have to look back to our very recent past where conspiracy theories related to Covid19 have led to the deaths of many thousands of people.

How do conspiracy theories occur?

When there is a crisis, such as a terrorist attack, Covid or a war in Ukraine, and circumstances are rapidly changing and people feel out of control and scared, they are more likely to interpret the changing dynamics as part of a conspiracy by powerful “out-group” people attempting to leverage advantage over them for their own sinister benefits. As circumstances change, so cause-and-effect connections are made in an attempt to understand and make sense of what is unfolding. Psychologists would say that the anxiety associated with a crisis tends to produce defensive protection. If the crisis tends to linger and is not resolved, then the defensive strategy becomes increasing “regressive” (primitive, child-like). Cause-and-effect assessments become distorted, with the cause of crisis being assigned to the “out-group.” Sense-making is framed exclusively as We/They.

As Van Prooijen notes “Conspiracy theories appeal to a basic, dark fear that we all are string puppets under the control of powerful, sinister, and invisible forces. Conspiracy theories refer to hidden, secret, and malignant organizations that influence our lives without us being aware of it... Negative emotions – particularly feelings of fear and uncertainty – form a key causal factor to explain why conspiracy theories are prevalent among large segments of the population. These negative emotions explain why conspiracy theories flourish in the wake of societal crisis situations”.

The risk with these beliefs is that people tend to disbelieve experts and scientists simply because they are seen as members of out-groups – if they are not part of OUR group, they must be part of the threat. As Uscinski notes (2018a), “Sizable portions of the public reject the science on vaccines, GM foods, fluoride, and climate change due to belief in conspiracy theories. Some conspiracy theories accuse scientists of being involved in a scam to defraud, injure, or kill the public ... there exists a sizable distrust of science and scientists”. In most cases, these beliefs are self-defeating in that they potentially harm the believers.

Van Prooijen observes that “Uncertainty about the future, feelings of alienation, fast-changing power structures in society, rapid technological advancement, or a deep-rooted distrust towards formal authorities can all stimulate conspiracy theories. Negative emotions elicit sense-making processes in which people assume the worst, increasing people’s suspicious feelings towards powerful, dissimilar, or distrusted outgroups”. An accelerator of these suspicions amongst vulnerable people is where manipulative leaders of these in-groups fuel these fears and stoke division for their own ends.

Depending on the severity of the uncertain times (at least perceived as uncertain by the in-group), people become hyper-sensitive and aware of potential perceived threats. This can often lead them, as Van Prooijen notes, to: “perceive patterns in what actually are coincidences, and feelings of fear and uncertainty exacerbate such illusory pattern perception. Studies for instance show that when people lack control, they not only start seeing conspiracy threats, but they also start seeing patterns in other stimuli, such as images in random noise, patterns in stock market information, and superstition”.

They then tend to connect these random occurrences into a connected pattern that is entirely false and often absurd. It is often observed that those who believe in conspiracy theories reject “facts”, however in their eyes, this is not the case – indeed, connecting the “perceived patterns” that Van Prooijen describes is often an argument used by believers that non-believers do not use facts. Conspiracy believers connect disparate, random “facts”, where there is no real connection, into an elaborate and complex story and accuse disbelievers of ignoring the “clear cause and effect” relationship amongst these pieces of information.

What kinds of people tend to believe in conspiracy theories?

As we noted in our previous essay on authoritarianism, it is much too easy to identify those who embrace a conspiracy theory as somehow being “stupid”, “uneducated” or somehow “infected” from birth with a proclivity toward conspiracy. There is really no such thing as a “conspiratorial personality” — just as it is hard to attribute all forms of authoritarianism to some widespread breakout of the “authoritarian personality.” When we offer these simplistic explanations, then we are guilty of the same distortion of cause-and-effects and the same We/They mentality that we are assigning to the conspirators. We are just as vulnerable to anxiety and regression as those we have identified as evil conspirators.

While popular media tend to portray conspiracy theory believers as somewhat crazy, but as Van Prooijen describes, “large portions of normal, law-abiding, well-functioning citizens believe these conspiracy theories. Furthermore, while conspiracy theories are slightly more common in the lower educated segment of society, they are by no means exclusive to this segment, as they also emerge among high-profile managers, actors, scientists, lawyers”. However, it is difficult to dismiss some level of “craziness” when belief in bazaar conspiracy theories and dismissal of expert scientists and experienced leaders in turn damages the conspiracy believers.

Indeed, Douglas and her associates (2016) suggest that the “drawbacks of conspiracy theories do not seem to be readily apparent to people who lack the ability or motivation to think critically and rationally. In cognitive psychology, rationality is defined as thinking, acting, speaking, reasoning or taking a decision in conformity with a normative (scientific) theory (Researchgate.net). In this context, conspiracy believers who believe conspiracy theories without question fail the “rationality” test.

What does this mean? On the one hand, we find that conspiracy belief is correlated with lower levels of analytic thinking (Swami, et. al., 2014) and lower levels of education (Douglas, et al., 2016). On the other hand, this doesn't mean that thinking skills and education account for conspiratorial perspectives. Correlation is about relationships, not about causation. Lower education levels, for instance, tend to correlate with lower socio-economic level. This lower level on the totem pole might account much more toward the proclivity toward conspiracy, than does educational level. Furthermore, when a person lives continually under stress (as do people with low paying jobs or no jobs at all), we know that cognitive functions tend to decline. Psychoanalysts speak of this as regression and note it's profound psychodynamic damage to the individual and to the groups in which these individuals function.

This complex set of factors that contribute to the creation of a conspiratorial mind-set is evident in cross-societal analyses of conspiracy. "In sum, [according to Van Prooijen] conspiracy theories flourish particularly among people at the edges of the political spectrum in modern democracies – specifically, the populist left and the populist right. Van Prooijen is focusing specifically on American and European societies.

Conspiracy theories are relatively more pronounced at the political left in countries where the left tends to be more radical (e.g., parts of Latin America) and relatively more pronounced at the political right in countries where the right tends to be more radical (e.g., the US). Indeed, the political polarization seen in US politics in recent decades has added to the potential for political extremes to develop and believe conspiracy theories, rejecting information and expert advice from scientists and experienced leaders in various fields (medical, climate, economics etc.) simply on the basis that these experts and leaders are part of out-groups and are therefore likely part of the conspiracy.

The limitations in critical thinking and logic are apparent in people and groups who attempt to sense-make through simple reasons—this is where regression in cognitive functions is evident. The level of regression can be quite amazing. Reasoning, for instance, is deeply flawed in the case of Pizzagate where QAnon believers accept a reality in which high-profile Democrats are sexually abusing children at a Washington, D.C. pizzeria.

This outrageous reasoning was not benign. It led to an armed attack on the establishment by a gunman who believed the theory. As Douglas and her associates (Douglas, et. al., 2016) suggest, people who tend to believe these conspiracies "instead of appreciating the complexity of many developments in society, extremist ideologies assert that societal problems occur for simple reasons – for instance, because they are caused deliberately by corrupt outgroups".

This view is somewhat in contrast to the "connecting the dots" notion where some conspiracy theories, like QAnon, is made up of a complex array of disconnected events and people. However, what Douglas is reflecting is that "simple reasons" are cause and effect solutions often identified by people who lack critical thinking. Indeed, Jay Cullen (2018) notes that

... there are people that because of their (lack of) educational background, past experiences, and tendency to accept conspiracy theories will simply not accept scientifically derived information from experts (that conflicts with their in-group views). They reject scientific expertise a priori and cannot be brought to change their opinion with factual information when their opinion on a matter is not fact based.

But Van Prooijen warns that "One of the main mistakes that one can make in explaining conspiracy beliefs is to dismiss them as pathological. Instead, ... conspiracy theories emerge from regular and

predictable psychological responses to feelings of uncertainty and fear”. While Van Prooijen may be correct in this viewpoint, that research (described below) also suggests that people with higher levels of education and analytical thinking skills in particular, are able to mentally step back from feelings and thoughts of anxiety and “think about their thinking” in a more rationale manner and come to some kind of realization that a secret cabal of Democratic, Satan-worshipping child molesters, operating in the basement of a pizza parlor (referring to the QAnon conspiracy theory) is probably unlikely.

A Mistake? Maybe not!

While Van Prooijen believes that it is a mistake to dismiss belief in conspiracy theories as “pathological”, recent research suggests the opposite. Research by Enders and his associates (Enders, et. al., 2022), suggests a link between conspiracy theory believers and anti-social personality disorder:

The public endorsement of conspiracy theories and misinformation by prominent trusted leaders may connect anti-social, conflictual people to those ideas, subsequently motivating them to act... Some conspiracy theories appeal to people who have anti-social and nonnormative traits and who exhibit anti-social behaviors. This might explain why it is so difficult to ‘correct’ some people’s conspiracy theory beliefs: those people are not open to correction or negotiation.

This is an important finding in the sense that the estimated number of people afflicted with this disorder range from over 3% of the US population to over 70% of certain subgroups (for example, males with alcohol use disorders and substance abusers). Symptoms of this disorder are quite serious. As noted by the Mayo Clinic (2022) this includes people who have a tendency to manifest the following:

- Disregard for right and wrong
- Persistent lying or deceit to exploit others
- Using charm or wit to manipulate others for personal gain or personal pleasure
- Arrogance, a sense of superiority and being extremely opinionated
- Recurring problems with the law, including criminal behavior
- Repeatedly violating the rights of others through intimidation and dishonesty
- Hostility, significant irritability, agitation, aggression or violence
- Lack of empathy for others and lack of remorse about harming others
- Failure to consider the negative consequences of behavior or learn from them
- Aggression toward people and animals
- Destruction of property
- Deceitfulness
- Theft
- Serious violations of rules

Clearly, these are potentially troubled and dangerous people who require help – however, leaders and experts with nefarious intent are much more easily able to influence individuals with these traits to believe conspiracy fabrications and take actions to injure others and ultimately themselves.

Are Conspiracy Theories Dangerous?

In a situation in which one group feels threatened by another group (perceived as an enemy and identified as enemies by unscrupulous leaders), the potential for distrust, anger and violence is heightened. As described above, belief in conspiracy theories can have dangerous consequences. For

example, the frequently quoted Pizzagate conspiracy theory where QAnon proponents believed that high-profile Democrats (in particular, the Clintons) were sexually abusing children at a Washington D.C. pizzeria, eventually led to an armed attack by a gunman, Edgar Maddison Welch, who believed the theory and wanted to protect children from abuse. This is just one of many such events extensively researched and documented.

Conspiracy theory believers do society an injustice by undermining confidence in experienced leaders, scientists and experts in general, fostering doubt on important issues related to health and safety amongst other important topics. Joseph E. Uscinski (2018a) observes that:

..... Conspiracy theorists are often accused of being anti-science. There is something to this claim. Sizable portions of the public reject the science on vaccines, GM foods, fluoride, and climate change amongst other fact based scientifically well-researched topics, painting scientific experts as “baffled. By undermining public confidence in the scientific method and the expertise of the scientific community in this way believers can place themselves and others in harm’s way.

The impact which conspiracy theories have is widespread—impacting society at all levels.

The personal damage of conspiracy

Van Prooijen tells how belief in conspiracy theories concerning the pharmaceutical industry can lead to people not having their children vaccinated and thereafter getting seriously ill. This is also true for Covid-19 where people have died needlessly for believing that Covid vaccines are part of a grand conspiracy by government and the pharmaceutical industry, rejecting evidence-based research and expert advice from scientists in countries around the world.

Conspiracy theories can even be purposely used as a weapon against enemy out-groups, as we are seeing play out in the Russian attack on Ukraine, in which the Russian leadership describe Ukrainians as “Nazi’s”, and less than human, thus justifying atrocities against civilians. Machiavellian leaders are able to exploit the gullibility of followers who blindly follow their every word against the advice from other leaders and experts simply because these leaders and experts are not part of the in-group.

Van Prooijen indicates that conspiracy theories (in their perceived threat to the in-group) can give extremist fringe groups the feeling that violence is the only remaining option. More specifically, conspiracy theories can add to the sense that the group – or the cause that the group stands for – is under imminent attack by a hostile enemy and there is an urgent need for a response, often violent, and that a peaceful reaction is unlikely to be effective”. Indeed, as we have seen with initial finding of the January 6th Commission, conducting the investigation into the attack on the US Capital, a number of the individuals and groups under investigation have discussed and planned the use of violence in this event.

While conspiracy theory believers and backers can clearly cause violence and physical damage, they can also cause psychological damage. For example, the far-right media personality Alex Jones, who fostered a conspiracy theory about the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, suggesting they were staged, caused immense distress to the families who lost children in that event. These fabrications foster distrust in the media reporting on these events and in the leaders and experts who are responsible to dealing with these tragedies.

The Sandy Hook families are currently, at time of writing, pursuing legal damages against Alex Jones. It is apparent that Jones did not actually believe that the shooting was staged (effectively he has admitted as such), but rather apparently promoted this conspiracy to attract listener and viewership to his extreme right wing Infowars media platform. The Sandy Hook families have claimed that his conspiracy theories were a “profit-driven campaign”. Jones now claims that he no longer believes the shooting was staged. This is an example of Machiavellian influencers who foster conspiracy theories amongst their gullible followers, who then believe them without question or logical consideration, and then cause harm to out-groups.

Conspiracy theories cause damage by casting doubt on information provided by experts and leaders by framing these experts and scientists as “baffled” at best and fraudulent and malicious at worst. They foster division between groups and the leaders and experts in these groups. These beliefs can be harmful, even fatal, when groups of people rush down the “rabbit-hole” of myopic belief. As with the perpetrators of violence at the Capital on January 6th and in the case of those who perpetrate conspiracy theories for personal gain, those who foster conspiracy theories that cause damage are increasingly being treated as criminals.

The organizational damage of conspiracy

Everything we have described about conspiracy theories to this point has been in the context of a country or society. However, anyone who has worked in a large organization has likely experienced the problem of extreme gossiping. In her insight-filled account of women working in 1970s organizations, Rosabeth Kanter (1977) identifies the gossip network in most organizations as being the primary way in which women working as secretaries and clerks communicate with one another. Furthermore, these women (without much formal power) often can influence their bosses (who do hold formal power), by having access to this gossip network (which often contains information that is not meant for public consumption).

While the face-to-face gossip network of the 1970s has been replaced in recent years by the introduction of the computer (and the departure of secretaries and clerks), there is still a powerful network operating in most organizations that provide the powerless members of the organization with some power. This network might even help keep an organization agile and responsive to fast changing conditions. We find in many developmental analyses of communities, that “natural networks” often help those living in the community to receive and deliver help, while also obtaining the “true” information needed for the delivery or reception of support.

There is the other side of the gossip network. It can also contribute to formation of intra-organizational conspiracies. It seems that gossiping has many of the hallmarks and origins of conspiracy theories—and as a result can have damaging results. Indeed, as business consultants, both of us have experienced the damaging effects of “conspiratorial gossiping” in workplace environments. In one case, for instance, it was an individual leader (similar to the role world leaders play in stimulating conspiracy theories for their own malevolent objectives) in an international energy company, fostering false stories about other leaders and their intentions. The results were extremely damaging to the people and the project. Moreover, research has demonstrated that when an employee is bullied in the workplace, they are much more susceptible to believing conspiracy theories (Staloch, nd).

As Brian Gallagher (2020) concludes: “Conspiracy thinking isn’t just a result of information suppression or mis- and disinformation saturation in wider society, of course. It can also fester in the relatively small

confines of the workplace, corroding any sense of trust or collaborative spirit in an organization. Conspiracy beliefs can thrive when workers in businesses are relatively powerless, having little responsibility or control over their duties, and face uncertainty concerning things like the motives of new management. Employees in these circumstances are liable to suspect that managers may, for example, conspire to hire a particular person for a job, or coordinate in getting a worker fired". Brian Gallagher (Conspiracy Thinking in the Workplace Isn't Harmless Gossip – Ethical Systems).

Douglas and Leite (2016) offer the following comment:

Conspiracy theories decrease organizational identification. If an organization is riddled with perceptions of conspiracy, such as beliefs that managers are deliberately trying to harm employees, this is likely to weaken the importance of the organization to the individual and reduce the positive self-esteem they derive from it."

The findings by Douglas and her associates (Douglas, et al. 2016) "suggest that managers and employees may need to be mindful of the effects that conspiracy theories could have on the workplace. Considering Conspiracy theories in organizations and the potential costs of (employee) turnover, and the negative effects of low commitment and job satisfaction on behaviours at the workplace such as organizational citizenship behaviour, it would be a mistake for members of an organization to dismiss organizational conspiracy theories as idle gossip or rumors with little consequence".

Leadership coaches and consultants are in a unique position to counter organizational conspiracy gossiping given that their roles are not "line" positions and are most often trusted advisors. They also often cross organizational structure boundaries and formal roles. They can then "follow the conspiracy dialogue" to its source and provide coaching and advice on how reduce gossiping and alert, coach and advise leaders on the potential threat these conspiracy theories pose, and their potential impact on the organization's performance.

Leaders, for example, can mistakenly but brazenly stimulate conspiracy gossiping by engaging in cost cutting retrenchments. This organizational strategy has been frequently engaged in recent years. One of us was consulting for a long period of time to a large technology company. An announcement was made by a new senior executive about restructuring of the global business unit. Immediately, this stimulated questions about the potential for redundancies and lay-offs.

The senior executive emphatically stated that there would be no lay-offs, yet within three months extensive lay-offs were announced. This perceived deception caused a cascade of conspiracy gossiping which destroyed trust in this new leader and in the organization as a whole. The explosion of conspiracy theory gossiping that followed was massive as thousands of employees began to worry about their own careers as well as disbelieving their own divisional leaders. The amount of emotional energy and time spent on conspiratorial gossiping sapped productivity and damaged careers.

How to Reduce the Risks Associated with Belief in Conspiracy Theories.

The solution to problems that emerge from belief in conspiracy theories is difficult to develop and implement given the societal and human psychology-based etiology of these beliefs. When groups bond together and find meaning and purpose in these conspiracy theories, attempting to demonstrate how ridiculous these beliefs are is, in essence, attacking their sense of self, and their group affinity. Often, no amount of fact-based convincing and scientific evidence from experts and leaders will penetrate that

barrier – these individuals want and need to believe it. However, based on the research, here are some short and long-term potential solutions:

Short term: While people are free to believe conspiracy theories, they must be held accountable if they cause damage and break the law as a result

If conspiracy theory makers or believers cause damage as a result of these beliefs, they must be held accountable. An example of this approach is the case of Jake Anjeli, also known as the “QAnon Sharman” who was amongst the group that stormed the Capital on January 6th, 2021. The message sent in his prosecution is that it is ok to believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory, but it is not acceptable to justify breaking the law in its defense. Similarly, with the far-right conspiracy theorist creator, Alex Jones (noted above), propagating conspiracy theories that harm people will likely result in lawsuits.

Clearly, the hundreds of people who stormed the US Capitol on January 6th, based on conspiracy theories propagated by political leaders and their attorneys, will also be held accountable – there must be consequences for harmful acts based on belief in these conspiracy theories. In organizational settings, employees who foster conspiracy gossiping that damages productivity and undermines leadership credibility should be held accountable.

Long-term: Learning analytical thinking

Education levels, and analytical thinking skills in particular, predict who is more likely to believe conspiracy theories: “People with high education are less likely than people with low education to believe in conspiracy theories”. (National Institute of Health, nd2) As we have already noted, Jay Cullen (2018) has observed that there are people who reject scientific expertise a priori and cannot be brought to change their opinion, even in the face of factual information from credible experts and leaders. Van Prooijen suggests that “improving people’s capacity to recognize when conspiratorial allegations are implausible” is critical to mitigating this problem. Indeed, “... increasing rationality and offering rational arguments may help in reducing their appeal... Analytic thinking reduces the tendency to believe conspiracy theories, and, consistently, efforts to stimulate analytic thinking (e.g., education) are associated with decreased conspiracy beliefs.

Van Prooijen continues:

Consistently, research found that education level is associated with disbelief in paranormal phenomena, a finding that was mediated by analytic thinking—that is, deliberative and conscious information processing. These arguments are relevant for belief in conspiracy theories, which is correlated with belief in paranormal phenomena.

Clearly, improving analytical thinking and logic skills in large populations is a long-term strategy, however, given the potential damage that conspiracy theories can cause, even when refuted by the most trusted experts and scientists in the world, this long game is essential.

Scrutiny and accountability by and of social media

As Van Prooijen observes, belief in conspiracy theories is not a recent phenomenon, they have been around since the beginning of humankind. However, “modern communication technologies increase the speed through which people learn about conspiracy theories”, although he also suggests that it is unlikely that these technologies increase the number of people that ultimately believe in them, which is a surprising observation in our view. Van Prooijen does not provide specific research demonstrating this

viewpoint, and my guess is that social media technologies such as Facebook, with billions of users, have the capacity to expand the reach of these conspiracy theories massively and rapidly.

Research conducted by a team from King's College London suggests that "lives are being put at risk by conspiracy theories pumped out by unregulated social media platforms - people who rely on sites such as Facebook and others for information on coronavirus are more likely to reject lockdown (guidelines) than people who access news from other more traditional sources. There are growing calls for some form of control over potentially damaging conspiracy theory information being rapidly and widely spread through social media platforms. A simple Google search on a (conspiracy theory) subject can return 16 million hits (Researchgate.net): "This overwhelming access to information can drive the way people think and their behavior", and some unscrupulous leaders clearly leverage this process.

Leadership Matters

It is unfortunate that, particularly in the political sphere, many world leaders (and their surrogates and influencers), including those in the US, use emotional messaging to foster fear and uncertainty in order to gain support from their constituents. Research demonstrates that fear and uncertainty is a huge driver of belief in conspiracy theories. Indeed, many of these leaders specifically foster conspiracy theories and misinformation to create anxiety amongst the public in a tactic to gain support – we have heard the phrase "only I" can solve this problem! If one adds to this approach (as noted in the section in education levels) a constituency that tends to be less educated and lacking in critical thinking skills, the likelihood that these hoaxes will be believed are greatly heightened:

Our results indicate that the language used by conspiracy influencers as well as their followers on Twitter is more likely to be characterized by negative emotions such as anger. In addition, we found that conspiracy influencers and their followers use language related to power, death, and religion more than their science-focused counterparts" (The language of conspiracy: A psychological analysis of speech used by conspiracy theorists and their followers on Twitter. (Fong, et al., 2021)

Van Prooijen confirms that leaders are in the most influential position to overcome this fearmongering: "If one manages to transform widespread pessimism into optimism, irrational conspiracy theories will decrease among the public. As these aversive feelings are closely coupled with feeling out of control, we propose, likewise, that making people feel in control reduces conspiracy theories. Furthermore, to the extent that information often flows through a network (such as gossip network) rather than just the formal network, those people who are situated at the "node" (cross-roads) of the network might also be quite influential (Schon, 1973). Stated from a somewhat different perspective, people working at all levels of and providing functions of all kinds in an organization must experience a sense of empowerment in order to become less suspicious. Indeed, one study finds that having participants remember a time in their life when they felt completely in control reduced (belief in) conspiracy theories as compared to a neutral baseline condition".

Obviously, there is another side to this story. It is often advantageous for certain leaders to foster fear and anxiety. This is a tragic reality that we must confront. One simply has to access online news or a social media platform to be confronted by information related to some conspiracy theory – they are everywhere, and an enquiring mind would (should) constantly question the validity of this information, but many clearly do not. With an audience that may feel under threat and anxious, and generally have

lower education levels, an unscrupulous leader simply stating that an expert, leader or influencer with opposing views is part of some nefarious plot, is often enough for large groups of people to believe it and respond defensively, if not violently.

Research into conspiracy theory belief in organizations suggests that leadership styles make a big difference. Van Prooijen (2018) summarizes this finding:

There was one leadership style that did predict reduced belief in conspiracy theories, however, and that was the participative leadership style. Leaders who give their followers a voice when important decisions need to be made and who take the input and opinions of followers seriously in their management tasks, elicited less conspiracy theories than nonparticipative leaders. The reason is that these leaders empower their followers - followers feel that they can be part of important decision-making processes and that their opinions matter.

Conclusions

A modern and effective society (whether at the personal or organizational level) cannot succeed without trusted experts and leaders. Steps to mitigate the formation and spreading of conspiracies in society and conspiratorial gossiping in organizations should be taken seriously and dealt with quickly before damage is caused. Education and specifically critical thinking skills is critical to counter unscrupulous leaders and experts from taking advantage and manipulating vulnerable populations to do their bidding. More susceptible populations (individuals with certain personality disorders) require more support and help to prevent them doing harm to others and themselves.

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