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Review

Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories

Jan-Willem van Prooijen^{1,2,3}**Abstract**

Many people believe conspiracy theories, even though such beliefs are harmful to themselves and their social environment. What is the appeal of conspiracy theories? In this contribution, I propose that conspiracy theories have psychological benefits by imbuing perceiver's worldview with meaning and purpose in a rewarding manner. Conspiracy theories enable an alternative reality in which perceivers (a) can defend a fragile ego by perceiving themselves and their groups as important, (b) can rationalize any of their beliefs and actions as legitimate, and (c) are entertained through the opportunity to uncover a mystery in an exciting tale. These are short-term benefits, however, suggesting that conspiracy theories provide people with a form of instant gratification.

Addresses¹ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands² The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR), Netherlands³ Maastricht University, NetherlandsCorresponding author: Prooijen, Jan-Willem van (j.w.van.prooijen@vu.nl)**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2022, 47:101352This review comes from a themed issue on **Conspiracy Theories (2023)**Edited by **Jan-Willem van Prooijen** and **Roland Imhoff**For complete overview about the section, refer [Conspiracy Theories \(2023\)](#)

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352>2352-250X/© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).**Keywords**

Conspiracy theories, Psychological benefits, Alternative reality, Instant gratification.

Although conspiracy theories are omnipresent, empirical research has mainly emphasized their negative effects. Believing conspiracy theories is associated with poor health choices [1–5], decreased well-being [6,7], and deteriorated social relationships [8]. Conspiracy beliefs also harm society by decreasing public support for policy aimed at addressing genuine problems such as climate change [9; but see 10] and the Covid-19 pandemic

[11,12]. Moreover, they are associated with support for populist and politically extreme movements [13–15], and violent activism [16–19]. These findings suggest a paradox: If conspiracy theories are largely harmful for perceivers and their environment, then why do so many people endorse them? The present contribution will examine how perceivers benefit psychologically from conspiracy beliefs.

While current theoretical models may imply that conspiracy theories satisfy basic psychological needs or help alleviate threats, empirical evidence does not support that people actually benefit from conspiracy beliefs in this manner. For instance, an evolutionary perspective suggests that susceptibility to conspiracy theories has been adaptive to ancient hunter–gatherers, to cope with the realistic threat of hostile coalitions. This reasoning, however, only emphasizes how conspiracy theories helped ancestors survive in a Pleistocene environment, and does not hold implications for possible psychological benefits in present-day society [20]. If anything, the evolutionary perspective implies macro-level societal benefits, by explaining why people possess mental systems that make them sensitive to signals suggesting possible collusion. Consistent with this perspective, citizens display stronger conspiracy beliefs in high-corruption than low-corruption countries [21,22].

Motivational perspectives also fall short of clarifying the psychological benefits of conspiracy beliefs. Extensive research has revealed that conspiracy beliefs increase following deprivation of existential, epistemic, and social needs [23]. These findings do not show, however, that conspiracy beliefs subsequently are successful in satisfying these needs. While conspiracy theories may help people understand their social environment when faced with existential threats, the epistemic assumption that hostile conspiracies operate in the shadows is unlikely to make them feel safe or certain. Conspiracy beliefs indeed do not reduce, and sometimes even increase, anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat [24]. Furthermore, although experiences of social exclusion increase conspiracy beliefs [25], believing conspiracy theories does not restore belongingness needs. Instead, conspiracy beliefs make people vulnerable to stigmatization [26], and predict job loss and social rejection [7]. One can even question how

comforting “denialist” conspiracy theories are: These theories may reduce feelings of existential threat in one domain (e.g., by denying the reality of climate change) yet reinforce other existential threats (e.g., the belief that authorities are deceptive).

These issues raise the question what the psychological payoff of conspiracy theories is for believers. The core of my argument is that although conspiracy beliefs may not reduce anxiety or help them maintain social relationships, they do stimulate a sense of meaning and purpose in a specific way that is psychologically rewarding. Through conspiracy theories perceivers can construct an alternative reality in which they are important and legitimate actors, participating in a spectacular narrative. In what follows I more specifically propose that conspiracy theories (1) have ego-defensive benefits by making people feel important, (2) help people rationalize their behavior and therefore make them feel legitimate, and (3) have entertainment value by stimulating feelings of excitement.

Conspiracy theories are ego-defensive

Many conspiracy theories provide alternative explanations for impactful crisis events in the world, such as pandemics, wars, or natural disasters [27]. Believing conspiracy theories therefore can install a sense of meaning and purpose by raising the impression that one is discovering something truly important. This reasoning is compatible with theoretical insights into closely related phenomena: For instance, radicalization theories stress that extreme ideological beliefs satisfy a need for significance, by making people feel important and special. People therefore are more likely to radicalize following experiences of significance loss (e.g., injustice; humiliation [28]). Likewise, conspiracy beliefs are associated with feeling unique and special, and can hence reflect positively on people’s self-perception [29,30].

It should be specified, however, that these self-related benefits of conspiracy theories do not necessarily pertain to maintenance of a positive self-concept; instead, conspiracy theories help people defend relatively fragile forms of self-perception [31]. For example, conspiracy beliefs predict instability of self-esteem (i.e., the extent to which self-esteem fluctuates over time) more strongly than level of self-esteem [32]. Moreover, conspiracy beliefs are positively associated only with an inflated sense of self, as conspiracy beliefs predict lower self-esteem but also higher narcissism [6].

A similar process can be observed in the way people derive self-worth from their group memberships, as conspiracy beliefs predict collective narcissism (i.e., an inflated perception of one’s ingroup [33,34]). Through conspiracy theories people can establish the superiority of their ingroup as compared with competing outgroups.

In sum, conspiracy beliefs can make people feel important and superior, and thus are beneficial by helping them defend a fragile sense of self-worth.

Conspiracy theories as rationalization tool

An additional way in which conspiracy theories contribute to meaning and purpose is by legitimizing people’s role in the world. Recall that conspiracy beliefs are associated with counter-normative behaviors including rejection of vaccines, reduced containment-related behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic, and antisocial behavior [3,4,18]. It is important to keep in mind that much of the evidence supporting this link is correlational. Even research showing causal effects of conspiracy theories on counter-normative behavior [11,35] does not exclude the possibility of bidirectionality: Counter-normative behavior may causally increase conspiracy beliefs. Here, I propose that the link between counter-normative behavior and conspiracy beliefs partially reflects a psychological benefit for perceivers: Conspiracy theories may be used as rationalization tool because they are flexible narratives that people can endorse, sometimes even with limited or no evidence [36]. Conspiracy theories therefore facilitate a motivated reasoning process that helps people justify (to themselves and others) their beliefs and behaviors [37].

The notion that people seek to rationalize their behavior, and therefore easily embrace conspiracy beliefs, is consistent with classic theories of cognitive dissonance [38]. The flexible nature of conspiracy theories implies that people can conveniently form them about any societal institution or group, and as such, conspiracy theories help perceivers mentally reconstrue unhealthy behaviors as healthy (e.g., justifying vaccine refusal by believing that pharmaceutical companies are dishonest), and anti-government violence as legitimate (e.g., justifying violent protests as legitimate resistance against oppressors). While these actions themselves are not beneficial—to neither believers nor society—conspiracy beliefs can imbue people’s worldview, and their actions associated with it, with a sense of legitimacy.

Various findings support the notion that people use conspiracy theories as a rationalization tool. During the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy beliefs not only predict decreased Covid-19 preventive behavior over time, but also, decreased preventive behavior predicts increased conspiracy belief over time [39]. Also, at the start of the pandemic the link between conspiracy beliefs and detrimental health behaviors was mediated by a belief to have experienced a Covid-19 infection, without evidence of a positive medical test. Apparently, conspiracy beliefs predict a motivated tendency to interpret one’s own physical discomfort as evidence of a Covid-19

infection, presumably to rationalize a worldview that downplays the dangers of the coronavirus [12].

Conspiracy beliefs also help to rationalize people's perceptions of society. In politics, people endorse conspiracy theories as a form of motivated reasoning to support their ideological beliefs and degrade competing ideologies [40,41]. Moreover, conspiracy theories help people justify the societal system that they live in—thus raising their satisfaction with it—by blaming its problems on outgroup conspiracies instead of inherent flaws in the system [42,43]. Relatedly, outgroup conspiracy theories are associated with collectivist cultural values [44–46]. In sum, conspiracy theories make perceivers feel like legitimate actors by helping them rationalize their beliefs and behaviors.

Conspiracy theories as entertainment

A third way in which conspiracy theories contributes to meaning and purpose is by creating an alternative reality that is exciting, attention-grabbing, and spectacular. Conspiracy theories typically portray an archetypical struggle between good and evil, and introduce mystery about the potentially dubious role of powerful and important societal actors (e.g., politicians; celebrities). It is therefore not surprising that the plotlines of many works of fiction—including novels, theater plays, and movies—center around conspiracies [47]. Believing conspiracy theories turns perceivers into active players in such spectacular narratives, and gives them the opportunity—much like lay detectives—to uncover a mystery. Believing conspiracy theories hence offers people entertainment.

At first blush, this psychological benefit might seem discrepant with the notion that conspiracy theories can increase negative emotions such as anxiety [24]. Note, however, that many popular sources of entertainment are likely to increase anxiety (e.g., scary movies; detective novels; gambling; bungee jumping). People often do not avoid such negative emotions; instead, people are drawn to events that provide intense emotional experiences, which may include emotions that are negative, positive, or both [48]. Such intense emotional experiences are exciting, and make people feel alive.

Research supports the notion that people experience conspiracy beliefs as entertaining. Conspiracy beliefs are associated with dispositional aversion to boredom [49], and with the more general trait sensation-seeking, reflecting people's desire for intense sensations and experiences [50]. Sensation-seeking also predicts a range of phenomena closely related with conspiracy beliefs, including radicalization and participation in violent extremist groups [51,52], and supernatural beliefs [53,54]. Moreover, conspiracy beliefs are associated with not only negative but also positive emotions [55].

Experimental studies underscore the entertainment value of conspiracy theories. Participants rated a conspiratorial text (about the Notre Dame fire or the death of Jeffrey Epstein) as more entertaining than a text describing the official account of these events. These entertainment appraisals subsequently predicted increased belief in these conspiracy theories. An additional study showed that people more strongly believed that an election event was rigged if it was described in an entertaining rather than a boring manner [50]. These findings illuminate that people find conspiracy theories entertaining, which motivates increased belief in them.

Conclusions

Why are so many people drawn to conspiracy theories? The present contribution has highlighted three complementary ways in which believing conspiracy theories may bring psychological benefits. Conspiracy theories help people defend a fragile ego by exaggerating the importance of themselves and their groups; conspiracy theories make people feel like legitimate actors by rationalizing their beliefs and behaviors; and, believing conspiracy theories entertains people by making them active participants of an exciting tale. The general process underlying these psychological benefits is the potential of conspiracy theories to imbue perceivers' worldview with meaning and purpose in a rewarding manner.

Two qualifications of these propositions are in order. First, the described processes are likely to be psychologically beneficial only in the short run. While constructing an alternative reality may be appealing as described here, a risk is that reality catches up with perceivers eventually. Many of the harmful effects of conspiracy theories emerge by promoting choices that may have negative real-life consequences for themselves and others [3,7,11]. Second, the current propositions only focus on the question how perceivers themselves benefit from conspiracy theories. How perceivers' social environment, or society at large, might benefit from conspiracy theories is a different issue. Although conspiracy theories also may have certain benefits for society—in that they can increase transparency among decision-makers, and can keep the public attentive to the possibility of actual corruption [56]—most social consequences are likely to be negative [1–5,7–12,16–20].

These considerations suggest that conspiracy theories provide a form of instant gratification to people. Somewhat analogous to smoking or gambling, conspiracy beliefs may be psychologically rewarding in the short run; but perceivers and society pay a price for them in the long run. It therefore should be emphasized that the main goal of the present contribution was to understand what makes conspiracy theories appealing despite all of

their negative effects. Recognizing that there are psychological benefits to believing conspiracy theories does not imply a recommendation to endorse them, nor is it an argument against interventions to reduce conspiracy beliefs (e.g., debunking and prebunking; [57]). The appeal of conspiracy theories notwithstanding, in the end perceivers and society benefit most from reason and truth.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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