

Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories can form a monological belief system: A self-sustaining worldview comprised of a network of mutually supportive beliefs. The present research shows that even mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively correlated in endorsement. In Study 1 ($n = 137$), the more participants believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered. In Study 2 ($n = 102$), the more participants believed that Osama Bin Laden was already dead when U.S. special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive. Hierarchical regression models showed that mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively associated because both are associated with the view that the authorities are engaged in a cover-up (Study 2). The monological nature of conspiracy belief appears to be driven not by conspiracy theories directly supporting one another but by broader beliefs supporting conspiracy theories in general.

Keywords

conspiracy theories, conspiracism, contradiction, explanatory coherence

A conspiracy theory is defined as a proposed plot by powerful people or organizations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal (Coady, 2006; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994). Popular contemporary examples include the theory that the 9/11 attacks were planned and carried out by elements within the American government (Kay, 2011) and the belief that evidence of a causal link between autism and childhood vaccination is being suppressed by an unscrupulous medical industry (Goertzel, 2010). Conspiracy theories are not by definition false; indeed, many real conspiracies have come to light over the years. Suspicions of President Nixon's involvement in a burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee began as a seemingly outlandish conspiracy theory but turned out to be true (Bale, 2007). However, conspiracy beliefs, even when wrong, are notoriously resistant to falsification, and can take on the appearance of a “degenerating research program” (Clarke, 2002, p. 136), with new layers of conspiracy being added to rationalize each new piece of disconfirming evidence.

Spurred in part by the growth of new media, conspiracism has become a major subcultural phenomenon. This shift has not gone unnoticed in academia. In recent decades, there has been an explosion of research into the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories. Much of this research interest has focused on the individual correlates of conspiracy belief, but perhaps the most consistent finding in the work on the psychology of conspiracy theories is that belief in a particular theory is strongly predicted by belief in others—even ostensibly unrelated ones (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994; Swami,

Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011). For instance, someone who believes that the American government was behind the 9/11 attacks is very likely to also believe that Princess Diana was deliberately assassinated. One proposed explanation for this connection is that beliefs in conspiracy theories somehow support one another (Goertzel, 1994). Even though the perpetrators may be different in each case, the fact that one massive, sinister conspiracy could be successfully executed in near-perfect secrecy suggests that many such plots are possible. Over time, the view of the world as a place ruled by conspiracies can lead to conspiracy becoming the default explanation for any given event—a unitary, closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a *monological belief system* (Clarke, 2002; Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010, 2011).

However, some conspiracy theories emphatically do not support one another; indeed, many provide mutually contradictory explanations for the same event. These contradictions among conspiracy theories are the focus of the present article. For instance, the theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana vary widely; some claim that she was killed by MI6, others allege that she was killed by Mohammed al-Fayed's

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