

## Handout

# Understanding Conspiracy Theories: Advanced

**Directions:** Read the article and respond to the connection questions.

Conspiracy theories are beliefs that allege secret, powerful groups control the world, mislead the public and/or are behind significant events. Some theories claim famous people who died, like Elvis and Tupac, are still alive; others that events, such as the moon landing and the sinking of the *Titanic*, were faked; and others that the world is not as we know it: the earth is flat and global warming is a hoax. At the more offensive end, some theories fuel hatred and distrust towards certain groups in society, scapegoating them for problems. There are theories, for example, that allege Jews and Muslims are behind global issues, such as COVID-19, and are intentionally trying to wipe out the white populations of Western countries.

Research has shown that large numbers of people believe in some kind of conspiracy theory. Part of this is because human brains have evolved to be able to see patterns: recognising patterns, such as which plants to eat, how to hunt prey and how to identify threats, is necessary for learning, decision making and survival. Stories are a form of pattern. They have narrative structures (a beginning, middle and end), recognisable characters (like villains and heroes), and demonstrate cause and effect (why something happens and what the outcome is). When we recognise patterns, our brain releases dopamine, a feel-good hormone, to facilitate the learning process and help us to remember information. However, this chance of dopamine reward can mean that humans see patterns where none exist and try to attach meaning to coincidences.

Research also suggests that people believe in conspiracy theories to satisfy psychological needs. They need to understand the world; to feel safe and in control; to have a sense of belonging and to feel like they are superior (the sense of knowing something others don't can increase people's self-esteem). Conspiracy theories gain prominence during times of crisis, highlighting how people seek them out when concerned to feel a sense of control (although evidence suggests that consuming conspiracy theories actually makes people feel more uncertain and less powerful, so it has the opposite effect).

Belief in one theory can lead to belief in others as conspiracy theories tend to have a common structure: they feature an 'other', a victim, a powerful group that is behind the conspiracy, a hidden agenda, and cover-up. This makes it easier for people to believe more than one conspiracy as this structure can shape how they view the world.

Social media platforms also push conspiracy theory content in a bid to maximise user watch time and keep users online for as long as possible to make more money. Public figures who promote conspiracy theories can also make money on these platforms (and others), and by selling merchandise, books and speaking at events. This means people and companies have an economic incentive for encouraging people to create and engage with content about conspiracy theories. Once people engage with one conspiracy theory online, it increases their chances of encountering others due to the way algorithms work and of diving further down the 'rabbit hole'.

It can be difficult for people to stop believing in conspiracy theories once they have taken root. Confirmation bias, which leads people to seek out information that aligns with their beliefs and reject information that does not, can prevent people from questioning conspiracy theories and accepting evidence that disproves them. Believers often claim that any evidence is proof of the conspiracy theory. Moreover, echo chambers (and the way algorithms work) on social media make it more difficult for people to be exposed to information that challenges their views.

Conspiracy theories also impact people on an emotional level: they are stories people turn to when they feel anger and distress, and the fact they contain clear villains and revolve around seeming injustice can create a sense of outrage that means people do not engage with their content critically and rationally. They can also counteract a sense of loneliness as people become part of a community of believers, connecting with others. These emotional factors can make it hard for people to stop believing in them.

While some conspiracy theories appear harmless, the underlying sense that the world is controlled by a secret group is harmful. It can create distrust in public institutions, cause people to feel like they have no agency and make people turn away from the democratic process: people who believe in conspiracy theories are less likely to vote. Such beliefs can therefore stop people from engaging in society and resolving societal problems.

Conspiracy theories have also been shown to fuel prejudice towards minority groups in general, not just those named by a conspiracy theory, and can push people towards violence, crime and extremism. Moreover, such theories can make the targets of conspiracy theories feel threatened and anxious, and less able to interact with those from outside their group, so they subsequently withdraw into their community. This reduces the chance of people mixing with, understanding and empathising with those from different social groups. Conspiracy theories therefore divide society in multiple ways.

However, conspiratorial thinking is not all negative as it can help hold those in power to account. In the past, some governments and corporations have been found to have engaged in conspiracies (this has contributed to the lack of trust that people feel towards official narratives). For example, tobacco companies engaged in disinformation campaigns to make people doubt the link between smoking and cancer (fossil fuel companies used a similar tactic to cast doubt on the fact that burning fossil fuels causes climate change). Such secrets are often revealed by whistleblowers and/or when evidence emerges. Most conspiracies, however, are not connected – they are carried out by diverse governments and corporations, rather than one small, all-powerful group.

Questioning the world around you can be helpful, but it is important to assess evidence, be open to having your mind changed and avoid accepting simple answers. Theories that suggest a small group of people control the world ignore how complex everything is. If you see problems in the world, rather than casting blame on a secretive group, think about what needs to be done to resolve them.

If someone you know has been sucked down a 'rabbit hole' of conspiracy theories, do not dismiss them as foolish; understand that they are probably invested emotionally in what they believe, listen to them and ask them questions about their beliefs to build understanding. It can also help to look for common ground, suggest looking at evidence together and help them think about what they can control.

## Connection Questions

1. What causes people to believe in conspiracy theories?
2. How might the Internet and social media help spread conspiracy theories?
3. Why is it difficult for people to stop believing in conspiracy theories?
4. What impact do conspiracy theories have on individuals who consume them? On minority groups? On society?
5. In which ways can conspiratorial thinking be helpful?
6. What can you do to avoid falling for conspiracy theories?
7. How can you engage with people who believe in conspiracy theories?