



What do we know about conspiracy theories?

Psychologists' research offers insight into why people put faith in conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

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Psychological research shows humans' tendency to perceive patterns and embrace information that meets needs for security and belonging is a driving force behind widespread irrational beliefs.

About half of Americans believe in at least one disproven conspiracy theory (Oliver, J. E. & Wood, T. J., *American Journal of Political Science* (<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>), Vol. 58, No. 4, 2014), perhaps none more provocative than QAnon, a conspiracy theory that President Trump is waging a secret war against a pedophilic ring of "deep state" elites

linked to the Democratic Party. Less absurd but more insidious claims, for instance, that COVID-19 is a hoax, are also part of the QAnon movement.

QAnon, first started in 2017 on the online message board 4chan, has since mushroomed into a web of misinformation. And of the nearly half of Americans who know about QAnon, 20% say it's somewhat or very good for the country (<https://www.journalism.org/2020/09/16/most-americans-who-have-heard-of-qanon-conspiracy-theories-say-they-are-bad-for-the-country-and-that-trump-seems-to-support-people-who-promote-them/>), 2020).

Widespread belief in conspiracy theories is cause for concern, says Karen Douglas, PhD, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent, because research links support in such theories to prejudice, violence, and terrorism. Several followers of QAnon have been charged with violent crimes, prompting the FBI to label the group a potential domestic terrorist threat in May.

Psychological research on cognition, personality, and conspiratorial narratives helps explain why the theory has taken hold, what makes it appealing, and how it might be stopped.

Motivation to believe

People believe in conspiracy theories for a variety of reasons—to explain random events, to feel special or unique, or for a sense of social belonging, to name a few.

In a series of experiments, Douglas and Jan-Willem van Prooijen, PhD, an associate professor of social and organizational psychology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, found that the tendency to perceive illusory patterns—to connect stimuli that aren't related—is part of the cognitive machinery behind irrational beliefs such as conspiracy theories (*European Journal of Social Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331>), Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017). Along those lines, some QAnon followers think that because Q is the 17th letter of the alphabet, President Trump is sending them messages when he mentions the number 17 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2018/08/02/what-makes-qanon-so-scary/>).

Q, the anonymous internet poster behind the movement, who claims to be a high-ranking U.S. intelligence official, releases cryptic breadcrumbs known as “drops” online that followers then decipher. Drops are said to explain or predict developments in the supposed war between President Trump and the alleged deep-state pedophiles. Participating in what feels like an exclusive intelligence circle can satisfy the human need for uniqueness, psychologists’ research has shown, prompting a desire to continue participating (Lantian, A., et al., *Social Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000306>), Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017).

People also turn to conspiracy theories when important psychological needs aren’t being met, says Douglas. Her research shows that such narratives can fulfill our need for certainty and security, for instance, when events seem random, and for social belonging (*Current Directions in Psychological Science* (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>), Vol. 26, No. 6, 2017).

Those findings help explain why many Americans, including QAnon supporters, have turned to extreme explanations for the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey data collected by psychologist Daniel Romer, PhD, research director at the University of Pennsylvania’s *Annenberg Public Policy Center* (<https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/>), suggest that nearly a third of U.S. adults think the coronavirus is a bioweapon created by the Chinese government (Romer, D. & Jamieson, K.H., *Social Science & Medicine* (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113356>), Vol. 263, 2020).

“Conspiracy theories make people feel as though they have some sort of control over the world,” Romer says. “They can be psychologically reassuring, especially in uncertain times.”

Research also indicates that some people are more likely to embrace conspiratorial narratives than others. Schizotypy, for example, a personality trait defined by eccentricity and suspiciousness of others, is tied to belief in conspiracy theories. People who see the world as a dangerous place and those prone to think meaningless information is profound are also more likely to embrace such narratives (Hart, J., & Graether, M., *Journal of Individual Differences* (<https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-0001/a000268>), Vol. 39, No. 4, 2018).

Some evidence suggests a link between personality and conspiracy theories. Shauna Bowes, a clinical psychology doctoral student at Emory University, and her colleagues surveyed nearly 2,000 people and found that those lower on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and humility were more likely to embrace both general conspiracy theories (statements like “the government is hiding something from us”) and concrete ones (for instance, that the Apollo moon landings were fake). People with pathological personality scores—such as high grandiosity or very low self-esteem—were even more likely to support conspiratorial narratives (Bowes, S. M., et al., *Journal of Personality* (<https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12588>), 2020).

The future of conspiracy theories

As QAnon evolves, it absorbs new theories and believers from unexpected places, including attracting online [wellness influencers](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/04/wellness-qanon-coronavirus/) (<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/04/wellness-qanon-coronavirus/>) and building a large following in Germany (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/europe/qanon-is-thriving-in-germany-the-extreme-right-is-delighted.html>). QAnon has gone dark since the U.S. presidential election (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/technology/qanon-election-trump.html>), but experts don't think this means QAnon will disappear. Believers may instead join adjacent conspiracy theory communities or more mainstream efforts to dispute election results.

“We can think of many conspiracy theories like a virus, because they take on new life as they spread,” Bowes says.

Future research should define various “flavors” of conspiracy theories, Bowes says, to understand if they attract different types of believers. She also hopes to dig deeper into interactions between the personality traits and pathological factors that predict such beliefs—and to explore how personality and beliefs develop in tandem over time.

Douglas says more work is needed to understand the long-term effects of conspiracy thinking, as well as when and why people choose to share theories. The neurological basis of conspiratorial thinking also remains largely unknown, van Prooijen says.

Dispelling conspiracy theories is a major challenge, partly because their adherents tend to distrust authority and believe that powerful people or groups are corrupt—a conviction that supporters of QAnon share.

“Conspiracy theories are ‘sticky’ and it might be ideal to inoculate against them rather than trying counterarguments after they have already stuck,” Douglas says, referencing a study she coauthored on antivaccine conspiracy theories (Jolley, D. & Douglas, K.M., *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (<https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12453>), Vol. 47, No. 9, 2014).

An inoculation effort could involve presenting scientific information on an issue, such as the safety and efficacy of a coronavirus vaccine, before people are exposed to counternarratives.

“Many people have doubts or questions about the government”—and that’s natural, says van Prooijen. “A lot can be gained by targeting people [for inoculation] who are open to conspiratorial narratives, but are also open to being persuaded otherwise.”

Further reading

[Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615)

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615>).

van Prooijen, J. M. and Douglas, K. M., *Memory Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2017

[Better the devil you know than a world you don't? Intolerance of uncertainty and worldview explanations for belief in conspiracy theories](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886916303221?via%3Dihub)

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886916303221?via%3Dihub>).

Moulding, R., et al., *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 98, 2016

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