

Why Do People Embrace Conspiracy Theories?

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Authorities are still working to determine the identities of the insurrectionists who attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, many of whom were apparently motivated by false conspiracy theories that former President Donald Trump won the 2020 election but was cheated out of his victory due to widespread election fraud.

Conspiracy theories often rely on seeing things sharply in terms of right and wrong, and that can drive people to do things they might never have contemplated before, says Peter Ditto, a professor of psychological science at the University of California, Irvine.

“Moralizing things mobilizes people to action,” he says. “If I believed that the American election had been stolen from the rightful winner, I’d probably storm the Capitol, too. It makes perfect sense if that really happened. The problem is, that didn’t happen.”

The people most likely to embrace conspiracy theories are less inquisitive and often exhibit narcissistic tendencies, such as an inflated sense of self-importance, a deep need for attention and admiration, troubled relationships, a lack of empathy for others and fragile self-esteem, according to Emory University research published in the Journal of Personality.

Nika Kabiri, an expert on human decision-making affiliated with the University of Washington in Seattle, says everyone is potentially drawn to conspiracy theories, although some far more than others.

“We’re all potentially drawn to them because we all hate uncertainty. We all don’t like the idea of not knowing why things happen. It makes us feel like we don’t have control in the world. We want closure,” she says. “It’s a natural tendency for the human brain to look for those explanations.”

A conspiracy theory is thinking that blames or explains an important event or set of circumstances on a secret plot that is usually masterminded by powerful people. Conspiracy thinking can also embrace the idea that a big secret is being kept from the public.

When a prominent person, be it a movie director or a president, transmits a conspiracy theory, Kabiri says, it is like a super spreader event, and the conspiracy theory gets a lot of exposure.

“People are adhering to these beliefs because they’re already dissatisfied,” she says. “They’re already unhappy. There’s something they want to, perhaps, explain something that doesn’t sit well with them, and the story gives them an answer.”

Times of uncertainty, such as a pandemic, can help fuel the spread of conspiracy theories.

“People, in particular, that are susceptible to conspiracy thinking, they’re susceptible to them when they feel threatened and anxious, like a lot of people do right now,” Ditto says. “When the world seems confusing and incomprehensible, which it does right now. When people are lonely and they’re seeking connection with others.”

People often latch onto conspiracy stories because they cannot accept simple explanations for life-altering events, according to Ditto.

A major conspiracy about the 9/11 terror attacks holds that the twin towers in New York fell in a controlled demolition, rather than because planes crashed into them.

Unproven speculation about the COVID-19 pandemic holds that the virus escaped from a Chinese lab and was possibly an engineered bioweapon.

Many Americans find it hard to believe that President John F. Kennedy, a larger-than-life political figure, was killed by a lone gunman, a regular guy, which is why they embrace the unproven idea that there must have been a larger conspiracy to murder the president.

The Emory researchers found that the people most likely to embrace conspiracy thinking are often less agreeable and less conscientious, while being associated with a sense of entitlement, grandiosity, depression and anxiety.

“If you are in a close-knit community, either on social media or in real life, with people who are all adhering to the same belief, there’s a commitment to that belief that’s even more intense than if you just held that alone,” Kabiri says.

Ditto says a million years of evolution pushes people to break into groups with like-minded people.

“We’re very tribal. We’re very provably attached to people who are like us. It’s very, very unusual to have a place where you’re supposed to make friends with, and connect with, and cooperate with, people who don’t look like you and don’t have the same values. Maybe they have a different religion,” Ditto says.

“The American experiment, essentially, is an attempt to work against all those evolutionary forces and move people in this positive way where they cooperate. It’s way easier to break people up.”