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ON THE MOTIVES OF BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES*

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Abstract. Conspiracy theories represent one of the phenomena of today's modern information society. They have occurred in human society in every historical period. They are nothing new, but in the 21st century, they have experienced an unprecedented boom, which is undoubtedly related to the rapid development in the field of communication and information technology, the expansion of the Internet, the massive use of social networks and the quick exchange, spread and sharing all kinds of information. For many years, conspiracy theories stood outside the mainstream interest of academics and scientific institutions. Only in the last few years has the situation changed, and initiatives have attempted to build a theoretical framework and conceptualize this construct. For this reason, we decided to contribute to current research in the field of conspiracy theories through this work and, using the relevant qualitative theoretical scientific research methods, to participate in clarifying this increasingly frequent phenomenon in modern human society.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; motives; information; modern information society

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1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have become a very widespread phenomenon in recent years. They have become one of the phenomena of today's modern society. Undoubtedly, the rapid development in communication and information technologies, systems and tools, the expansion of the Internet and the massive use of various social networks contributed significantly to this. Conspiracy theories are characterized by the fact that they deal with irrational beliefs about the illegal and threatening plans of secret societies, groups or influential people and their plots

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against ordinary people. They can be highly improbable (e.g., the claim that aliens, who have taken on human form, live among us or that the Earth is a flat plate) but also relatively plausible (e.g., that specific secret organizations regularly violate privacy laws and spy on people).

Belief in conspiracy theories has occurred in every historical period (Groh, 1987; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Although in the past the importance of anticipating real conspiracies and creating conspiracy theories was often important for human survival due to their frequent occurrence, which could lead to his death (Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018), an enormous number of current conspiracy theories are in terms of their content irrelevant and illogical. American polls show that up to 55% of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory - currently, the most common one is that a group of Wall Street bankers orchestrated the financial crisis intending to dominate the world economy (Oliver & Wood, 2014). The situation is no different in Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, or the Czech Republic, where, for example, 30 to 36% of people believe in the conspiracy theory that Jews are trying to dominate the world (Krekó, 2015).

Fundamental to the research of conspiracy thinking are those findings that point to relatively stable individual differences in the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories - a person who believes in one conspiracy theory is more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011). This tendency to believe in conspiracy theories means that despite the diversity and wide variety of conspiracy theories, there are common psychological processes behind them. Recent research works with belief in conspiracy theories as a conspiracy mindset, a mentality with specific elements typical of this thinking.

The importance of understanding and investigating this phenomenon stems not only from their irrational nature but mainly from research that has pointed to the negative connection between belief in conspiracy theories and the well-being of individuals and society as a whole. Although doctors agree that vaccines do not cause autism, many people believe otherwise and deny themselves and their children essential vaccinations, putting themselves and their health at risk (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a). Belief in conspiracy theories has also been associated with a reduced willingness to vote or engage in environmental behaviour due to the belief that global warming is a hoax (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). Belief in conspiracy theories also harms interpersonal relationships (Harambam & Aupers, 2015), is associated with the advocacy of violent protest actions (Chayinska & Minescu, 2018), with extremism and contributes to the process of radicalization and violent tendencies of extremist groups (Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

Although, in the last few years, the scope of knowledge about conspiratorial thinking and the number of actively working researchers have increased, so far, only a few initiatives have appeared that have tried to build a theoretical framework and conceptualize this construct (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018, Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018). This fact indicates that the research and development of conspiracy theory is still in its infancy. For this reason, we have decided to contribute to the current research in the field of conspiracy theories as part of our scientific research activity and, using relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research to clarify this increasingly frequent phenomenon in the modern information society.

2. Theoretical view of the development of the investigation of conspiracy theories and their definition

One of the first researchers who established and popularized the term conspiracy theory was Karl R. Popper (1949). According to him, the conspiratorial view of the world is very typical for society and developed from traditional religious ideas that gods are behind inexplicable events, which nowadays have been replaced by secret influential associations, groups, and powerful organizations. Initial descriptions of this construct occurred mainly in historical and political essays. In one of these essays, Hofstadter (1964) called conspiracy belief a paranoid style. Although he did not use the term in a medical sense, it spurred future research that found a link between belief in conspiracy theories and paranoia (Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011; Grzesiak-Feldman & Ejsmont, 2008;

Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). It was in the late 1980s that publications began to appear that included theoretical definitions and analyses of historical evidence for this phenomenon (Graumann & Moscovici, 1987). The term conspiracy theory was any alternative hypothesis, opinion, or story used to explain the circumstances of an unclear phenomenon or event, the background of which was a certain conspiracy.

Definitions of conspiracy theories gradually became unified, and nowadays this concept is briefly defined as *"a set of unfounded beliefs that lead a person to believe that the main cause of a certain event is a conspiracy of several actors working together, with a clear goal, often illegally and in secret"* (Swami & Furnham, 2014, p. 220). A broader definition describes conspiracy theories as *"unproven and remarkable conspiracy claims that: a) deny more likely consideration; b) presuppose, in terms of their content, extraordinary malice and competence on the part of the conspirators; and c) are, in the sense of epistemic reasoning, based on evidence that is considered by legitimate epistemic authorities to be of poor quality and resistant to questioning or correction"* (Brotherton, 2013, p. 12-13).

According to Van Prooijen (2018), every belief in conspiracy theories and conspiracy thinking contains 5 main signs, with the help of which we can distinguish this construct from other similar constructs, such as belief in the paranormal, paranoid thinking or superstition.

The first sign is finding patterns (pattern perception) in the surrounding environment and non-random connections between events, objects, and people. The conspiracy theory assumes that the incident did not happen by chance, by coincidence, but something more is hidden behind it.

The second sign is based on the assumption that the incident was sophisticated, detailed and deliberately planned by intelligent actors. This sign is marked as an "agency detection", whereby these intelligent actors form coalitions.

The third sign is that if a person believes that only one actor is behind the event, this statement cannot be called a conspiracy theory because it does not contain its main component – the conspiracy of several people.

The fourth sign is hostility because the intentions of these actors are always selfish and malicious.

The last sign that defines conspiracy theories is the concealment of these intentions from the public (continued secrecy); covert operations remain uncertain, unproven, and unsupported by solid evidence.

3. Belief in specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy thinking

Goertzel (1994) was responsible for the initial research on belief in conspiracy theories and asked the question of to what extent belief in conspiracy theories is a general trait. According to him, the best predictor (presupposition) of belief in a particular conspiracy theory is that a person believes in another. Based on the significant correlations between individual conspiracy theories, he offered support to science for further research into belief in conspiracy theories as a general ideological dimension. Currently, there are two ways to deal with belief in conspiracy theories:

- a) belief in specific conspiracy theories,
- b) general propensity to believe in conspiracies (Abalakina-Paap, 1999).

Specific conspiracy theories contain statements directed against a specific group of people and prompted by context (e.g. social, historical, cultural). Even though there are many specific conspiracy theories, and they are very different in content, the same processes stand in their background, captured precisely in the general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. It is, therefore, possible to say that it is this general tendency (regardless of the content of conspiracy theories) that leads people to believe in specific conspiracy theories, the content of which is

contextually conditioned (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Krekó, 2015). A public opinion poll, for example, can deal with belief in specific conspiracy theories without reflecting on the general tendencies that lead to beliefs about their truth.

The current area of interest is primarily the general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. Currently, we can come across various terms that indicate this general tendency, e.g., "conspiracy mentality" (Moscovici, 1987), "generic conspiracist belief" (Brotherton, French, & Pickering 2013), "conspiracist ideation" and "endorsement to the conspiracy" (Swami et al., 2011). The term conspiratorial thinking is used in this work.

4. Motives of belief in conspiracy thinking

Labelling a person as a conspirator has acquired a pejorative connotation based on the historical and contemporary association of belief in conspiracies with paranoia (Hofstadter, 1964; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). However, it is not the role of science to deal with whether conspiracy theories are true. However, specific conspiracy theories have proven real (e.g., Watergate). The critical question is what factors and variables lead a person to doubt the facts presented and believe in conspiracy theories. As part of our qualitative theoretical research on conspiracy thinking, we will, therefore, focus on a relevant synthesis of theoretical findings using appropriate research methods, emphasizing epistemic, existential, and social motives for belief in conspiracy theories.

4.1 Epistemic motives

Among the epistemic motives that lead a person to conspiratorial thinking, we can mainly include the fulfilment of curiosity and the reduction of uncertainty, especially in those situations in which a person does not have all the relevant information available and also in those situations in which random events seem to be challenging to understand (Douglas et al., 2017). On the one hand, it can be a desire to search for information with the aim of reducing uncertainty, on the other hand, this recognition is, within the framework of conspiratorial thinking, accompanied by cognitive deficits (Kossowska, 2007). This idea was supported by the results of research studies showing that the need for cognitive closure, defined by Kruglanski (1990) as the desire to find an answer to avoid uncertainty and confusion, is positively related to conspiratorial thinking (Marchlewska et al., 2017; Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, & Furnham, 2014; Umam, Muluk, & Milla, 2018).

The need for cognitive closure can act as a defence mechanism for someone who feels that the information available to understand a certain phenomenon is limited and, therefore, resort to simplistic and flawed explanations (Umam et al., 2018). Paradoxically, on the one hand, conspiracy theories provide explanations that serve as a refuge in the face of uncertainty and confusion, but on the other hand, they can increase discomfort and insecurity when people become aware of the danger posed by conspirators (Douglas et al., 2017).

Conspiracy theories are well insulated from epistemic access to new information and resistant to questioning or correction. At the same time, they are based on low-quality and weak evidence that contains gaps and unclear details (Brotherton, 2013). A large body of studies has, therefore, focused on heuristics in conspiratorial thinking. Barkun (2003) summarizes the basic attributes of conspiracy theories in three points: a) nothing happens by chance, b) nothing is as it seems, and c) everything is connected. Conspiracy theorists commit a fundamental error and more often make conclusions that relate to influential groups, even when adequate situational explanations are available (Clarke, 2002). Brotherton and French (2015) supported this theory with research in which respondents who interpreted vague and contrived events as intentional and planned were more likely to resort to conspiracy thinking than respondents who interpreted these events as random.

In another study, the same authors found that participants with conspiracy thinking tended to commit conjunction fallacies, which are described by Tversky and Kahneman (2008) as a specific error in reasoning where people overestimate the probability of co-occurring events (e.g., “Olivia is a saleswoman in the shop.” is a more likely statement than “Olivia is a shop assistant and also active in the anti-globalization movement.”) (Brotherton & French, 2014; Dagnall, Denovan, Drinkwater, Parker, & Clough, 2017).

A similar heuristic was found in another study that discovered a relationship between conspiratorial thinking and causal interpretations of spurious correlations. Participants agreed with statements that contained spurious correlations (e.g. "Increased morbidity in people is associated with more hospital visits.") and claimed to be able to interpret them. Respondents with conspiracy thinking were also more likely to prefer an explanation of a certain event as being causally connected to a similar recent event. At the same time, they liked events or stories presented as interconnected more than when presented as isolated and random. These results indicate a certain tendency of people with conspiracy thinking to give causal interpretations to events that are not related in any way because it can help them understand the world and explain certain circumstances (van der Wall, Sutton, Lange, & Braga, 2018).

Another possible explanation for why conspiracy thinkers tend to infer unlikely causal connections between phenomena is that they prefer to explain large effects in terms of significant causes; for example, it may seem that the sudden death of Princess Diana could not have been just an accident after all (Van Prooijen, 2018).

A slightly different group of studies focused on the idea that people with conspiratorial thinking tend to overestimate their knowledge and ability to understand complex phenomena. During the experiment, participants with a conspiracy mentality succumbed to the illusion that they could explain phenomena that they do not understand at all ("illusory of explanatory depth") (Vitriol & Marsh, 2018) and the heuristic called the "hindsight problem" or also called "I-knew-it" effect.

In another study, participants with a higher conspiracy mentality after the election results were more likely to claim that they knew the election outcome all along (Lamberty, Hellman, & Oeberst, 2018). Conspiracy thinking has been shown to have a close positive relationship with intuitive thinking and a negative relationship with analytical and rational thought (Ståhl & Van Prooijen, 2018; Swami et al., 2014; Van der Wal et al., 2018; Van Prooijen, 2017). Moderate to strong correlations were also found between conspiracy thinking and belief in paranormal phenomena, paranoid thoughts, and certain schizotypal personality traits. The most robust relationships were found to be with unusual perceptual experiences, paranoid thoughts, superstition, ideas of reference (the belief that random and irrelevant events are directly related to the person), and magical thinking. These aspects of the schizotypal personality reflect disorganized thought processes and a rejection of analytical thinking (Barron, Morgan, Towell, Altemeyer, & Swami, 2014; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011), which has also been shown in other research with people with conspiratorial thinking to have reduced trust in influential (mainstream) sources and, conversely, increased faith in lay non-expert (alternative) sources (Imhoff, Lamberty, & Klein, 2018).

4.2 Existential motives

Whether a person finds refuge in conspiratorial thinking, existential motives also play a significant role, including the need for security and perceived control over one's surroundings (Ušiak & Trubenová, 2020). The propensity to believe in conspiracy theories may also be associated with increased self-esteem, an inappropriate perception of oneself as the centre of attention of others and the associated feeling of being the target of a deliberate attack by others. This idea was supported by research that found a positive association between conspiratorial thinking and individual narcissism (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2016). At the same time, the perception of oneself in the centre of interest of others is also associated with a higher degree of paranoid thoughts, which

further feed conspiratorial thinking. Several studies have found that people who score higher on the paranoia scale are significantly more likely to endorse conspiracy claims (Darwin et al., 2011; Grzesiak-Feldman & Ejsmont, 2008; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). One of the characteristics of paranoia is a self-referential perception of the behaviour of others (Fenigstein & Vanable, 1992).

Because these constructs may seem very similar, knowing the differences that set them apart is excellent and appropriate. Both constructs assume particular intentions of others, which a person applies to himself. Conspiracy thinking is more specific; it assumes the intentions of powerful groups' secret societies, while paranoia assumes a particular purpose from each person. The fundamental difference is that while in the case of paranoia, the target is the person himself, in the case of conspiratorial thinking the target is the society to which the person belongs (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018).

The results of other studies also contribute to the idea of an overvalued perception of oneself, which can be a defence strategy against feelings of inferiority. It turned out that participants with higher conspiracy thinking also had a more increased need for uniqueness, which expresses their need to differentiate themselves from others and show their uniqueness. Conspiracy-thinking participants much more often thought that they were the owners of unique information, which, unlike them, most people do not own (Lantian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2017).

In another study, the results also pointed to a highly functional aspect of endorsing mainly lesser-known and less popular conspiracy theories related to the fulfilment of the need for uniqueness (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). The connection between conspiratorial thinking and overestimated self-perception can also be linked to the above-described epistemic motives, mainly to overestimation of one's own knowledge and predictive thinking (Vitriol & Marsh, 2018). Support can also be found in the proven relationship between the need for uniqueness and narcissism (Emmons, 1984; Lantian et al., 2017).

In this case, the second component of existential motives is the fulfilment of the need for security and safety (Beňuška & Nečas, 2021; Kavan, 2021). The feeling that the impact of social change threatens the basic values of society can strengthen conspiracy thinking and the endorsement of conspiracy theories. The perception of a threat to personal safety as a result of social changes can affect the perception of the legitimacy of the relevant social systems, the questioning of society, the importance of membership in this society and the extent to which a person attributes to them based on the values emanating from society. A heightened sense of this threat has been associated with conspiratorial thinking (Federico, Williams, & Vitriol, 2018).

Conspiracy thinking among respondents also increased when they perceived a threat to the legitimacy of the social system. Conspiracy-thinking participants perceived society as fairer, more legitimate, and safer, attributing society's problems more to malicious individuals than systemic causes (Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton, 2017). Within the system-justification theory, which Jolley et al. (2017) offer to interpret the results, conspiracy thinking is a response to perceived threats. System-justification theory explains that people are motivated to maintain a positive image of the existing social, economic, and political establishment, thereby symbolically satisfying their social, epistemic, and existential needs. Threatening this justice, integrity and legitimacy of the social system also threatens these needs and force people to defend themselves or rationalize the status quo even at the expense of their interests.

The extent to which people can exercise and control their social environment is linked to their desire to make sense of that environment. This sense-making is a central component of conspiratorial thinking (Douglas et al., 2017). In several research studies, participants who felt a threat of control over their environment had a stronger tendency towards conspiratorial thinking (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). An insufficient feeling of control

also increases the perception of illusory patterns in the environment, which, according to Van Prooijen (2018), is one of the five signs of conspiratorial thinking.

When a person feels a threat of control over his environment, perceiving powerful enemies can serve as psychological compensation. Enemies, in this case, play the role of a psychological focus responsible for adverse events and threats to life and well-being that cannot be controlled. People with conspiratorial thinking tend to deny the influence of random forces on any adverse event and to immediately shift the blame to "powerful enemies", while the fact that these enemies have been exposed brings them a sense of security (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010).

A similar and equally important driver of conspiratorial thinking is perceiving and finding meaningful patterns in stimuli that random processes have generated. This perception is also associated with the belief that random and irrelevant events are directly related to the person who perceives them, which leads to a certain degree of egocentricity (Van Prooijen, Douglas, & de Inocencio, 2017).

Van Prooijen and Van Vugt (2018) conceptualized two possible theories why people resort to conspiracy thinking and why it is so influential:

- a) conspiracy theories are an evolutionary by-product of a set of cognitive mechanisms (pattern perception, detection, and revelation of enemies) that have evolved for various reasons,
- b) conspiracy theories are part of a developed adaptive psychological mechanism to detect and reveal dangerous coalitions.

The first hypothesis assumes that conspiracy theories occur as a by-product of cognitive mechanisms: the perception of patterns, threats, and detection of actors and coalitions. These can sometimes be perceived as erroneous or overestimated, and conspiracy theories result from distortions of these mechanisms. The second hypothesis posits that conspiratorial thinking has an adaptive basis, designed to address and deal with realistic threats of coalitional violence that were present in the past among our ancestors. Conspiracy thinking could thus be functional in the environment of our ancestors, who were often threatened by deadly conspiracies. However, when these threats have disappeared in the current era, it has already lost its adaptive value.

4.3 Social motives

Motivating elements that can contribute to conspiratorial thinking include the individual's desire to maintain a positive self-image and the image of the group to which the person is a part and with which he identifies. Attributing adverse outcomes to others can contribute to maintaining an image of oneself and one's group as competent and moral or, failing that, as being sabotaged by powerful and unscrupulous others (Douglas et al., 2017).

Conspiracy thinking can also serve as a strategy to satisfy specific group needs, e.g., participants who identified with the protesting group movement defended the group's conflictual behaviour through the belief that members of the government were conspiring against the group (Chayinska, & Minescu, 2018). This ingroup effect (adherence to the group to which the individual belongs) is also supported by the results of other research studies, which show significantly greater susceptibility to conspiracy thinking in minority ethnic groups (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Van Prooijen, Staman, & Krouwel, 2018) even if these conspiracy theories are irrelevant due to their position in society (Van Prooijen et al., 2018).

Another significant predictor contributing to the explanation of this construct is collective narcissism, which reflects the belief in the importance of the member group ("ingroup"), inter alia, conditioned by the recognition of

others (Cichocka, Marchlewska & Golec de Zavala, 2016; Golec de Zavala, & Federico, 2018). Narcissistic identification with a group of which the individual is a member is positively related to the endorsement of conspiracy theories that are directed against groups to which the individual does not belong ("out-group") (Cichocka, Golec de Zavala, Marchlewska, & Olechowski, 2015).

According to Winiewski, Soral and Bilewicz (2015), conspiracy thinking is based on the scapegoat theory. Social psychology often mentions this theory in the context of hostility and hatred towards groups and minorities. They become a scapegoat worthy of punishment for negative consequences caused by entirely different causes. Its reformulation within the framework of conspiracy thinking proposes that the group scapegoat does not have to be only a vulnerable and powerless minority but also a group that people believe is powerful and dangerous. Frustration, which flows from deprivation or an unfavourable life situation, often plays the primary role. This frustration motivates a person to attribute causes to influential groups, which he puts in the role of a scapegoat.

People with a conspiratorial mindset tend to personalize groups, seeing them as a collective enemy with hostile intentions towards their group. Conspiracy theories are causal: they attribute to the group they are targeting a collective goal (desire for power and dominance), collective behaviour and a high degree of egoism in terms of support and solidarity within the group, alongside a disregard for the well-being of those outside the group.

Conclusions

Based on our research findings, we can theoretically consider conspiracy thinking as a specific unconscious strategy that helps a person to fulfil epistemic, existential, and social needs. Within epistemic motives, conspiracy thinking offers a simple scheme to understand the causes of obscure events. Conspiracy thinking is associated with intuitive and distorted thinking, susceptibility to various heuristics, and overestimating one's abilities and knowledge. The last aspect is a manifestation of self-evaluation, essential in fulfilling existential motives. Research has shown that conspiracy thinking is associated with an increased need for uniqueness, individual narcissism, and an egocentric view of oneself. In addition to maintaining a positive self-image, a person also needs to maintain a positive image of the group he is a part of.

Conspiracy thinking is also associated with prejudice against groups that are perceived as powerful or threatening. In social motives, conspiratorial thinking is also related to collective narcissism, whereby out-groups become the target of prejudices and scapegoats, which cause difficult life situations or inexplicable events. One of the most recent attempts to explain conspiracy thinking is the evolutionary theory by Van Prooijen and Van Vugt (2018), who hypothesize that this phenomenon is a by-product of cognitive mechanisms that were developed for our ancestors' security, namely the detection and revelation of enemies, and finding connections and patterns in the surrounding environment. Nowadays, however, conspiracy thinking is already maladaptive.

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