

# Believing the impossible and conspiracy theories

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Distrust and paranoia about government has a long history, and the feeling that there is a conspiracy of elites can lead to suspicion for authorities and the claims they make. For some, the attraction of conspiracy theories is so strong that it leads them to endorse entirely contradictory beliefs, according to a study in the current *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

People who endorse conspiracy theories see authorities as fundamentally deceptive. The conviction that the "official story" is untrue can lead people to believe several alternative theories-despite contradictions among them. "Any conspiracy theory that stands in opposition to the official narrative will gain some degree of endorsement from someone who holds a conspiracist worldview," according to Michael Wood, Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton of the University of Kent.

To see if conspiracy views were strong enough to lead to inconsistencies, the researchers asked 137 college students about the death of Princess Diana. The more people thought there "was an official campaign by the [intelligence service](#) to assassinate Diana," the more they also believed that "Diana faked her own death to retreat into isolation." Of course, Diana cannot be simultaneously dead and alive.

The researchers wanted to know if the contradictory beliefs were due to suspicion of authorities, so they asked 102 [college students](#) about the death of Osama bin Laden (OBL). People who believed that "when the raid took place, OBL was already dead," were significantly more likely

to also believe that "OBL is still alive." Since bin Laden is not Schrödinger's cat, he must either be alive or dead. The researchers found that the belief that the "actions of the Obama administration indicate that they are hiding some important or damaging piece of information about the raid" was responsible for the connection between the two [conspiracy theories](#). Conspiracy belief is so potent that it will lead to belief in completely inconsistent ideas.

"For conspiracy theorists, those in power are seen as deceptive-even malevolent-and so any official explanation is at a disadvantage, and any alternative explanation is more credible from the start," said the authors. It is no surprise that fear, mistrust, and even [paranoia](#) can lead to muddled thinking; when distrust is engaged, careful reasoning can coast on by. "Believing Osama is still alive," they write, 'is no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years."

**More information:** The article "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories" in Social Psychological and Personality Science is available free for a limited time at [m.spp.sagepub.com/content/earl ... 50611434786.full.pdf](http://m.spp.sagepub.com/content/earl...50611434786.full.pdf)

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