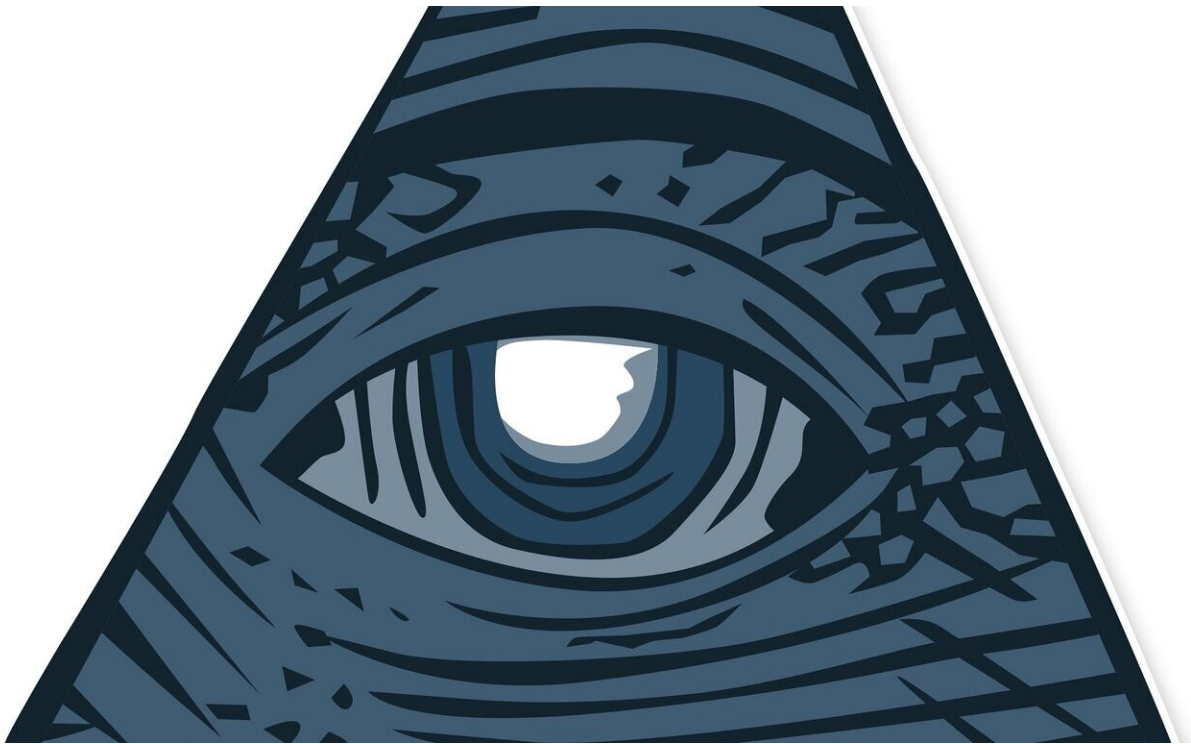


No simple answer for why people believe in conspiracy theories, says new study

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People can be prone to believe in conspiracy theories due to a combination of personality traits and motivations, including relying strongly on their intuition, feeling a sense of antagonism and superiority toward others, and perceiving threats in their environment, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

The results of the study paint a nuanced picture of what drives conspiracy theorists, according to lead author Shauna Bowes, a doctoral student in [clinical psychology](#) at Emory University.

"Conspiracy theorists are not all likely to be simple-minded, mentally unwell folks—a portrait which is routinely painted in popular culture," said Bowes. "Instead, many turn to conspiracy theories to fulfill deprived motivational needs and make sense of distress and impairment."

The research was published online in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

Previous research on what drives conspiracy theorists had mostly looked separately at [personality](#) and motivation, according to Bowes. The current study aimed to examine these factors together to arrive at a more unified account of why people believe in conspiracy theories.

To do so, the researchers analyzed data from 170 studies involving over 158,000 participants, mainly from the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland. They focused on studies that measured participants' motivations or personality traits associated with conspiratorial thinking.

The researchers found that overall, people were motivated to believe in conspiracy theories by a need to understand and feel safe in their environment and a need to feel like the community they identify with is superior to others.

Even though many conspiracy theories seem to provide clarity or a supposed secret truth about confusing events, a need for closure or a sense of control were not the strongest motivators to endorse conspiracy theories. Instead, the researchers found some evidence that people were more likely to believe specific conspiracy theories when they were motivated by [social relationships](#).

For instance, participants who perceived social threats were more likely to believe in events-based conspiracy theories, such as the theory that the U.S. government planned the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, rather than an abstract theory that, in general, governments plan to harm their citizens to retain power.

"These results largely map onto a recent theoretical framework advancing that social identity motives may give rise to being drawn to the content of a conspiracy theory, whereas people who are motivated by a desire to feel unique are more likely to believe in general conspiracy theories about how the world works," according to Bowes.

The researchers also found that people with certain personality traits, such as a sense of antagonism toward others and high levels of paranoia, were more prone to believe conspiracy theories. Those who strongly believed in [conspiracy](#) theories were also more likely to be insecure, paranoid, emotionally volatile, impulsive, suspicious, withdrawn, manipulative, egocentric and eccentric.

The Big Five personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism) had a much weaker relationship with conspiratorial thinking, though the researchers said that does not mean that general [personality traits](#) are irrelevant to a tendency to believe in [conspiracy theories](#).

Bowes said that future research should be conducted with an awareness that conspiratorial thinking is complicated, and that there are important and diverse variables that should be explored in the relations among conspiratorial thinking, motivation and personality to understand the overall psychology behind conspiratorial ideas.

More information: The Conspiratorial Mind: A Meta-Analytic Review of Motivational and Personological Correlates, *Psychological*

Bulletin (2023). DOI: 10.1037/bul0000392, ([PDF](#)),
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