

People who primarily 'use their own gut feeling' more easily believe conspiracy theories: Study

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People who primarily use their own gut feeling to determine what is true and false are more likely to believe conspiracy theories. That is the

conclusion of researchers at Linköping University, Sweden, who have investigated the relationship between susceptibility to misleading information and the conviction that the truth is relative.

"I think many people who emphasize a more relativistic view of what [truth](#) is mean well. They believe that it's important that everyone should be able to make their voice heard. But these results show that such a view can actually be quite dangerous," says Ph.D. student Julia Aspernäs at the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Learning in Linköping.

In two studies reported in an article in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, she and two colleagues have investigated the relationship between so-called truth relativism and the risk of falling victim to incorrect or fraudulent information.

The first study involves approximately 1,000 Swedes. In an [online survey](#), participants were asked to answer questions about their views on what truth is. They then had to take a position on various [conspiracy theories](#) and also assess the content of a number of nonsense sentences.

The researchers also collected information on factors previously found to be related to belief in misleading information, such as the ability to reason analytically, political orientation, age, gender and educational level.

In the second study, more than 400 people from the U.K. participated. Here the number of questions was expanded and the participants' degree of dogmatism and willingness to adapt their perceptions when faced with new facts were also measured. From the material, the researchers unearthed two types of truth relativism. One that comprises those who are convinced that what you personally feel to be true is true, that is to say, that truth is subjective. And one including those who believe that truth depends on which culture or group you belong to, so-called cultural

relativism.

The results clearly show that those who believe that the truth is subjective are more likely to believe conspiracy theories and to hold on to their beliefs even when faced with facts that contradict them. They also have a greater tendency to find profound messages in nonsense sentences. Even when the researchers investigated other possible explanations, such as the ability for analytical thinking or [political orientation](#), subjectivism remained as an independent, explanatory factor.

The connections were not as clear for those who believe that truth is culture-bound and the results there point partly in different directions.

To the researchers' surprise, the [data collection](#) from the U.K. also showed a link between subjectivism and dogmatism. Thus, someone who claims that the truth is personal can, paradoxically, often at the same time reject other people's right to their own truth.

Julia Aspernäs thinks that the results are useful when listening to political debates, such as those concerning schooling. People may have different opinions on matters of fact, but behind this may lie a fundamental disagreement about how the world works and what even exists.

"I got the idea when listening to debates about whether students should learn factual knowledge or be encouraged to themselves seek out what they think is true. It sounded like the debaters had completely opposite assumptions about what truth is and argued that their own approach was the best way to help students become critical thinkers. Although our study did not investigate causality, we see that truth relativism seems to be linked to a greater belief in misleading information. It may be important to keep that in mind," she says.

More information: Julia Aspernäs et al, Misperceptions in a post-truth world: Effects of subjectivism and cultural relativism on bullshit receptivity and conspiracist ideation, *Journal of Research in Personality* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrp.2023.104394](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2023.104394)

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