

Conspiracy theories

Who doesn't love a good conspiracy theory? Government snoops, extraterrestrials, assassinations and supposed-assassinations. George Bush and Dick Cheney. The missing birth certificate. The Clinton body bags.

A conspiracy theory is an alternative to an official account of events that accuses a group of conspirators of engaging in secret, self-serving, harmful, possibly illegal, actions. The group is believed to have made meticulous plans over a long period of time and (this is important) to have then eliminated evidence. *Conspiracism* is a worldview that sees conspiracy as *the* driving force of history and all of history as an impenetrable web of conspiracies.

Why we believe in conspiracies

There are a lot of theories about why people buy into conspiracy theories. One idea is that, when times are troubled or when people feel socially isolated or otherwise powerless, a conspiracy theory can offer an illusion of understanding, and thus of control. In short, believers feel that the conspiracy narrative makes sense out of events. The conspiracy narrative usually attributes evils to the malice of super-villains and their minions—not to random acts of nature or baffling, unstoppable social forces. These villains are a well-defined, easily understood enemy. Believers have the further comfort of seeing themselves as select members of a small group that understands what is *really* going on.

Another reason people gravitate toward conspiracy theories is that humans are meaning-seekers, and it is human nature to want to attribute significant causes to significant events. We don't want our icons, heroes, kings, and presidents brought down, for instance, by a lowly virus or a random accident—we prefer the dignity of assassination. We don't want the levees to break (as they did after Hurricane Katrina) because of deferred maintenance or bureaucratic delays—we prefer to think that the disaster is caused by something or someone suitably large and malevolent.

We may be more likely to buy into conspiracy theories because we daily prime ourselves to believe the world is more dangerous than is really is. George Gerbner, an early researcher on the effects of mass media on public perception, did volumes of research in the 1960s on the effects of television violence. He coined the term *mean world syndrome* to describe the effects experienced by people who, because they spent so much time filtering the world through violent television programs, came to believe the world was a more violent place than it actually was. Today we filter the world not only through our televisions—news programs, dramas, docudramas, and reality shows that entertain around the clock with humans behaving badly—but also through our computer browsers, which are programmed to feed us more of what we appear to want. It is any wonder we are ready to believe the worst?

Common conspiracy elements: "us" vs. "them"

Conspiracy theories share common elements. For instance, they tend to divide the population into groups. First there are the bad guys:

- The bad guys are a small group of villains. They hold positions of disproportionate power (but possibly not visibly so. They might be the men behind the men who *seem* to hold power).
- They are corrupt. They act out of self-interest and against the public interest. They are almost unbelievably intelligent, farsighted, and patient. They've anticipated every move and countermove in their elaborate preparations.
- They are devious. They've destroyed the evidence of their crimes and manufactured false evidence and a false narrative.

We, on the other hand, are the select few who understand what is going on. We are freethinkers and freedom fighters. *You* are clueless, part of the clueless mob. You are, at best, a pawn in their game. At worst, your closed-mindedness and unwillingness to believe make you suspect: possibly you are one of them after all!

Problems with conspiracy theories

There are several problems with conspiracy theories in general.

- They are unfalsifiable; they are articles of faith.
- They are self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing.
- They depend on unidentified “eyewitnesses.”
- They are overly complicated.
- They fall into a variety of fallacies.

First, if you’ve ever had the opportunity to argue with a conspiracy believer, you may have discovered this problem with conspiracy theories: they are unprovable—and undisprovable. In other words, they are untestable, or *unfalsifiable*. A theory is falsifiable if it is possible to test it against reliable evidence to discover if it is true. But because it is usually a central tenant of conspiracy theories that the villains have tampered with the evidence, you can never test a conspiracy theory against reliable evidence. It remains forever an article of faith.

A second problem is that while we are thoughtfully critical of the official version of events, we are less critical of our favored alternative. Conspiracy theories are *self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing* in this respect: My worldview steers me toward a favored conspiracy, and the conspiracy’s narrative confirms my worldview. We are more open to theories that already fit our worldviews and may not ask enough hard questions about logic or evidence.

A third problem is the heavy reliance on supposed-eyewitness evidence. However, it’s almost always the hearsay evidence of a friend of a friend of a friend. Research shows that even good-faith eyewitness testimony is less than reliable, but the testimony of a distant, unverified, possibly *unidentifiable eyewitness* is even worse. You can’t hope to verify or falsify the testimony of a lost or anonymous witness.

Another problem is that conspiracies offer *inexplicably complicated* schemes as alternate explanations. Normally, the means nature uses to achieve a desired result are as economical—as simple—as possible. Migrating birds don’t choose the most roundabout way to fly south; they take the most direct route that suits their needs. The principle of Occam’s Razor is that the simpler of two explanations is likelier to be true and that we must omit from consideration any evidence that cannot be examined or tested. To the extent, then, that a conspiracy is overly complex and evidence untestable, it can be judged less likely to be true. This advice to go with the simpler, more likely, explanation is expressed in the saying, “When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras.”

Finally, conspiracy theories fall into a multitude of *fallacies*. If you accept a theory with insufficient evidence, you fall into the fallacy of *hasty conclusion*. If believers ask for a special dispensation from the need to produce evidence because the evidence has gone missing, you have the fallacy of *special pleading*. The long, improbable links in the theory itself weaken the alleged cause-and-effect relationships, resulting in *questionable cause* or *slippery slope* fallacies. Conspiracies tend to demonize conspirators and deny them any good-faith intentions—the *ad hominem* fallacy. And the us-vs-them mentality exemplifies the *black-and-white* or *false dilemma* fallacy—no middle ground is considered.

Triangulate on the truth

That said, it would be oversimplifying to deny that real conspiracies occur. Test your own favorite conspiracy against these criteria. Pay attention to unsupported assumptions, fallacies, missing evidence, the quality of the testimony. Most important, triangulate on the truth from multiple sources and viewpoints. And always remember, just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re *not* out to get you.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever

