

Handout

Understanding Conspiracy Theories: Intermediate

Directions: Read the article and respond to the connection questions that follow.

Conspiracy theories are beliefs that claim secret, powerful groups control the world, mislead the public and/or are behind significant events. Some theories claim famous people who died, like Elvis and Tupac, are still alive; others that events, such as the moon landing and the sinking of the *Titanic*, were faked; and others that the world is not as we know it: the earth is flat and global warming is a hoax. At the more offensive end, some theories fuel hatred and distrust towards certain groups in society, **scapegoating** them for problems. There are theories, for example, that allege Jews and Muslims are behind global issues, such as COVID-19.

Research has shown that large numbers of people believe in some kind of conspiracy theory. Part of this is because human brains have evolved to be able to see patterns: recognising patterns, such as which plants to eat and how to identify threats, is needed for decision making and survival. Stories are a form of pattern. They have a beginning, middle and end, recognisable characters (like villains and heroes), and show why something happens and what the outcome is. When we recognise patterns, our brain releases dopamine, a feel-good hormone, to help the learning process. This chance of dopamine reward can mean that humans see patterns where none exist and try to attach meaning to coincidences.

Research also suggests that people believe in conspiracy theories to satisfy psychological needs related to understanding, safety, control, belonging and self-esteem (the sense of knowing something others don't can increase people's self-esteem). Conspiracy theories gain visibility during times of crisis, highlighting how people seek them out to feel a sense of control. Although, evidence suggests that consuming conspiracy theories actually makes people feel more uncertain and less powerful.

Belief in one theory can lead to belief in others as conspiracy theories tend to have a common structure that then shapes how people view the world: they feature an 'other', a victim, a powerful group that is behind the conspiracy, a hidden agenda, and cover-up.

Social media platforms also push conspiracy theory content in a bid to boost user watch time and keep users online for as long as possible to make more money. Once people engage with one conspiracy theory online, it increases their chances of encountering others due to the way algorithms work and of diving further down the '**rabbit hole**'.

It can be difficult for people to stop believing in conspiracy theories once they start. Confirmation bias, which leads people to seek out information that aligns with their beliefs and

Glossary

- **Scapegoat (noun):** Wrongly blaming someone or group of people for something bad that has happened.
- **Rabbit hole (noun):** A situation that is difficult to get out of.
- **Rational (adjective):** Based on clear thought and reason, not emotion.
- **Democracy (noun):** A system of government in which power is held by elected representatives or the people.
- **Extremism (noun):** Holding extreme or radical political or religious views.
- **Disinformation (noun):** False or inaccurate information that is intentionally spread to mislead and manipulate people.
- **Whistle-blower (noun):** A person who reveals immoral or illegal activity.

reject information that does not, can prevent people from accepting evidence that disproves conspiracy theories. Believers often claim that any evidence is proof of the conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories also impact people on an emotional level: they are stories people turn to when they feel anger and distress. Emotions can stop people thinking **rationally**. Conspiracy theories can also make people feel less lonely – believers become part of a community.

While some conspiracy theories appear harmless, the view that the world is controlled by a secret group is harmful. It can create distrust in public institutions, cause people to feel like they have no power and make people turn away from **democracy**: people who believe in conspiracy theories are less likely to vote.

Conspiracy theories have also been shown to fuel prejudice towards minority groups, and can push people towards violence, crime and **extremism**. They can also make the targets of conspiracy theories feel threatened and anxious, and less able to interact with those from outside their group. This reduces the chance of people mixing with, understanding and empathising with those from different social groups.

However, conspiratorial thinking is not all negative as it can help investigate the behaviour of people in power. In the past, some governments and corporations have been found to have engaged in conspiracies. For example, tobacco companies engaged in **disinformation** campaigns to make people doubt the link between smoking and cancer (fossil fuel companies used a similar tactic to cast doubt on the fact that burning fossil fuels causes climate change). Such secrets are often revealed by **whistleblowers** and/or when evidence emerges. Most conspiracies, however, are not connected – they are carried out by different governments and corporations, rather than one small, all-powerful group.

Questioning the world around you can be helpful, but it is important to assess evidence, be open to having your mind changed and avoid accepting simple answers. Theories that suggest a small group of people control the world ignore how complex everything is. If you see problems in the world, rather than casting blame on a secretive group, think about what needs to be done to resolve them.

If someone you know has been sucked down a 'rabbit hole' of conspiracy theories, do not dismiss them as foolish; understand that they are probably emotionally invested in what they believe, listen to them and ask them questions about their beliefs to build understanding. It can also help to look for common ground, suggest looking at evidence together and help them think about what they can control.

Connection Questions

1. What causes people to believe in conspiracy theories?
2. How might the Internet and social media help spread conspiracy theories?
3. Why is it difficult for people to stop believing in conspiracy theories?
4. What impact do conspiracy theories have on individuals who consume them? On minority groups? On society?
5. In which ways can conspiratorial thinking be helpful?
6. What can you do to avoid falling for conspiracy theories?
7. How can you engage with people who believe in conspiracy theories?