Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories

Alison Holderbaum

HON 3993: Conspiracy Theories

Dr. John Banas

October 9th, 2023

It is human nature to have a need to understand the world around you. This epistemic need is what drives many to read and research about what is around them or topics they find interesting. We would not have the society we have today if humans did not possess an innate epistemic desire. This need for knowledge is what drives many students to pursue higher education but this same need can also drive people towards conspiratorial beliefs. “Specific epistemic motives that causal explanations may serve include slaking curiosity when information is unavailable, reducing uncertainty and bewilderment when available information is conflicting, finding meaning when events seem random, and defending beliefs from disconfirmation.” (Douglas et al., 2017) Holding onto conspiratorial beliefs fundamentally helps us explain what is happening around us. It gives us something to help interpret what we see. As a society, it feels that we have had a lot on our plates in the last few years. There has been a growing feeling of unease accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, civic unrest, and many other events. You are looking at something that does not make sense. Your world is turned upside down and

you need something to explain it. Finding something like FOX news or the community surrounding QAnon helps you feel better. It helps you process what is happening in the world around you. It explains what you are seeing and gives you a way to process it. This partially explains why QAnon became so popular starting around 2020. Its leader "Q" gave information that helped explain everything that was happening and provided a sense of comfort in our ever changing world. His words promised that everything would be solved in the end as long as his followers were willing to wait for it.

QAnon is one of the biggest conspiracy theories of our time and possibly one of the most outlandish. "Accusations of pedophilia, baselessly aimed at celebrities, companies, and politicians, that are at the very center of QAnon"(Coaston, 2018). While there are offshoots of QAnon and associated conspiracy theories that focus on COVID-19 and organized the January 6th insurrection, most of their beliefs come back to their fight against pedophilia. Big name celebrities and politicians such as Hillary Clinton, Tom Hanks, John Podesta, Anthony Fauci, Lady Gaga, and even Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama were believed to be involved in a satanic, cannibalistic cabal("QAnon," 2023). One of the reasons why QAnon was able to become so popular so quickly is that it has a little bit of everything, allowing it to appeal to more perspective members. QAnon has been described as "a cult, pseudo religion, conspiracy cabal, promoter of false prophecies, online disinformation source, Internet scam, hate group, far-right political movement, and trope for anti-Semitism, fascism, apocalypticism, and domestic terror threats. Each of these is a correct, though incomplete, description of QAnon. And to a large degree, that is why QAnon appeals to many audiences"(Berghel, 2022). If the information used by QAnon's leader Q is correct, there is also a cause to get almost everyone involved. Most people would feel the need to stop high power politicians and celebrities like Hillary Clinton if she actually was mutilating a young girl and drinking her blood as shown in a fake video (*Is a Hillary Clinton "Snuff Film" Circulating on the Dark Web?*, 2021). QAnon is loudly pro-Trump as they see him as

one of the few people working against the Democratic Cabal. This makes QAnon believers more likely to support Republican ideals and would explain the connection between QAnon members and the January 6th Insurrection.

For many people, the belief in conspiracy theories may help them accept what is happening around them. Think about the events that have happened in the last five to ten years. Everything that has changed in American politics and culture. This could be a big change that is hard for some people to handle, especially as there are also big shifts in their personal life. "Big, sudden, or tragic events may, initially, lead more people to adopt a conspiracy explanation" (P. J. Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Even if someone does not believe in a large-scale conspiracy theory like QAnon, it is still possible that they have a "conspiracy" explanation for something that has happened. For many things that happen in our lives, it is easier to process if there is someone else to blame. We blame the referees instead of the players if our team loses. It is easier to say that you were late due to traffic than to admit that you should have left earlier. It is easier to place the blame on an external factor than to accept that it was caused by yourself and your shortcomings. Much of this is related to the need to feel like things are wrapped up nicely and that there is an acceptable explanation for everything in our lives. This leads to the NFCC or need for cognitive closure. It was stated that "individuals with a high NFCC tend to be more entrenched in their attitudes and seek to reach a decision or make a judgment more quickly and with less scrutiny than those with low NFCC" (P. J. Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). This would seem to suggest that those with a higher NFCC are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. The evidence to support this claim is mixed but there is certainly a relationship between NFCC and BICT (belief in conspiracy theories). "Importantly though, the effects of BICT are nullified by lowering NFCC. With lower NFCC individuals are more motivated to both attend to and scrutinize in more detail the evidence" (P. J. Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). Someone who has a lower need for cognitive closure is

more likely to fully look into the details surrounding what is happening leading them to be less likely to accept conspiratorial beliefs. This means that if someone does not immediately need to find answers, they are more likely to find information that is factually correct rather than turning to conspiratorial beliefs. If you start to truly believe that democrats are part of a satanic cannibalistic organization, you naturally want to find closure for this. You want them to pay for what they have done, whether with arrest or their lives. This leads to things like the January 6th insurrection, which had strong influences from QAnon, and death threats against the owner of the pizzeria involved in Pizzagate. While these may seem like extreme examples of finding closure, they are perfectly explainable and normal when coming from QAnon. It is also possible that the need for cognitive closure has lead people towards QAnon and other conspiracy theories as they provide explanations that do a better job of explaining what is happening than official accounts.

While there is evidence that there is a lower chance of believing in conspiracy theories with a lower need for cognitive closure, this requires time to properly absorb the material and make a judgment.

In a situation that changes quickly, there is less time to fully find closure, leading to more conspiratorial thinking. This is one reason why there are so many conspiracies surrounding large events that take more time to process. Some of the most culturally prevalent conspiracy theories are about incredibly large and traumatic events. For example, events that led to a large number of deaths such as 9/11 or the Oklahoma City Bombing, events that involved the death of a world leader such as the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, or events that led to a quick change in everyday life such as Covid-19 are more likely to lead to conspiracy theories than events that do not have as big of an impact. When there is a big event that changes the way we think and feel, we want a satisfying answer. We fundamentally need to find something that explains why it happened and the details surrounding it. We want to find an answer that seems to match the size and scale of the event. Belief in

conspiracy theories "appears to be stronger when events are especially large in scale or significant and leave people dissatisfied with mundane, small-scale explanations" (Douglas et al., 2017). It makes more sense to us to have an explanation that has a similar size to the event itself. "We tend to infer that a major or significant event is more likely to have a major or significant cause whereas a relatively minor event will have a comparatively minor cause" (P. Leman & Cinnirella, 2007). This natural assumption leads us to feel that the explanation for an event should be larger than it actually may be. Beyond the overestimation of the importance and size of the cause of an event, we turn to conspiracy theories to fulfill existential and social needs. In conspiracy theories with high-stakes answers, having an existential answer helps bring peace and control to those without it. "People who lack instrumental control may be afforded some compensatory sense of control by conspiracy theories, because they offer them the opportunity to reject official narratives and feel that they possess an alternative account"(Douglas et al., 2017). There is also the social aspect to why people believe in conspiracy theories. Some theories rely on the fact that there is an in-group and an out-group. Those who believe in these theories usually belong to the in-group who are at risk of being usurped by a lesser group. The social side of conspiratorial belief "includ[es] the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group. Scholars have suggested that conspiracy theories valorize the self and the in-group by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others" (Douglas et al., 2017). In addition to using conspiracy theories to create a narrative where your group has more power, certain conspiracy theories can be used to create a community.

No matter how you process the aftermath of an event, you need to find information about it. We all possess an information need that influences what we do in our lives. Whether your current need is to find the hours of a restaurant or to find information about a news story, information controls our lives. Our information need directly influences what we search for and how we search, also known as our

information behavior. “The satisfaction of an information need is proposed to be the driving force behind the action taken by a user”(Garg, 2016). It is human nature to search until we are able to find what we are looking for and fulfill our information need. This need for information may lead some to believe in conspiracy theories if the information they find supports a conspiratorial narrative. We encounter large amounts of information from a variety of sources and viewpoints anytime we try to research a topic. For topics related to the government, there is often an official explanation that comes directly from a voice of authority. For many people, this is enough to satisfy their information need. However, for others, especially those with an existing mistrust of the government or other authorities, the official account does not meet their information need, leading them to continue their research. After you have eliminated official reports on some topics, the main thing left is conspiracy theories. This leads to the socio-epistimic model of belief in conspiracy theories proposed by Pierre. He states that “epistemic mistrust is the core component underlying conspiracist ideation that manifests as the rejection of authoritative information”(Pierre, 2020). While there are likely other factors to why people believe in conspiracy theories, the rejection of authoritative information is key for most conspiracy narratives.

Pierre even goes as far as to state that the need for cognitive closure mentioned earlier may “explain conspiracy theories emerging in the wake of ‘crisis situations’… but are less obviously relevant to beliefs in a flat Earth, ‘chem trails,’ or ‘pizzagate’”(Pierre, 2020). While the need for closure surrounding a traumatic crisis situation such as the Kennedy assassination is stronger and different than the need for information about “pizzagate”, there is still a need to find a satisfactory answer. We commonly see closure as something that we seek after an event. We need to feel closure after we lose someone or something close to us. We need that explanation and finality in order to move on. However, we can also think of the completion of a quest to fulfill an information need as closure.

Once we have found the answer that we are satisfied with we have the same sense of closure that we seek in other places in our lives. Just as we hate when a show or book leaves us on a cliff hanger, we have the innate desire to fully complete everything in our lives. Our information need leads us to ensure that we find enough information about a specific topic to be completely satisfied. We need to feel that we have found and considered all of the possible information about a topic. This can lead to conspiratorial beliefs when the information we find to fulfill this need is from unofficial sources or provides a narrative that does not fit within what is traditionally accepted. Pierre also proposes that one of the reasons that some people believe in conspiracy theories is due to their mistrust in the government and other authorities. This mistrust is more likely to lead people to conspiratorial beliefs to fulfill their insatiable need for information. If you already do not trust what the government tells you or have questions about its authority, it is reasonable to believe that you are more susceptible to conspiratorial beliefs. “Conspiracy theories are appealing to those with epistemic mistrust because they represent the antithesis of authoritative accounts”(Pierre, 2020). While the information contained in conspiracy theories may not seem logical to those who do not believe in them, conspiracy theories are the logical next step for those who have a weakened immunity to them. Those who already have epistemic mistrust as well as a strong information need may be more likely to find and believe in conspiracy theories. Much of the research surrounding belief in conspiracy theories seems to rely on information behavior gone wrong. During the attempt to fulfill their information need, conspiracy theorists found an answer that did not represent factual evidence. While this explanation works, it does not explain why

some people are more susceptible to conspiracy beliefs than others. We need to expand on the psychological research behind why some people hold conspiratorial beliefs while others do not. This focus on psychological seems to be prevalent in layman explanations for conspiratorial beliefs.

It seems that the average explanation for why people believe in conspiracy theories is that they are crazy. There is something fundamentally different in the brains of conspiracy theorists that make them unlike the rest of us. When I told my family I was taking a course on conspiracy theories, one of the biggest reactions was from my grandmother who said something along the lines of "I want to know why those people believe in those crazy things". She wanted me to learn what was wrong with conspiracy believers but the answer is one that I know she would not be satisfied with. She would want more than that they have faulty information behavior or are just looking to explain the world around them and found the answers in conspiracy theories. I know my grandma well enough to know that she meant the insurrectionists and election deniers when she said that she wanted to know "why people believed in those crazy things". While the term "crazy" has been used in a variety of ways in American culture, the dictionary definition of the word is usually related to being mentally ill(*Crazy*, 2023) or unsound(*Definition of CRAZY*, 2023). Using this definition, perhaps conspiratorial beliefs actually are a mental illness in and of themselves, making conspiracy theorists truly crazy. If we look at conspiracy theories as a personality disorder it could be expanded that some people would believe that conspiracy theorists are actually mentally ill and therefore crazy. However, does that mean that everyone who believes in any alternative explanation or anything not supported by official explanations is also crazy? We should not take simply having epistemic mistrust or faulty information behavior as a cognitive failing.

We often paint conspiracy theorists as an out group of people who are crazy or who believe in things that they know are fundamentally wrong or disproven. However, it has been found that "conspiracy narratives were as likely to be used by highly educated respondents as those with few educational qualifications, by people with multiplex social networks as those whose social interactions were generally more restricted, and by people with professional or managerial occupations as those

employed in semi- or unskilled work" (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). If conspiratorial thinking is just as likely to occur at a variety of educational and social levels, what actually makes conspiracy theorists different from the rest of us? We cannot blame it on their lack of education or social interaction, decreasing the strength of the idea that they are uneducated "losers" who are isolated. If people who believe in conspiracy theories are notably "normal" in terms of most statistics, what makes them different from the rest of us? Are they truly crazy or are they just a by product of the crazy times that we live in now? "Individuals who endorse conspiracy theories have been variously understood to be suffering from 'paranoia', 'cognitive failure', 'delusional' thinking, or 'crippled epistemology'" (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). While this could be seen as an academic way of saying that people who believe in conspiracy theories are simply crazy, I feel that there is more to the story. We can use theories found in psychology to expand upon the reasoning behind why people believe in conspiracy theories.

Your personality and disposition actually has a very strong correlation with the likelihood that you will believe in conspiracy theories. While personality tests are often seen as popular culture responses to psychology that have no scientific backing, we can actually find out a decent amount of information using results from these tests. According to the Big Five personality traits taxonomy, there are five key factors that influence our personality and therefore shape who we are and what we experience. These traits are "neuroticism, openness to experience, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness"(Roccas et al., 2002). Each of these traits correspond with certain personality characteristics. Those scoring high in neuroticism tend to be "anxious, depressed, angry, and insecure"(Roccas et al., 2002) while those with high levels of openness to experience are more "intellectual, imaginative, sensitive, and open-minded"(Roccas et al., 2002). Those who score highest in extraversion, agreeableness, or conscientiousness tend to be more "sociable, talkative, assertive, and active"(Roccas et al., 2002), "good-natured, compliant, modest, gentle, and cooperative"(Roccas et al.,

2002), or “careful, thorough, responsible, organized, and scrupulous”(Roccas et al., 2002), respectfully. The levels of each of these five traits uniquely combine to make our personality what it is today. We each have our own distinctive mixture of these traits that guide the way we think and act. Due to its association with anxiety and depression, those who have higher neuroticism scores are more likely to have signs of mental illness even when not diagnosed. Additionally, those who possess the “dark triad” of personality traits (machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) have been found to have higher neuroticism scores as well as lower agreeableness and conscientiousness scores (Fehrman et al., 2019). Those who use illicit drugs have similar traits as well as a higher openness to experience. Using similar research methods as the ones used to find the connection between Big Five traits and personality disorders or substance use, we could find what traits are more likely to coexist with higher levels of conspiratorial thinking. The results of this study could help find the connection between belief in conspiracy theories and a range of mental illnesses, potentially leading to understanding if there is a genetic predisposition to conspiratorial ideas.

There is already some research done in this area but it there is conflicting evidence about the connection between any of the Big Five personality traits and belief in conspiracy theories. However, it has been found that those who have symptoms of the “dark triad” are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. “Those who are cynical and misanthropic (i.e., those scoring high in Machiavellian views) are more prone to feeling a lack of control over their lives and, in turn, more likely to endorse conspiracy theories” (Kay, 2021). There has been a growing sense of unease in American culture that could lead more people with Machiavellian ideation to conspiratorial beliefs. Additionally, “if the distrust common to Machiavellianism views means a person is also distrustful of those in power, the person might adopt theories that reflect this incredulity”(Kay, 2021). Those who show sign of Machiavellianism are more likely to have a distrust in the government. This leads to the rejection of official explanations for events, a large factor in conspiracy theories that rely on the

perceived

difference between what the government “tells” you to believe and what can be “proven” using other forms of evidence. The connection continues between the rest of the “dark triad” and belief in conspiracy theories. For those with signs of narcissism, “conspiracy theories would allow them to believe that they, not only figured out something that others (even prominent scientists) were incapable of figuring out, but also that they are in possession of valuable and potentially life-saving knowledge”(Kay, 2021). This ties back to the “grandiose exhibitionism factor of narcissism”(Kay, 2021) and the fact that those with narcissism need to feel that they are unique. There is less evidence for the connection between psychopathy and conspiracies, but it is believed that the “egocentric and callous aspects of psychopathy” (Kay, 2021) as well as the predisposition to have odd beliefs may increase the likelihood of possessing conspiratorial ideas. Since those with characteristics of the “dark triad” of personality disorders are more likely to believe in conspiracies, it is plausible that this connection can be extended to the association between the Big Five traits and the ‘dark triad”. More research is needed on this connection, but it could help expand our current knowledge about conspiracy beliefs and their “risk factors”.

Ultimately, there needs to be more research about the factors that influence belief in conspiracy theories. The common explanation that conspiracy theories are crazy does not hold up to current academic explanations but it could be found in future years that belief in conspiracies is related to other forms of mental illness. While conspiracy theory belief may not be a mental illness in and of itself. It may be used as a “crutch” to help deal with what is happening in the world or to mask other seemingly undesirable characteristics such as possessing traits associated with the “dark triad”. The research done on the demographics of conspiracy theorists could be expanded upon by exploring the possibility between certain personality traits and the likelihood to have conspiratorial thoughts.

Works Cited

Berghel, H. (2022). The QAnon Phenomenon: The Storm Has Always Been Among Us. *Computer*, *55*(5), 93–100. https://doi.org/10.1109/MC.2022.3154125

Coaston, J. (2018, August 1). *QAnon, the scarily popular pro-Trump conspiracy theory, explained*. Vox. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/8/1/17253444/qanon-trump-conspiracy-theory 4chan-explainer

Crazy. (2023, September 20). https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/crazy

Definition of CRAZY. (2023, September 11). https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crazy

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Fehrman, E., Egan, V., Gorban, A. N., Levesley, J., Mirkes, E. M., & Muhammad, A. K. (2019). *Personality Traits and Drug Consumption: A Story Told by Data*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-10442-9

Garg, M. (2016). *Information Seeking Behaviour Models: A Brief Introduction*. *6*. *Is a Hillary Clinton "Snuff Film" Circulating on the Dark Web? | Snopes.com*. (2021, November 10). https://web.archive.org/web/20211110005050/https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hillary clinton-snuff-film/

Kay, C. S. (2021). Actors of the most fiendish character: Explaining the associations between the Dark Tetrad and conspiracist ideation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *171*, 110543. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110543

Leman, P., & Cinnirella, M. (2007). A major event has a major cause: Evidence for the role of heuristics in reasoning about conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological Review*, *9*, 18–28. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsspr.2007.9.2.18

Leman, P. J., & Cinnirella, M. (2013). Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, 378. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00378

Pierre, J. M. (2020). Mistrust and Misinformation: A Two-Component, Socio-Epistemic Model of Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, *8*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v8i2.1362

QAnon. (2023). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=QAnon&oldid=1177658015#Q's_posts

Roccas, S., Lilach Sagiv, Schwartz, S. H., & Knafo, A. (2002). The Big Five Personality Factors and Personal Values. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*(6), 789–801. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167202289008

Sapountzis, A., & Condor, S. (2013). Conspiracy Accounts as Intergroup Theories: Challenging Dominant Understandings of Social Power and Political Legitimacy. *Political Psychology*, *34*(5), 731–752. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12015

Alison,

I really like the opening paragraph. It was engaging and had a certain gravitas that I found delightful. Your introduction did a good job establishing credibility, the overall idea, and the thesis of the paper. Maybe my only critique is that it would have been nice to have a more clear preview of the main points.

I really enjoyed your description of QAnon. I've written about QAnon myself, but I'm not sure I did a better job than did you in this paper. You covered a substantial amount of ideas very concisely and clearly.

Turning to your analysis, I like the clarity of your ideas and writing. The section on cognitive closure was very well done, as was your section on how we want an explanation to be as significant as the event. You clearly explained the ideas and provided several examples related to QAnon. That's what I was looking for in this paper. You do a good job of showing me how NFCC works in your QAnon example rather than simply telling me it does.

I also liked the section on existential and social needs. You should have started a new paragraph however. I also like how you linked those ideas to the Pierre's work on the socio-epistemic model. You did a very thorough job in this paper. You covered a lot of ground in relatively-short paper. Impressive.

Notes: One minor thing you'll want to avoid in the future is using "naked quotes." These are quotations that stand alone in a paragraph. Instead, you'll want to lead into any quotes you use to contextualize them. Also, in APA style, you'll want to include the page number when you use direct quotes.

48/50