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Belief in Conspiracy Theories

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A survey of 348 residents of southwestern New Jersey showed that most believed that several of a list of 10 conspiracy theories were at least probably true. People who believed in one conspiracy were more likely to also believe in others. Belief in conspiracies was correlated with anomia, lack of interpersonal trust, and insecurity about employment. Black and hispanic respondents were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than were white respondents. Young people were slightly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, but there were few significant correlations with gender, educational level, or occupational category.

KEY WORDS: conspiracy theories, anomia, trust

Reports in the mass media suggested that belief in conspiracies was particularly acute in the United States in 1991 and 1992 (Krauthammer, 1991; Krauss, 1992). The release of the movie *JFK* triggered a revival of popular interest in America's "conspiracy that won't go away" (Oglesby, 1992). A national survey by the *New York Times* (1992) showed that only 10% of Americans believed the official account that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating President John F. Kennedy, while 77% believed that others were involved, and 12% didn't know or declined to answer.

Belief in the Kennedy conspiracy has always been strong but seems to have increased as the event became more distant. In 1966, 36% of the respondents in a Gallup poll believed that Oswald acted alone. The percentage was 11% in both the 1976 and 1983 Gallup polls, and 13% in a 1988 CBS poll (*Times*, 1992). This increase in belief in the conspiracy has taken place despite the fact that the accumulation of evidence has increasingly supported the lone-assassin theory (Moore, 1990).

Perhaps more surprising was the widespread belief, particularly in the African-American and gay communities, that the AIDS epidemic was a deliberate conspiracy by government officials (Bates, 1990; Cooper, 1990; Douglass, 1989). A survey of African-American church members by the Southern Christian Leadership Council found that 35% believed AIDS was a form of genocide,

while 30% were unsure (Thomas & Quinn, 1991, p. 1499). Thirty-four percent of the respondents believed that AIDS is a man-made virus, while 44% were unsure. AIDS specialists say that there is no convincing evidence for this argument, but many African-Americans see a parallel between AIDS and the Tuskegee syphilis experiments conducted from 1952–1972.

Another conspiracy theory current in 1991 was the “October Surprise,” the belief that George Bush and other Republicans conspired with Iranian officials to delay the release of American hostages until after the 1980 elections. This theory, like many others, failed to hold up to careful scrutiny (Barry, 1991), but it continued to be viewed as plausible by many people on both the right and the left.

A number of other conspiracy theories were also current in 1991. Focus-group discussions with students at a New Jersey public university identified the following as widely believed: the conspiracy of Anita Hill and others against Clarence Thomas, the conspiracy by government officials to distribute drugs in American minority communities, the conspiracy of Japanese businessmen against the American economy, the conspiracy of the Air Force to conceal the reality of flying saucers, and the conspiracy of the FBI to kill Martin Luther King.

There has been no published information about the prevalence of belief in any of these conspiracies. Nor has anyone addressed the question of to what extent belief in conspiracies is a generalized ideological trait, that is, how likely are people who believe in one conspiracy to believe in others. Nor has there been any previous attempt to discover the psychological or sociological correlates of belief in conspiracies.

SURVEY RESULTS

In April 1992, a telephone survey was conducted of 348 randomly selected residents of Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester counties in southwestern New Jersey. These counties, which are part of the Philadelphia metropolitan area, are racially, ethnically, and sociologically diverse, including inner-city underclass neighborhoods and working- and middle-class suburbs. The sample was stratified to overrepresent the impoverished minority community residing in the city of Camden, and the percentages were weighted to reflect the demographic balance in the region as a whole. Two hundred and eleven of the respondents were white, 74 were black, 44 were Hispanic, and 19 were Asian or members of other groups. Interviews were conducted by students in a university research-methods class and carefully verified by a staff member. This sample size provides a margin of error of approximately 5.3%.

The first question was, “There has recently been a good deal of interest in the assassination of President John Kennedy. Do you think it likely that President Kennedy was killed by an organized conspiracy, or do you think it more likely

that he was killed by a lone gunman?” Sixty-nine percent of the respondents thought it likely that Kennedy had been killed by a conspiracy, 14% by a lone gunman, and 17% volunteered that they were uncertain. These figures are close to those in the *New York Times*/CBS News national survey (*Times*, 1992), which used very similar question wording.

Table I. Responses to Survey Items on Conspiracies

2. “Anita Hill was part of an organized conspiracy against Judge Clarence Thomas.”	Definitely True (DT): 10% Probably True (PT): 22% Don’t Know (volunteered) (DK): 14% Probably False (PF): 31% Definitely False (DF): 23%
3. “The AIDS virus was created deliberately in a government laboratory.”	DT: 5% PT: 10% DK: 12% PF: 25% DF: 48%
4. “The government deliberately spread the AIDS virus in the homosexual community.”	DT: 3% PT: 8% DK: 9% PF: 26% DF: 54%
5. “The government deliberately spread the AIDS virus in the black community.”	DT: 4% PT: 6% DK: 8% PF: 26% DF: 56%
6. “The Air Force is hiding evidence that the United States has been visited by flying saucers.”	DT: 12% PT: 29% DK: 11% PF: 25% DF: 23%
7. “The FBI was involved in the assassination of Martin Luther King.”	DT: 9% PT: 33% DK: 16% PF: 22% DF: 20%
8. “Ronald Reagan and George Bush conspired with the Iranians so that the American hostages would not be released until after the 1980 elections.”	DT: 16% PT: 39% DK: 12% PF: 23% DF: 11%
9. “The Japanese are deliberately conspiring to destroy the American economy.”	DT: 16% PT: 30% DK: 8% PF: 30% DF: 16%
10. “The American government deliberately put drugs into the inner city communities.”	DT: 7% PT: 14% DK: 9% PF: 29% DF: 41%

The respondents were then asked their opinions about nine other conspiracies which had lately been in the news. A four-point scale was used, ranging from “definitely true” and “probably true” to “probably false” and “definitely false.” “Don’t know” was not offered as an alternative but was recorded when the respondents volunteered it. This question wording encouraged respondents to give their best guess as to the truth of a conspiracy, while relying on the distinction between “probably” and “definitely” to distinguish between hunches and strong beliefs. The items and the weighted percentages are in Table I.

Figure 1 shows the number of conspiracies that the respondents believed to be definitely or probably true. Very few (6.2%) of the respondents thought that none of the conspiracies was at least probably true, while 21% thought that two were true, and 19% that three were true. These percentages were weighted to correct for the disproportionate sampling of minority respondents.

African-American respondents were more likely than white or Hispanic respondents to believe in the conspiracies which specifically affected their community. Sixty-two percent of the black respondents believed that it was definitely or probably true that the government deliberately put drugs in black communities. Sixty-eight percent believed that the FBI had been involved in the killing of Martin Luther King. Thirty-one percent believed that the government deliberately put AIDS into African-American communities. These percentages are reasonably consistent with those from a survey of black church members (Thomas and Quinn, 1991), although our sampling and question wording were different. Because of the smaller number of respondents, percentages based

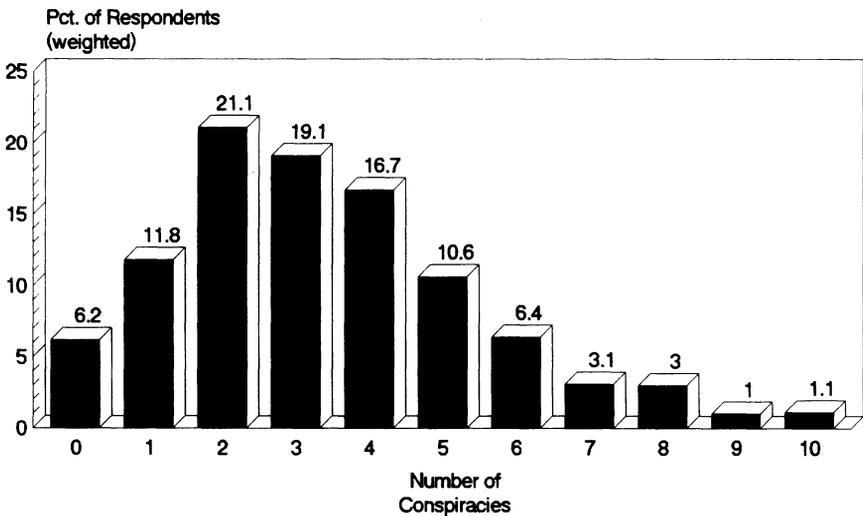


Fig. 1. Number of Conspiracies Believed Definitely or Probably True

only on the black respondents are subject to an approximate 11% margin of sampling error.

BELIEF IN CONSPIRACIES AS A GENERALIZED DIMENSION

There is remarkably little psychological literature on belief in conspiracy theories. Graumann (1987, p. 245) observed that this is a “topic of intrinsic psychological interest that has been left to history and to other social sciences.” Historians (Groh, 1987) and sociologists (Lipset and Raab, 1970) find that conspiratorial thinking has been central to antisemitic and other authoritarian belief systems, and to many social movements in both Europe and the United States. A well-known historical discussion by Hofstadter (1965) argued that there is a distinct paranoid “style” in American politics. Despite this historical evidence, conspiratorial thinking was not part of the authoritarianism syndrome as originally conceptualized by Adorno, et al. (1950), and has not been addressed in the subsequent research on authoritarianism or related social-psychological constructs.

Given this lack of prior empirical research, our first goal was to determine to what extent there is a generalized tendency to believe in conspiracies. The matrix of correlations between the nine conspiracy theory items is shown in Table II. The table shows a moderate to high level of correlation between many of the items, including several that have no strong logical or topical connection. Most of the correlations are statistically significant, as indicated in the table. A factor analysis determined that the first principal factor explained 37.8% of the variance common to these items. (For the white respondents alone, the first principal factor explained 32.5% of the variance; for the black alone it explained 39.9%). These findings offer strong support for the hypothesis that belief in conspiracies is a generalized ideological dimension.

Table II. Correlations Between Belief in Specific Conspiracies

Theory	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Kennedy									
2. Anita Hill	.08								
3. Aids Govlab	.22**	.28**							
4. Aids-Gays	.11	.24*	.69*						
5. Aids-Blacks	.15*	.24**	.67*	.78**					
6. Flying Saucers	.24**	.15*	.21*	.19	.11				
7. FBI-King	.27**	.27*	.35*	.33**	.42**	.16*			
8. Iran Hostages	.16*	.11	.32**	.31**	.32**	.17**	.34**		
9. Japanese Econ	.07	.29**	.20**	.23**	.22*	.03	.24**	.17**	
10. Drugs-Gov	.08	.34**	.52**	.54**	.56**	.19**	.44**	.29**	.29**

N of cases: 348 One-tailed significance: * < .01, ** < .001

CORRELATES OF BELIEF IN CONSPIRACIES

These 10 items were used to construct a summated scale of Belief in Conspiracies. This scale had a reliability coefficient (α) of .78, confirming that the items have enough variance in common to justify treating them as a scale for this population. The scale was then used to investigate some of the correlates of belief in conspiracies as an attitude dimension.

Belief in conspiracies was not significantly correlated with gender, educational level, or occupational category. There was a weak ($r = -.21$) negative correlation with age (all correlations mentioned in the text are significant at the .001 level). Attendance at the movie *JFK* was not correlated with Belief in Conspiracy scores. There was a strong correlation ($r = .44$) with minority status (defined as white=1, hispanic=2, black=3) and with black race as a dummy variable ($r = .42$).

The minority status variable was treated as linear for purposes of correlational analysis since this made sense conceptually (Hispanics are less stigmatized as a minority than are blacks) and empirically (Hispanics were intermediate between white and blacks in their scores on the variables used in this study). Although the U.S. Census treats race and Hispanic ethnicity as two different variables, the sociological reality, at least in New Jersey, is that whites, blacks, and Hispanics are three distinct social groups.

Belief in conspiracies was significantly correlated ($r = .43$) with a three-item scale of "Anomia" ($\alpha = .49$) made up of items taken from the General Social Survey of 1990. These items measured the belief that the situation of the average person is getting worse, that it is hardly fair to bring a child into today's world, and that most public officials are not interested in the average man. These items tapped into feelings of discontent with the established institutions of contemporary society, feelings which were widely observed by pollsters and pundits in 1991 and 1992. A comparison of scores from this sample with those from the national 1990 sample confirmed that anomia in this sense was higher in 1992 than in 1990.

The Belief in Conspiracies scale was significantly correlated ($r = -.37$) with a three-item scale of trust ($\alpha = .57$), which asked whether respondents felt that they could trust the police, their neighbors, or their relatives. The Belief in Conspiracies scale was also significantly correlated ($r = .21$) with the item "Thinking about the next 12 months, how likely do you think it is that you will lose your job or be laid off?"

Table III shows the mean scores of each of the racial/ethnic groups on each of the attitude scales. Group differences on all three scales were statistically significant at the .001 level by analysis of variance test.

In a multivariate regression analysis of the determinants of belief in conspiracies, age and economic insecurity were not statistically significant. The vari-

Table III. Mean Scores of Racial/Ethnic Groups on Attitude Scales

Scale	White	Hispanic	Black
Belief in Conspiracies	2.5	2.8	3.3
Anomia	3.4	3.8	4.1
Trust	3.7	3.3	3.1

Note: All scales varied from 1 to 5, with 3 as a neutral score.

ables which retained significance were minority status, anomia, and trust. The multivariate relationships are shown most clearly in the path analysis in Figure 2. Minority status and anomia are clearly the strongest determinants of belief in conspiracies. Minority status is also strongly correlated with anomia and with lower levels of interpersonal trust. The correlation between trust and belief in conspiracies was weakened when anomia and minority status were controlled, but it retained statistical significance.

The correlation between minority status and belief in conspiracies was elevated by the fact that our questions included several conspiracies alleged to have been directed specifically at blacks. Black respondents were much more likely to believe in these conspiracies than were white or Hispanic respondents. However, the data in Table IV show that minority status was positively correlated with belief in several of the conspiracies which had nothing to do with minorities, such as the Iran hostage conspiracy and the Japanese conspiracy against the American economy. Minority status was not, however, correlated with the belief

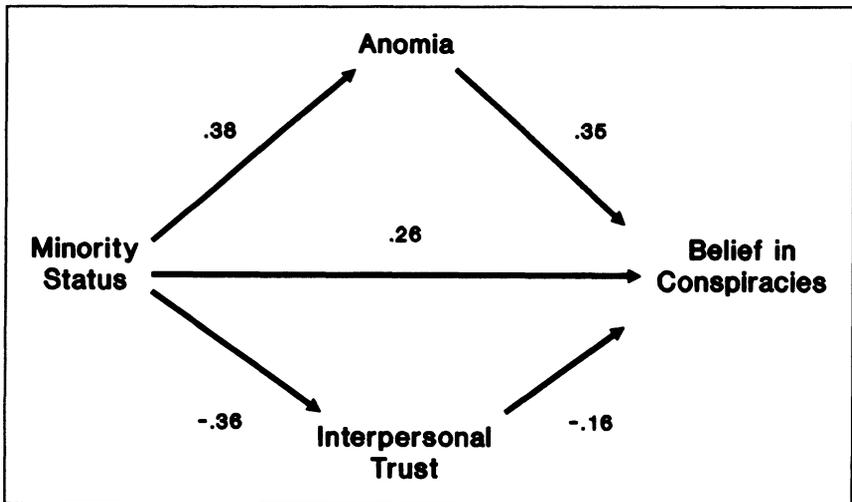


Fig. 2. Path analysis of determinants of belief in conspiracies

Table IV. Correlations of Minority Status, Anomia, and Trust with Conspiracy Items

Items	Minority Status	Anomia	Trust
Kennedy	.03	.17**	-.10
Anita Hill	.28**	.18**	-.10
Aids-govt	.43**	.36**	-.31**
Aids-gays	.39**	.35**	-.30**
AIDS-blacks	.38**	.35**	-.32**
Flying Saucers	-.05	.11	-.11
FBI-King	.31**	.34**	-.26**
Iran Hostages	.23**	.43**	-.16*
Japanese	.19**	.28**	-.19**
Drugs-govt	.55**	.43**	-.40**

N of cases: 329 One-tailed significance: * - .01 ** - .001

that President Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy or that the Air Force is hiding evidence about flying saucers. Belief in the Kennedy conspiracy seems to have become part of the conventional wisdom in all sectors of society, while the flying saucers item may tap into a “new age” belief system not measured by the other items.

Among white respondents, belief in the AIDS conspiracies and belief in the Martin Luther King conspiracy were negatively correlated with educational level. There were no other significant bivariate correlations between education and belief in conspiracies. There was no evidence of an interaction between educational level and anomia, which might have caused an especially high level of belief in certain conspiracies among highly educated anomics. Multivariate regression did show, however, that both education and anomia were significant as determinants of belief in the Kennedy conspiracy for the sample as a whole.

Table IV also shows the correlations between the scales of Anomia and Trust and the 10 conspiracy items. The Anomia scale is significantly correlated with all of the items except the one about flying saucers, which supports the idea that this item may tap into a different belief system. The Trust scale is significantly correlated with most of the conspiracies, although the correlations are lower and do not achieve statistical significance in the case of the Kennedy, Anita Hill, and flying saucer conspiracies.

DISCUSSION

These data confirm that conspiracy theories are alive and well in contemporary American society. Most respondents are inclined to believe that several of a list of conspiracies are probably or definitely true. The tendency to believe in conspiracies is correlated with anomia, with a lack of trust in other people, and

with feelings of insecurity about unemployment. It is also more common among black and Hispanic respondents than among white respondents, at least for this New Jersey sample. The correlations with minority status do not disappear when anomia, trust level, and insecurity about unemployment are controlled, although it is true that minorities in the sample are more anomic, distrustful, and insecure about their job opportunities.

The strong correlation with the scale of Anomia indicates that belief in conspiracies is associated with the feelings of alienation and disaffection from the system. Volkan (1985) suggests that during periods of insecurity and discontent people often feel a need for a tangible enemy on which to externalize their angry feelings. Conspiracy theories may help in this process by providing a tangible enemy to blame for problems which otherwise seem too abstract and impersonal. Conspiracy theories also provide ready answers for unanswered questions and help to resolve contradictions between known "facts" and an individual's belief system.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is puzzling that conspiratorial thinking has been overlooked in the extensive research on authoritarianism which has dominated quantitative work in political psychology since the 1950s. One possible explanation is that much of this work focuses on right-wing authoritarianism (Altmeyer, 1988), while conspiratorial thinking is characteristic of alienated thinkers on both the right and the left (Citrin et al., 1975; Graumann, 1987; Berlet, 1992). Even more surprisingly, however, conspiratorial thinking has not been a focus of the efforts to measure "left-wing authoritarianism" (Stone, 1980; Eysenck, 1981; LeVasseur & Gold, 1993) or of research with the "dogmatism" concept (Rokeach, 1960), which was intended to overcome the ideological bias in authoritarianism measures.

On a more fundamental level, the difficulty with existing research traditions may be their focus on the content of beliefs rather than the respondent's cognitive processes or emotional makeup. As I have argued elsewhere (Goertzel, 1987), most studies of authoritarianism simply ask people what they believe and then assume that these beliefs must be based on underlying psychological processes which go unmeasured. Since these scales ask mostly about beliefs held by those on the right, it is not surprising that they find authoritarianism to be a right-wing phenomenon. Research with projective tests (Rothman & Lichter, 1982) and biographical materials (Goertzel, 1992), on the other hand, have confirmed that many aspects of authoritarian thinking can be found on both the left and the right.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence, chaos theory, and neuropsychology are providing a framework which may enable political psychologists to go beyond this focus on the content of beliefs (Eiser, 1994). In *Chaotic Logic*,

Benjamin Goertzel (1994) develops a mathematical model of belief systems as part of a larger model of the structure and evolution of intelligence (B. Goertzel, 1993a, 1993b). In this model, he shows that belief systems can be characterized as *dialogical* or *monological*. Dialogical belief systems engage in a dialogue with their context, while monological systems speak only to themselves, ignoring their context in all but the shallowest respects. This mathematical model quantifies the philosophical distinction between the “open” and “closed” mind.

Conspiratorial beliefs are useful in monological belief systems since they provide an easy, automatic explanation for any new phenomenon which might threaten the belief system. In a monological belief system, each of the beliefs serves as evidence for each of the other beliefs. The more conspiracies a monological thinker believes in, the more likely he or she is to believe in any new conspiracy theory which may be proposed. Thus African-Americans, who are more likely to be aware of the Tuskegee syphilis conspiracy, are predisposed to believe that AIDS may also be a conspiracy, while this idea may seem absurd to people who are unfamiliar with past medical abuses.

Of course, conspiracies are sometimes real, and not all conspiracy theories are rooted in monological belief systems. Today, everyone acknowledges the reality of the Watergate cover-up conspiracy because the tape recordings provided such strong evidence. The key issue is not the belief in a specific conspiracy, but the logical processes which led to that belief. As with other belief systems, conspiracy theories can be evaluated according to their *productivity* (B. Goertzel, 1994). To the extent that they are productive, belief systems generate new patterns of thought in response to new issues and problems. Some conspiracy thinkers are productive in this sense. They develop highly idiosyncratic theories and gather extensive evidence to test them. Brock (1993), for example, has recently uncovered a great deal of factual evidence relevant to a hypothesized conspiracy to defeat Clarence Thomas’s confirmation to the United States Supreme Court. Although Brock could be characterized as a conspiracy theorist, at least with regard to this case, the structure of his argument is less monological than that of many opponents of this particular conspiracy theory who rely on discussions of wider societal issues which add no new information about the particular case (Morrison, 1992). Of course, dialogical thinkers who sympathize with Anita Hill can find flaws in Brock’s case and cite other facts in Hill’s defense (Mayer & Abramson, 1993).

Dialogical conspiracy theories, which include extensive factual evidence and details, are testable and may even be disconfirmed by new evidence. On rare occasions, a conspiracy expert may even become a turncoat, abandoning a belief which is not supported by the preponderance of evidence (Moore, 1990). Many people seem to respond to dialogical conspiracy arguments according to their ideological scripts (Goertzel, 1992). In just the *New York Times*, for example,

reviewers of and commentators on Brock's book about Anita Hill found it to be "sleaze with footnotes" (Lewis, 1993), "a book that sinks beneath its bias" (Quindlen, 1993), "well written, carefully researched and powerful in its logic" (Lehmann-Haupt, 1993), and a book with "opinionated and sloppily presented arguments" which nonetheless "badly damages [Anita Hill's] case" (Wilkinson, 1993). A *Washington Post* reviewer characterized it as "the first salvo in a long and salutary search for the truth of an affair that is taking place alongside the Kennedy assassination and Watergate as one of the nation's unsolved political mysteries" (Shales, 1993).

Monological conspiracy thinkers do not search for factual evidence to test their theories. Instead, they offer the same hackneyed explanation for every problem—it's the conspiracy of the Jews, the capitalists, the patriarchy, the communists, the medical establishment, or whatever. In these cases, the proof which is offered is not evidence about the specific incident or issue, but the general pattern; for example, the X conspiracy has been responsible for all of our other problems, so it is obvious that X must be responsible for this one as well. For example, Crenshaw (1992) observed that black women have been racially and sexually abused by the white male power structure throughout American history. She then simply assumed that Anita Hill's allegations should be viewed as an example of this pattern, never stopping to examine the factual basis for the particular allegations at hand.

To fully test the model of conspiratorial thinking as part of a monological belief system, we would need time series data to determine how change in belief about one conspiracy affects change in belief in another. On a more qualitative level, we would predict that monological conspiracy thinkers would be more likely to defend their beliefs about a given case by citing evidence about other cases. They would be less likely to rely on evidence which is available to everyone in public sources, and more likely to depend on untestable suppositions and abstract principles. It would be difficult to test these hypotheses with questionnaire data, but they could be tested with content analyses of published literature or with depth interviews.

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