

# THE SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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## ABSTRACT

*In recent years, there has been a surge in conspiracy theories across the world, and the people believing in these theories have also increased drastically. Since a lot of times conspiracy theories have a direct impact on people's lives, be it their health, relationships etc. it's worthwhile to look at the sociological aspects of such theories, why people believe in them, and what are the consequences of the growing belief in them. Thus, with this growing large support for conspiracy theories, it has become important to study their sociological aspects, how they are spread, why people believe them, and what are the consequences of this growing belief.*

**Key Words:** Conspiracy theories, Sociological aspects, COVID-19 pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

Before one looks at the various sociological aspects of Conspiracy Theories, it is required to give a concise definition of such theories first. According to Scott A. Reid (2021), conspiracy theories are an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events are the results of the actions of a small, powerful group of people. These theories reject the accepted narrative surrounding such events and sometimes even see the accepted narrative as further proof of the conspiracy. However, conspiracy theories don't exist solely for "harmful or tragic events". Such theories exist for a variety of events, some of which cannot be categorized as harmful or tragic. For example, the very famous conspiracy theory is that the Earth is flat, or that the moon landing of 1969 was faked. Thus, there is need to extend this definition and include such events as well. Therefore, the more

accurate definition according to Enders, et al (2018) should be "A conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups, often political in motivation, when other explanations are more probable." While earlier the belief in such theories was often dismissed as being pathological and it was thought that only a handful of people believed such theories, recent events have revealed that this might not be the case. The most notable of such events was the 2016 US Election, when Donald Trump, a candidate who spread multiple conspiracy theories ranging from saying that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, to calling climate change a Chinese hoax, was elected President.

Thus, with this growing large support for conspiracy theories, it has become important to study their sociological aspects, how they are spread, why people believe them, and what are the

consequences of this growing belief. We then turn to a case study of such theories during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

## THE BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

It is well said that the people believing conspiracy theories reject the more probable explanations. Thus, if rejection of conspiracy theory is more probable, than why do conspiracy theorists believe in such theories? Why do they look for more complicated explanations, when a simpler explanation is being provided? Why has this belief surged in recent years?

A huge draw in of conspiracy theories is that it helps explain a chaotic, uncertain world. It appeals to the human impulse, that big events must have big causes behind them. This is also known as the proportionality bias. In the same sense, it has been observed that relatively small events have almost no conspiracy theories associated with them. For Example, consider the assassination of US President, John F. Kennedy's in 1963 that took the entire world by surprise, and hence was a huge event which sparked numerous conspiracy theories. There have been theories of there being multiple gunmen, the CIA being involved, the vice-president being involved etc. A similar event on a smaller scale would be the failed assassination attempt on US President Ronald Reagan. One can observe that this event has very low number of conspiracy theories associated with it. While the two events are similar in nature in the sense that both involved an assassination attempt on a sitting US President, one caused a significant change in the world, and was hence a major event. Thus, the assassination of John F. Kennedy sparked many more conspiracy theories. To quote John Oliver, "One man suddenly changing the world is inconceivable. One man failing miserably isn't remotely surprising." (Douglas, et al 2017).

Most conspiracy theories are based on a range of elaborate arguments, suggesting that the

belief in these theories stems from a scientific mindset. For example, the waving flag on the moon despite a lack of wind, or that there is no such force as gravity, only a flat earth accelerating at 9.8m/s. One might be lead to believe that such thinking is based on an analytic and inquisitive mindset that critically analyses evidence.

However, according to Federico, et al (2018), empirical evidence points in the opposite direction. Rather than analytic thinking, conspiracy beliefs are generally found in intuitive thinking of a subject matter which they are not completely familiar with. Data suggests that higher education is linked with lower conspiracy beliefs. Conspiracy beliefs are often related to the illusion of explanatory depth. Thus factors like proportionality bias and the illusion of critical thinking help plant the seed of conspiracy inside people's heads. But there is another big reason for this belief that a huge conspiracy is afoot. It's the confirmation bias. According to Brotherton (2015), confirmation bias helps the conspiracy seed planted take root inside the mind. "Our brain sifts through the mounds of available data, hoarding any morsel that appears to fit a conspiracy and ignoring or dismissing the rest. Confirmation bias wraps a vague suspicion in a cocoon of seeming positive evidence, where it can blossom into a positively held conspiracy theory." Therefore, one can say that these conspiracy beliefs are sort of emotional in nature, and indeed, such traits are often found in correlation with certain other emotional traits like anxiety, etc. Thus, conspiracy theories are innately appealing to the human mind, and have thus attracted several people over the years.

## THE RECENT SURGE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Conspiracy Theorists have existed throughout history, but have found a recent surge in numbers.

The chief cause of this issue is the internet. With the internet, it has become relatively very easy to spread conspiracy theories, and several platforms

have emerged for the same, for example, QAnon which is a "far-right conspiracy theory alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against the current US President." However, it is not just spreading their beliefs which has become easier, fabrication of new conspiracy theories has also become easy, as anyone can just start goggling about events and with bad research, they come up with new conspiracy theories, and spread their results.

Not only that, with the advancement in image processing, it has become remarkably easy to make fake evidence for your claims regarding a conspiracy. Couple that with hiding certain facts and neither false nor true kind of statements it is no surprise that such theories have gained a lot of momentum. All of these factors are already dangerous enough. Add the fact that one of the biggest spreader of conspiracies on the planet, Donald J. Trump was the president of the United States. Indeed, Donald Trump has been spreading conspiracies to his voter base for a while, be it calling climate change a "hoax", or continuously questioning the 2020 US election, he has tweeted and re-tweeted almost all of these theories. And a large majority of his followers do believe him, and also believe these theories. All of these factors together have led to these conspiracy theories spreading like wildfire not only across the United States, but across the entire Globe. Indeed, we will see examples and results of such widespread conspiracy belief in the latter part of this essay. But first, I would like to discuss some sociological aspects of the belief in conspiracy theories.

## SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

Conspiracy Theories are also a social phenomenon. They reflect the basic structure of inter group conflict. Beliefs start qualifying as conspiracy theories only when not just the individual, but a group of people start feeling threatened, for example the theories related to security agencies

being able to access our camera at any moment and keeping an eye on us, or the different theories regarding different political parties etc. All of these involve a group of people feeling threatened by another group. Looking closely, you can find two main sociological reasons for the rise of such thinking. Firstly, people only care about conspiracy theories when they feel connected to the victim in some fashion. It's one of the main reasons why I believe Trump supporters rally so strongly with him. They feel a sort of a connection with him, and are hence deeply indulged and believe that the 2020 Election was rigged.

Second, people believe theories when they feel threatened by the perpetrating group. These groups can be the government, or a minority group. The perpetrating group typically has some sort of power or negative stereotypes associated with them, which leads to such theories gaining even more momentum. An example of such a situation would be Americans wanting to build a wall to protect them from Mexican immigrants who they believe commit heinous crimes on coming to America. These motivations can be seen as clear as day when it comes to politics. The Democrats believe theories against Republicans, and the Republicans believe theories against Democrats. Often times these motivations are found together in a group. For example, when a group feels under threat from a foreign group, they also feel a need to protect their identity. Thus though the two motivations look different from each other, often times there is a cause and effect relationship between the two. It is also worthwhile to note that these theories are not specific to any particular culture or time. These theories have been noted to exist as further back as the 14th century, when during the Bubonic Plague, rumors spread that the Jews were responsible for the plague. They have been a part of every culture. Indeed, it's a testament to the amount of suspicion ingrained in man, and our lack of ability to trust people easily. These beliefs are clearly universal, and while it doesn't mean everyone believes in them equally, but it means most individuals and groups believe in them to some extent. It's somewhat

interesting to note that research has found that oppressed minority believe in conspiracy theories much more than the majority. There is a stronger sense of unity amongst the minority members, which could be attributed to the fact that they feel a strong sense of camaraderie with each other due to shared oppression experiences and smaller groups. Research indicates that such groups believe in both types of conspiracy theories much more readily, as they try to blame the system for the problems faced by their community. Thus, one can attribute inter group conflicts to be a root cause of such theories. We have now looked at Conspiracy Theories, their sociological and psychological basis, and the reasons for their spreading. Lets now move on to the consequences of these beliefs.

## CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

Conspiracy theories generally have a negative effect on people. They adversely affect health, relationships, and generally the society as a whole. For Example, with the emergence of vaccines, many people have begun to believe the conspiracy theory that these vaccines cause autism. Thus, people exposed to these conspiracy theories have a somewhat lower chance of getting their children vaccinated. These consequences are not limited to health related conspiracy theories, but are present in almost all such theories. Conspiracy theories, in general cause hindrance to the society in working towards a common goal. Be it working together to address the climate change issue, controlling the corona virus, or even just working together to end violence between communities, these theories cause people to rally against the measures being taken, and hence end up causing harm to the society. This belief in conspiracy theories is often times even used by politicians to further their personal cause, for example, the 2016 US elections, which Donald Trump won, in my opinion by spreading conspiracy theories like the deep state, or Hillary Clinton's secret server emails. Now, whether President Trump was a good or bad president isn't what I want to say

here, but that these theories have a very big real world impact. There have been accounts of people who were exposed to conspiracy theories regarding the government, who later said they had lost faith in the political system. Thus, these theories cause a sort of alienation of people from politics. Furthermore, such theories are also associated with political extremes, and often become a breeding ground for extremist movements like Neo-Nazism, religious fundamentalists etc. People who believe in conspiracy theories often times face ridicule and social stratification because of their beliefs. In fact, a lot of times, it also makes people feel powerless. Thus, conspiracy theories seem to be extremely subversive, and lower the individual's confidence in already established institutes. The above consequences paint a rather heavy picture of the consequences of the popularization of such theories. Indeed, most of the consequences of widespread belief in such theories is negative, but it's not like there have not been any positives out of believing in such theories. Such theories often force the government to be more transparent. They even help point out inconsistencies in government explanations at times. These theories can sometimes also inspire protests in the right direction. In fact, sometimes, and by sometimes I mean extremely rarely, these theories come out to be true, like Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. Thus, conspiracy theories have a wide range of consequences, and hence shouldn't be taken lightly. A perfect example of these theories having huge effects on people's lives is the recent corona virus pandemic.

## COVID-19: A HOTBED FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Throughout the times, plagues have a history of inspiring conspiracy theories, for example in 1918, the theory spread that a German company had tainted its tablets with the Spanish flu. So, it is only natural that these theories occur this time too. One can also see from the aforementioned proportionality bias, that a plague like Corona virus should have some sort of a big reason behind its'

spread. Thus, what makes this time's conspiracy theories so interesting? Like I mentioned before, there has already been a huge surge in the belief of conspiracy theories in recent years, due to the internet. Not only that, President Trump has been repeatedly transmitting conspiracy theories to the entire world, like how masks are anti-Christian, the corona virus is a Democrat party hoax, or the corona virus was a bio-weapon developed by the Chinese in order to take over the world. Thus, these conspiracy theories have gathered momentum like that never seen before, and hence resulted in a lot of adverse consequences. Let's take the example of a few such theories. The anti-mask movement is perhaps, one of the best examples, as through that, we can not only see the affect on public health, but also the social stratification caused by it. Let's look at how the belief began. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued guidelines regarding the wearing of masks, some people decided that the masks were too uncomfortable. When stores refused them service because of a lack of mask, or they were condemned for their actions, these people thought that their liberty as an American was under a direct threat. Thus, they started believing the conspiracy theories spewed by the than President, like how the virus was a hoax, and young people didn't die from it. Yes, indeed, a part of American public felt that their identity as free-Americans was under threat, and this formed the breeding grounds for a plethora of conspiracy theories, like how wearing mask was anti-Christian in some manner. These beliefs spread like wildfire when President Trump said in a press conference that wearing masks was optional and hence he wasn't about to wear one. And when a country sees its leader not following the CDC protocols, they imitate him. People showed up in big numbers to events, without wearing masks and without caring about the corona virus. Fast forward to approximately 8-9 months later, we can clearly see the result of not following the CDC guidelines. USA currently has the highest number of reported corona virus cases, and also the highest number of deaths. Thus, the scale to which these conspiracy theories have affected public health measures, has been

astounding and beyond our imagination. Anti-maskers were not only detrimental to the goal of stopping corona virus; they also created a social divide between them and the people who wore masks. Anti-maskers faced social stratification and were painted as fools all over the internet. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that they are the victims here, but I am saying the social divide created definitely did not help in encouraging these people to wear masks. The social divide created by the entire pandemic may not be so easy to overcome even when the pandemic is over. It is also a bit interesting to note that, no matter how many deaths occurred, or how much evidence in support of the masks was provided by the CDC, the anti-maskers refused to wear a mask and continued with their belief that masks were dangerous. This actually, is another common trait of conspiracy theories, that they are inherently, self-sealing. That is, any criticism just justifies their beliefs that the whole thing is bigger than anyone could imagine. This is just one of the conspiracy theories, however there were several others, like how corona virus is spread through 5G networks, and conspiracy theorists burned down a 5G tower in UK. This just goes on to show that these theories are widespread and are more or less universal. With this case study, the author, intended to show that most conspiracy theories do work in the ways mentioned in this paper, and that they are incredibly dangerous. In fact, various social media outlets have begun trying to strike down such theories, but they face several major challenges, like lack of expert information and the sheer volume of such theories that are put up every day. The best way to mitigate the spread of such theories would be to improvement in education, and reinforce analytically thinking about the information available online, and not believe blindly.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion the author quotes from Alan Moore: "The main thing that I learned about conspiracy theory is that conspiracy theorists believe in a conspiracy because that is more comforting. The truth of the world is that it is actually chaotic. The

truth is that it is not The Illuminati, or The Jewish Banking Conspiracy, or the Gray Alien Theory. The truth is far more frightening and nobody is in control. The world is rudderless." Indeed, this is frighteningly true, that conspiracy theories do offer a more satisfying explanation, but believing in these theories can have disastrous consequences, ranging from widespread death to social division lasting for many years. The random knowledge from internet about events and subsequently coming up with new conspiracy theories, and spreading them is a great threat to the society. The author thus is in opinion that it is important to have an inquisitive mind, and question the validity of different results, but it is even more important to be able to tell the difference between facts and falsehood, and to be able to form theories that fit all the facts, and not to bend facts to fit theories.

This article highlights several reasons for why people believe in conspiracy theories, their sociological and psychological appeal, why these theories have gained more momentum now as compared to the past, and why this growing trend is especially harmful. Lastly, few conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, and explored the various sociological aspects in them, how and why they came about, how did they spread and what were the consequences. Thus, the scientists and policy-makers need to collaborate closely to address this phenomenon effectively, because if these theories continue to spread like they are right now, the consequences might soon be direr than the ones that are existing now.

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