

The psychology of conspiracy theories

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What makes a person more likely to believe in or create conspiracy theories—and whether that is related to mental illness—is the subject of new research from Victoria University of Wellington.

The study was carried out by Dr Darshani Kumareswaran, who recently completed her training as a Clinical Psychologist and graduated last week with a PhD in Psychology. She wanted to find out which factors make somebody more likely to be a [conspiracy](#) theorist, and also to understand public opinion of people who subscribe to those theories.

"According to the literature, people are more likely to believe in, or create, [conspiracy theories](#) to try to make sense of situations where they have little or no control," says Dr Kumareswaran. "As part of my research, I asked participants to recall a situation where they had no control: to describe it in detail and write it down. The idea was to put them in a psychological space where they felt a sense of powerlessness."

Dr Kumareswaran then presented the participants with a series of visual patterns, some of which contained real objects. "There were 24 pictures that looked like snowy television sets. Half of them contained obscured objects like a chair or tent, and the other 12 had nothing. The people in the low-control condition, who also scored highly on a form of psychopathology known as schizotypy, were more likely to say that they could see an object in those images where there actually was none, which tells us that they're more likely to make connections between unrelated stimuli.

"I also found that someone who creates conspiracy theories is more likely to have some form of psychopathology, or mental illness such as paranoid thinking, compared to those who believe in conspiracy theories but do not create them or people who do not believe in them at all," explains Dr Kumareswaran. "Belief in conspiracy theories is possibly a means of trying to re-establish a sense of control over a situation."

Dr Kumareswaran says she's interested in the psychological effects of feeling a lack of control. "I'd like to find out under what circumstances someone might start using strategies like this to re-establish a sense of control—it might be when someone's facing their own mortality, for example. I'd then like to investigate how this affects their mental wellbeing, which could have implications for clinical psychological treatment. If we can arm people with the tools to feel more empowered and cope with seemingly uncontrollable situations, it could be a really useful method of targeting [mental illness](#) and allowing people to continue

in life in a more fulfilling way."

Dr Kumareswaran's research also looks at how the public perceives conspiracy theorists. "It's quite a stigmatised label," she says. "The public views conspiracy theorists in as negative a light as they do convicted criminals, despite the fact there is evidence of verified conspiracies, such as the Watergate conspiracy. For the label to be so negatively rated by the public is quite a powerful finding."

Dr Kumareswaran PhD supervisor Dr Marc Wilson says her work counters the common stereotype that people who believe conspiracy theories are characterised by extreme paranoia. "The relationship between psychopathology and paranoia is quite weak," he says. "The really interesting thing is that people tend to assume that paranoia is a root cause of conspiracy when it isn't the smoking gun."

"It is equally important to acknowledge that there have been lots of instances in the past where making connections between seemingly unrelated things has benefitted humanity," says Dr Kumareswaran.

"For example, some mathematical theorems, or even the discovery of penicillin have been the result of creative thinking linking previously unrelated ideas. It appears however, that when this style of thinking is used as a compensatory mechanism by people in situations they feel little control, it has the potential to become quite problematic."

Provided by Victoria University

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