

There is no doubt that big, sudden and threatening world events often lead people to adopt conspiracy explanations (i.e., beliefs in secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups that allegedly aim to take control over the world and hurt particular individuals). Belief in conspiracy theories is a global phenomenon popular among people of different national and cultural background. For example, in the United States, conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terror attacks accused the Bush administration, major corporations, and Jews; in France, conspiracy theories about the Notre Dame Cathedral fire blamed Muslims; while in the United Kingdom, conspiracy theories surrounding Princess Diana's death inculpated the CIA, among others.

Why are conspiracy theories so popular? What psychological traits or states make us willing to reject official explanations related to tragic world events and adopt alternative conspiracy explanations? Is it possible that accepting conspiracy explanations can help people better understand the world (e.g., find explanations why bad things happen to good people)? Or does it hinder everyday functioning leading to negative psychological outcomes?

The aim of our project is to find answers to these questions. It seems that significant world events that cause unpleasant psychological outcomes (e.g., evoke uncertainty and threat, leading to feelings of stress and negative emotions) are commonly, at least among some individuals, related to conspiracy beliefs. In our project particular attention will be paid to the role of coping with stress and negative emotions in adopting conspiracy beliefs. Basing on the studies carried out so far in the field of social, political, cognitive and personality psychology, we assume that those individuals who use maladaptive stress and emotion regulation strategies (and have difficulties in emotion regulation) should be most prone to adopt conspiracy explanations related to world events. In such a way, we present conspiracy beliefs as a response to maladaptive coping with psychological threat and as an attempt to reduce negative psychological states by precisely locating groups of people allegedly responsible for the tragic situation. Moreover, reducing the psychological threat may also be associated with obtaining "reliable" answers to difficult questions. However, as conspiracy theories has been so far associated with negative psychological outcomes (e.g., a sense of alienation and passivity in various spheres of life), we assume that accepting conspiracy explanations will exacerbate the negative psychological effects, leading to higher levels of negative emotions and feelings of stress; in the long term, increasing the lack of interpersonal and intergroup trust.

In our project, we will use a methodology that has not been used in studies on conspiracy thinking so far that would allow to estimate the stability of conspiracy thinking in the same group of people over several months. We will also examine the causes and effects of adopting conspiracy beliefs. We plan to conduct several experimental studies and thoroughly determine the consequences of the mere exposure to the conspiracy explanations for the general psychological well-being. Finally, we will check whether the use of adaptive coping with stress and negative emotions strategies can lower conspiracy beliefs, in turn, leading to positive psychological outcomes both on individual and group level.

Finally, our project will enable a better understanding of the role of conspiracy thinking in everyday human functioning – especially in the context of coping with stress and negative emotions. It will allow for a better understanding of differences in the perception of significant socio-political events between people using different ways of dealing with a psychological threat. As a result, it will result in numerous speeches at national and international conferences as well as international publications.