

Conspiracy mentality as an adaptation to historical trauma: mediating mechanisms, social-psychological outcomes and preventive factors.

Conspiracy theories and misinformation are among the most essential challenges of the contemporary world. In times of global economic crises and pandemic diseases, people's trust in science and institutions became essential to deal with these large-scale societal issues. Therefore, the quest to explain human motivation to believe in conspiracies and mistrust the established sources of knowledge became an important task for social psychologists.

In most existing psychological accounts, conspiracy beliefs were considered a maladaptive phenomenon and a pathology of human cognition. In the present research endeavor, we would like to offer an alternative account of people's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. We propose that such theories are, in fact, a form of the remnant of adaptation to an extremely hostile environment. This is why we would like to study the effects of historical trauma (past wars, ethnic cleansing, genocides) on current tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories.

We would like to propose that during long-lasting traumatic events people develop a specific mindset (conspiracy mentality) that makes them interpret the environment as hostile and others as intentionally conspiring against them. This mentality develops through three processes that are common during historical traumatic events: loss of personal control (experiences and feelings of powerlessness), victim consciousness (focus on own group's victimization), and relative deprivation (experience of precarity, exploitation, and poverty).

The main aim of this project is to analyze whether conspiracy beliefs are, in fact, more common in historically traumatized societies, and how such experiences are translated into more general mistrust: lack of trust in institutions, medicine, politics, science, as well as susceptibility to misinformation.

This project proposes a set of large cross-national comparative survey studies looking at the effects of secondary trauma related to historical experiences on the tendency to believe in conspiracies. Furthermore, experimental studies will determine the key mechanisms through which historical traumatic experiences lead to conspiracy beliefs and susceptibility to misinformation today. We will also reanalyze the existing datasets in order to examine whether such beliefs are more frequent in the populations that suffered from past trauma and developed victim consciousness.

Finally, we aim at determining the effective strategies to counteract this process, namely, the identity-related factors that can inhibit the effects of past victimization on the development of conspiracy beliefs. We propose that strong ingroup ties could become a buffer that protects societies from the spread of conspiracy beliefs after historically traumatizing events.

The impact of the proposed project will go beyond the boundaries of disciplines, and we anticipate that the results will be broadly applied not only in social psychology but also in political science and orthopsychiatry. A better understanding of the role of conspiracy mentality in responses to trauma might allow us to explain the prevalence of susceptibility to fake news and misinformation in many areas of the contemporary world.