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The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

, which explain important events as secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups? What are the psychological consequences of adopting these theories? We review the current research and find that it answers the first of these questions more thoroughly than the second. Belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group). However, little research has investigated the consequences of conspiracy belief, and to date, this research does not indicate that conspiracy belief fulfills people's motivations. Instead, for many people, conspiracy belief may be more appealing than satisfying. Further research is needed to determine for whom, and under what conditions, conspiracy theories may satisfy key psychological motives.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, conspiracy beliefs, psychological motives, epistemic motivation, existential mo

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