





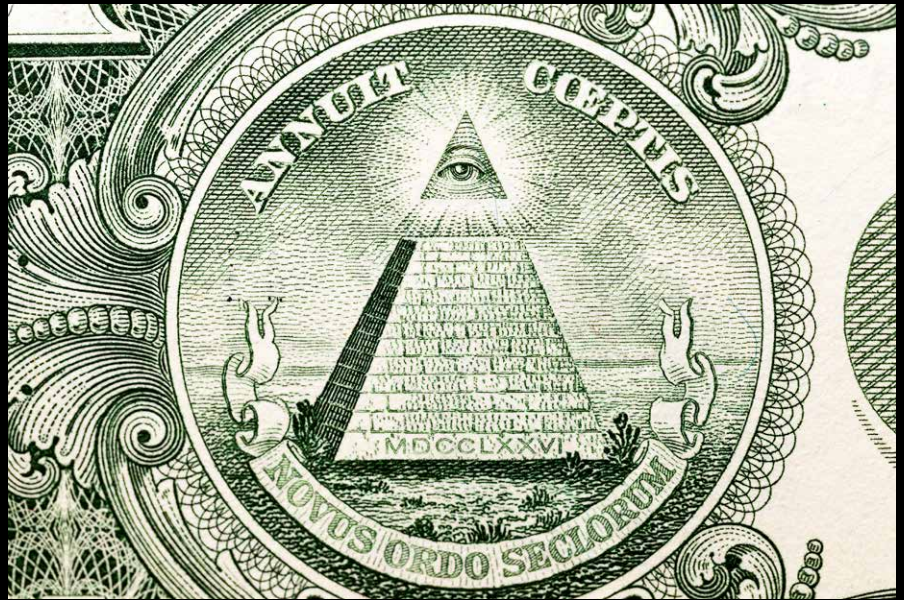
CONSPIRACY THEORIES VS SCIENCE

A REFUGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

Although research into the popularity of conspiracy beliefs is frequently undertaken in many different disciplines, in recent years their number in the field of psychology has increased significantly. The year 2020 brought us a difficult situation caused by the pandemic, which gave rise to many doubts and generated strong emotions such as fear, anger, and helplessness, affecting almost every aspect of people's lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a fertile platform for the development of conspiracy theories, and subsequent crises, wars, and geopolitical uncertainty have only reinforced their position in the modern world. New social movements began to emerge, and existing ones became more active, offering people a way to satisfy their needs, including restoring a lost sense of security.

 Julia Galas

 Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof.
Institute of Political Science
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Silesia in Katowice
agnieszka.turska-kawa@us.edu.pl



'Conspiracy theories have always been out there, but in the past they were rather isolated and focused on specific groups. They often arose as a result of situations that were difficult to explain conclusively and after large-scale events such as terrorist attacks, economic crises, and epidemics', says Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor, who heads the National Science Centre's OPUS LAP project 'Political potential of conspiracy theories. A Study of Poland and Slovenia'. Researchers from the University of Silesia and the University of Ljubljana have been cooperating for several years to analyse movements based on conspiracy theories in three thematic areas: political science (the political potential of conspiracy theories), communication (paths of theory dissemination), and psychology (individuals' susceptibility to conspiracy thinking).

The project devoted a lot of space to analysing the profile of people who turn away from knowledge and science and chose to rebuild their worldview on the basis of conspiracy theories. In one of their numerous publications, entitled *Contemporary trends in psychological research on conspiracy beliefs*, the researchers compiled the results of studies from the Scopus and Web of Science databases from 2018–2021 on the factors that support belief in conspiracy theories. The reasons for such beliefs are diverse: cognitive (thinking style), motivational (need for control),

personality-related (collective narcissism), psychopathological (psychoticism), political (extremist views), and socio-cultural (collectivism). One of the strongest predictors of conspiratorial thinking turned out to be a low level of trust – in science, the government, other people, and society.

In order to prepare the aforementioned psychological profile, the researchers conducted an online survey on Facebook (over 1,000 participants) and carried out interviews with people with strong conspiratorial beliefs. Reaching these types of groups was quite difficult, as they usually operate on closed forums and often require verification of new members' views.

'Ultimately, we came up with a positive message announcing that we were looking for people who do not follow mainstream narratives and want to find answers to difficult questions', says Agnieszka Turska-Kawa. 'We have conducted interviews with more than 70 people. We divided them into two groups: the convinced, consisting of people who were certain of the truth of the theory, and the seeking, which included people who treated conspiracy narratives as one of the possible solutions to a situation they did not understand. The factor that differentiated the two groups was their worldview, which in the case of the convinced group was strongly based on four pillars: the central self, a threatening world, dishonest politics, and immaterial authority', explains the researcher.

Analysing the conclusions of the project, Agnieszka Turska-Kawa notes that as a society, we are not well prepared to face the unpredictability of the world in the era of the so-called polycrisis (numerous crises occurring simultaneously, reinforcing each other). Uncertainty has become another civilisation disease of the 21st century.

'Some of us have certain psychological resources that allow us to endure uncertainty, to accept the existence of questions that currently remain unanswered or those that will remain unanswered forever. However, there are people who, when faced with a loss of security, need immediate support: conspiracy narratives then become a shield, even though they provide a false sense of control over the situation', adds the researcher.

According to the researcher, building social resilience – based on knowledge – could counteract the development of conspiracy theories. We should teach young people how to deal with uncertainty, think critically, distinguish fake news from true information, and build their own anchors of security. Attitudes shaped in this way can develop at universities – places open to conversation and discussion, whose mission is, among other things, to build trust in science.

'The popularity of conspiracy narratives draws attention to the role and value of science, which, especially in difficult times, should be our main point of support', emphasises Agnieszka Turska-Kawa.