

The psychology of conspiracy theories

1. Warm-up discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner:

1. What is a **conspiracy theory**? Can you think of a famous example?
2. Why do you think some people are drawn to these theories, even when there's no evidence?
3. Have you ever encountered a conspiracy theory online or in real life? What was it about?

2. Vocabulary preview

Match the words from the upcoming video with their definitions. These words will help you understand the psychological concepts discussed.

1. Prevalent	a. A personal view of the world and how it works.
2. Plausible	b. To worsen or make a problem more severe.
3. Confirmation bias	c. The capacity of an individual to act independently and make their own free choices.

4. Worldview	d. To go against or be in conflict with something.
5. Contradict	e. Widespread or common in a particular area at a particular time.
6. Exacerbated	f. The tendency to search for, interpret, and recall information in a way that supports one's preexisting beliefs.
7. Agency	g. Seeming reasonable or probable.

3. Video: Why are conspiracy theories so appealing?

Watch the video to understand the psychological factors that make people believe in conspiracy theories. Answer the questions below.

[Watch the video on YouTube](#)

First viewing (0:00 - 1:39)

Watch the first part of the video and identify the first three psychological factors mentioned.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Second viewing (full video)

Watch the entire video again and answer the following questions.

1. The human mind is hardwired to believe in "intentional causality." What example is given to explain this?

2. What is a negative consequence of our superior "pattern processing" ability?

3. Why is it difficult for people to admit their worldview is incorrect?

4. What is "projection" in this context?

5. When do all these psychological factors become more intense or "exacerbated"?

4. Comprehension check and discussion

Discuss your answers from the video with a partner. Then, discuss the following:

- Which of the psychological factors discussed in the video do you think is the most powerful? Why?
- The video says we "err on the side of paranoid belief" for survival. Can you think of a modern-day example of this?
- At the end, the speaker advises us to "weigh all the evidence" and "keep an open mind." How can we do this in our daily lives?

5. Grammar focus: Hedging and cautious language

When discussing theories, psychology, or unproven ideas, it's important to use **hedging language**. This softens your statements and shows you are not presenting opinions as absolute facts. It makes your language more academic and cautious.

- **Modal verbs:** *may, might, could, can* (e.g., "This **can** lead to false patterns.")
- **Adverbs:** *often, sometimes, generally, potentially, arguably* (e.g., "This is **often** a contributing factor.")
- **Verbs:** *tend to, seem to, appear to, suggest* (e.g., "People **tend to** look for evidence that supports them.")
- **Phrases:** *It is likely that..., There is a tendency to..., In some cases...*

Rewrite these strong, direct statements using hedging language from the box above. Make them sound more cautious and academic.

1. Believing in conspiracies is a result of feeling powerless.
→ Feeling powerless _____ people to believe in conspiracies.
2. Confirmation bias is the only reason people ignore evidence.
→ Confirmation bias _____ a significant role in why people ignore evidence.
3. People see patterns everywhere because their brains are flawed.
→ The human brain's _____ see patterns everywhere can sometimes lead to incorrect conclusions.
4. If you are a liar, you believe others are liars too.
→ People who lie _____ assume that others are acting similarly.
5. Big events always have big causes.
→ There is a human tendency to assume that big events _____ have big causes.

6. Speaking practice: Analyzing a theory

Work in small groups. Choose one of the common conspiracy theory topics below (or one of your own). Your task is to explain **why** people might believe it, using the psychological concepts from the video and the hedging language you just practiced.

The moon landing was faked

The Earth is flat

Aliens built the ancient pyramids

A secret society controls the world

Useful phrases for your discussion:

- "One psychological factor that **might** explain this is..."
- "This theory **could appeal** to people who feel..."
- "This is **arguably** an example of proportionality bias because..."
- "People who believe this **tend to** focus on evidence that supports it, which is a form of..."
- "It **seems plausible** to some because it offers a simple explanation for a complex event."
- "The desire for a sense of **agency** or special knowledge **may play a role.**"

Try to use at least three of the psychological terms from the video (e.g., ****pattern processing****, ****confirmation bias****, ****intentional causality****, ****sense of powerlessness****).