

# The psychology of conspiracy theories

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## 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?

**Teacher's note:** Answers will vary. Encourage students to share their own definitions and examples.

*Sample answers:*

1. A **conspiracy theory** is an explanation for an event that claims a secret group or organization is responsible. Famous examples include theories about the JFK assassination, the 9/11 attacks, or the idea that the moon landing was faked.
2. People might be drawn to them because they offer simple explanations for complex events, make people feel they have special knowledge, or help them cope with feelings of powerlessness.
3. Students may mention theories seen on social media about politics, health, or historical events.

## 2. Vocabulary preview

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

1. <b>Prevalent</b>	<b>e.</b> Widespread or common in a particular area at a particular time.
2. <b>Plausible</b>	<b>g.</b> Seeming reasonable or probable.
3. <b>Confirmation bias</b>	<b>f.</b> The tendency to search for, interpret, and recall information in a way that supports one's preexisting beliefs.
4. <b>Worldview</b>	<b>a.</b> A personal view of the world and how it works.
5. <b>Contradict</b>	<b>d.</b> To go against or be in conflict with something.
6. <b>Exacerbated</b>	<b>b.</b> To worsen or make a problem more severe.
7. <b>Agency</b>	<b>c.</b> The capacity of an individual to act independently and make their own free choices.

## 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. Our minds are hardwired to believe in **intentional causality**.
2. Our superior **pattern processing** ability.
3. Our tendency towards **confirmation bias**.

## 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?  
**The example is hearing a rustling noise in the bushes. It's safer for survival to assume it's a threat (like a predator) rather than just the wind.**
2. What is a negative consequence of our superior "pattern processing" ability?  
**It can lead to finding false patterns, like seeing faces in inanimate objects or creating causal relationships between events that are just coincidences.**
3. Why is it difficult for people to admit their worldview is incorrect?  
**It can feel like admitting there is something wrong with them personally because these ideas are strongly connected to their identity.**
4. What is "projection" in this context?  
**It's an unconscious impulse to deny negative qualities in ourselves (like conspiring or lying) while assuming that others possess them and are acting on them.**
5. When do all these psychological factors become more intense or "exacerbated"?  
**They become more intense at times when we feel powerless or when our lives and the world around us seem out of control.**

## 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?

**Teacher's note:** These are discussion questions with no single correct answer. Guide students to use the concepts from the video in their reasoning.

*Sample points for discussion:*

- Students might argue **confirmation bias** is most powerful because it's reinforced by social media algorithms. Others might say feeling **powerless** is the root cause that triggers the other factors.
- A modern example could be immediately assuming an email from an unknown sender is a scam or virus, even if it might be legitimate. This "paranoid belief" protects us from potential harm.
- We can do this by reading news from multiple reputable sources, listening to people with different viewpoints, checking facts before sharing information, and being willing to admit when we are wrong.

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

**Teacher's note:** Below is a sample analysis of one theory to demonstrate expected student output.

#### Sample analysis: The moon landing was faked

"One psychological factor that **might explain** why some people believe the moon landing was faked is the assumption that big events need big causes. Landing on the moon was a massive event, so the idea that it was faked by a huge government conspiracy **seems more plausible** to some than the

simple truth. This theory **could also appeal** to people who feel a sense of **powerlessness**; believing they know a 'secret truth' can restore a sense of control and **agency**. Furthermore, believers **tend to** engage in **confirmation bias** by focusing on blurry photos or supposed inconsistencies, while ignoring the vast amount of evidence that contradicts their theory."