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March against racism in London on March 18, 2017. John Gomez/Shutterstock

Conspiracy theories fuel prejudice towards minority groups

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Some 60% of British people believe in at least one conspiracy theory, a recent poll reveals. From the idea that 9/11 was an inside job to the notion that climate change is a hoax, conspiracy theories divert attention away from the facts in favour of plots and schemes involving powerful and secret groups. With the aid of modern technology, conspiracy theories have found a natural home online.

Conspiracy theories often unfairly and erroneously accuse minority groups of doing bad things. For example, one conspiracy theory accuses Jewish people of plotting to run the world, including the outlandish idea that Jewish billionaire George Soros is a mastermind of a vast global conspiracy to “reduce humanity to slavery”. Another conspiracy theory proposes that global warming was created by the Chinese in order

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to make US manufacturing noncompetitive. Yet another conspiracy theory accuses immigrants of plotting to attack Britain from within.

In our research, we wanted to look at the impact of these types of conspiracy theories. How do they actually make people feel about minority groups? In our new paper, published in the **British Journal of Psychology**, we try to answer this question based on the results of three experiments.

In our first experiment, we asked 166 British participants to read one of three stories: (1) that immigrants are involved in terrorism in Britain (conspiracy), (2) that they are not involved in terrorism (anticonspiracy), or (3) no information (control). When tested afterwards, participants who had read the conspiracy story believed in conspiracy theories about immigrants more than participants in the other groups and were more prejudiced towards immigrants.

In the second and third studies, we asked 173 and 114 British participants respectively to again read a conspiracy story, an anticonspiracy story or a neutral story. This time, the material was about Jewish people and the conspiracy theory that they have a controlling influence over world affairs. In both studies, people who had read the conspiracy story were more likely to believe conspiracy theories about Jewish people and expressed more antisemitic attitudes. When asked if they would vote for a Jewish candidate in an upcoming election, those who had read the conspiracy story were less likely to say yes.

Also, in the third study, participants were asked to rate their feelings towards a number of other groups, such as people from different countries, ethnicities and people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds. We found that the participants who had read the antisemitic conspiracy story also expressed greater prejudice against these completely unrelated groups.

We find this last finding particularly worrying. It is bad enough that conspiracy theories fuel prejudice against minority groups who are accused of conspiring, but even more concerning that conspiracy theorising about one group can affect people's feelings towards other, completely unrelated groups. That is, when people's attitudes about one group are affected by conspiracy theories, these negative attitudes appear to transfer to or generalise about other groups.



George Soros is the subject of a harmful conspiracy theory. wikipedia, CC BY-SA

Prejudice isn't the only negative outcome of conspiracy theories. Other research has shown that conspiracy theories have a range of negative consequences. For example, exposure to conspiracy theories can make people less inclined to vote, reduce their carbon footprint and have children vaccinated. They can also make people more likely to engage in everyday criminal behaviour.

Tackling the problem

Given these harms, it is becoming increasingly important to understand what can be done to curb the influence of conspiracy theories. One technique that seems to work is to help people think more analytically. When people think clearly and critically, they are less likely to believe conspiracy theories. Education seems to help, too. Some research has shown that people who are more educated are less likely to "join the dots" and see patterns that don't exist, and this includes being less likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Furthermore, inoculating people with factual information can make people more resistant to conspiracy theories.

However, we need to do more to find out what strategies will help reduce the harmful effects of conspiracy theories, especially now that we know that these harmful effects include prejudice against a range of unrelated minority groups.

Psychology Racism Conspiracy theories Bigotry