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Conspiracy theories start to take hold at age 14, study suggests

February 25, 2021 2.00pm GMT

Conspiracy theories tend to prosper in times of crisis. When people are looking for ways to cope with uncertainty and threat, conspiracy theories may seem to offer simple answers. However, instead of making things better, conspiracy theories often make things worse.

Over the course of history, conspiracy theories have been linked to conflict, prejudice, genocide and the rejection of important scientific advances. Recently, belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (such as that the virus is a hoax) have been linked to vaccine rejection and reluctance to take action to stop the spread of the virus.

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We decided it was time to address this issue by developing a questionnaire suitable for young people. We have called it the adolescent conspiracy beliefs questionnaire.

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Using this questionnaire, we found that adolescents in the UK seem most likely to start believing in conspiracy theories around the age of 14. In one of our studies, we found that as adolescents reach around this age, their conspiracy beliefs were higher than in younger age groups. In another study, we found that 18-year-olds displayed higher belief in conspiracy theories compared to a mixed-age sample of older adults. It therefore seems that adolescence could be a peak time for conspiracy theorising.

We asked participants to decide how much they agreed with nine different statements, each on a scale of 1 to 7. These included assertions such as “secret societies influence many political decisions”, “governments have deliberately spread diseases in certain groups of people”, and “secret societies control politicians and other leaders”. We then calculated average scores across the nine items. A higher average score indicated a higher belief in conspiracy theories.

Between the ages of 11-14 and 14-16, belief in conspiracy theories increased from an average score of 3.72 to 4.67. Young people aged 16-17 also displayed a higher average (4.39) than the younger children. Furthermore, participants aged 18 reported higher conspiracy beliefs (4.06) than a mixed-age sample of older adults (3.81). Around the age of 14, conspiracy beliefs therefore appear to peak, and remain heightened into early adulthood, but then they appear to plateau.

Why conspiracy beliefs are taking hold

Many adolescents have been home schooled and isolated from their peer groups for much of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore not surprising that their social media use has significantly increased during this time. This could be the ideal situation for conspiracy theories to flourish in younger groups.

Indeed, a recent poll by the UK Safer Internet Centre found that 43% of young people have noticed

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A questionnaire to fill an important gap.

Psychological stress could also contribute to conspiracy beliefs in younger people. Our research also uncovered initial evidence that paranoia and mistrust are associated with young people's conspiracy beliefs.

Other research suggests that adolescents aged 13-15 are less likely to rely on emotion regulation strategies than at other points in their life. This means that adolescents may have trouble controlling, understanding and expressing their emotions at this age, which may lead to increased anxiety and, in turn, increased belief in conspiracy theories. The additional stress and mental health worries caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may lead adolescents to turn to conspiracy theories even more to try to cope with feelings of anxiety and isolation.

We know that helping adults feel more empowered can reduce their tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. That is, feeling more in control of one's social environment can reduce reliance on conspiracy theories. Also, belief in conspiracy theories is lowered when people are encouraged to think analytically. An important next step would be to examine whether such techniques help reduce conspiracy beliefs in younger people.

Our project has spotlighted young people's conspiracy beliefs for the first time. Conspiracy beliefs seem to flourish in teenage years and the COVID-19 pandemic may have made things worse. We therefore need to understand more about why conspiracy theories appeal to young people and what to do about it.



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