# Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories

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***Bio:***

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**Abstract**

Conspiracy theories can be harmful for public health, global warming, safety, conflict, and political polarization. What interventions help reduce the appeal of conspiracy theories? It is well-known that conspiracy theories flourish among citizens who feel powerless and out of control, however I argue that the opposite is also true: That feeling empowered, and in control of one's social environment, reduces belief in conspiracy theories. Given this, authorities can reduce conspiracy beliefs among the public by installing procedural justice principles in decision-making processes. Procedural justice increases feelings of empowerment and trust, even among followers who disagree with the decision outcomes.

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Are conspiracy theories harmless entertainment? Research suggests that, quite often, they are not. What people believe drives their behavior; and if people believe conspiracy theories for which there is little evidence, the behavior that follows may be irrational and harmful. For instance, people who believe in conspiracy theories about the pharmaceutical industry are less likely to have children vaccinated.[1] People who believe that climate change is a hoax are less willing to reduce their carbon footprints.[2,3] Conspiracy theories directly accuse other groups in society of unethical, and often criminal behavior, and may therefore be a breeding ground for aggression and conflict between groups.[4,5] Finally, conspiracy theories drive political choices in favor of populist political candidates who portray mainstream politicians as part of the "corrupt elites".[6] Conspiracy theories indeed played a major role in the election of Donald Trump as 45th US president, and the 2016 UK vote for a Brexit.

It therefore makes sense for policy-makers to try and reduce the appeal of conspiracy theories among the public. But in practice, this might be easier said than done. Not only do large numbers of regular citizens believe conspiracy theories,[7] but also, it is relatively difficult to falsify conspiracy theories. Through motivated reasoning, believers selectively embrace evidence or expert testimonies that support their theory (e.g., engineers and architects stating that, on 9-11, the impact of the airplanes could not cause the Twin Towers to collapse in this manner). In doing so they ignore, trivialize, or consider part of the conspiracy, evidence or expert testimonies to the contrary (e.g., all the engineers and architects who disagree with the "9-11 for truth" movement and see no evidence for controlled demolition). Indeed, reducing the appeal of conspiracy theories among deeply convicted believers, who are active on conspiracy theorist websites, may be a difficult if not impossible task.

This does not mean that providing rational arguments is useless. Besides such deeply convicted believers, a large group of citizens is more moderate and hence susceptible to both conspiratorial and nonconspiratorial explanations of societal events. Interventions to promote nonconspiratorial reasoning might well be effective, at least to some extent, among this large group of citizens. For instance, research suggests that providing rational arguments can decrease conspiracy theories.[8] Moreover, stimulating analytic thinking makes people less conspiratorial in their beliefs.[9,10] One may wonder, however, whether such a reflective, analytic approach is the most effective method to combat conspiracy theories. Providing rational arguments does not address the root cause of conspiracy theories: The negative emotions that people experience when they feel powerless and out of control.

The idea that feelings of powerlessness are at the basis of conspiracy theories has been first raised in the famous essay on "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" by Richard Hofstadter, who proposed that particularly citizens who feel powerless or voiceless are susceptible to conspiracy theories.[11] According to Hofstadter, such conspiracy theories facilitate comprehension of complex but distressing events by simplifying them into explanations that place blame on the evil schemes of powerful conspiracies. Subsequent research indeed found that when people feel powerless, or experience a lack of control over their environment, they are more likely to believe conspiracy theories.[4,12] Such powerless feelings may be either structural or incidental. For instance, citizens may feel that they have structurally little control over political decision-making, as often seen in allegations that authorities do not listen to their concerns. Also more incidentally, distressing events decrease people's feeling that they can control their own fate. It is therefore not surprising that distressing events—incidents such as a terrorist strike or a natural disaster, but also ongoing events such as an economic crisis or climate change—prompt

citizens to look for conspiratorial explanations.

Feelings of powerlessness are associated with a set of negative emotions that predict conspiracy theories, including anxiety and uncertainty.[13,14] These negative emotions increase a desire among people to make sense of their social environment, and make them vigilant towards possible threats. When distrusted and powerful groups are salient—such as governmental institutions—this vigilance may manifest itself in conspiracy theories. Put differently, the negative emotions that are associated with feelings of powerlessness put people in a suspicious, information-seeking state of mind that facilitates conspiratorial explanations for distressing events. Research indeed suggests that feelings of uncertainty increase belief in conspiracy theories, but only if the conspiracy involves groups that perceivers consider immoral.[15] Likewise, these sense-making desires have been found to predict conspiracy theories mainly when conspiratorial explanations for distressing events are salient.[16]

If feelings of powerlessness increase belief in conspiracy theories, might the reverse also be true—that is, do feelings of empowerment *decrease* belief in conspiracy theories? Empowerment refers to the feeling that one is in control over one's own life, and can influence relevant decisions that shape one's future. Just like feelings of powerlessness are related with negative emotions, including fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, feelings of empowerment are likely to decrease such negative emotions and instead foster hope, optimism, and confidence in the future. Such positive emotions may stimulate citizens to perceive their social environment in a less suspicious state of mind. In the following, I first present evidence that empowerment indeed reduces conspiracy theories. Then, I will introduce procedural justice as a practical tool for decision-makers to empower citizens, and therefore reduce conspiracy theories.

## Empowerment and Conspiracy Theories

Various studies investigated the influence of being out of control on conspiracy theories using experimental methods. In these studies, research participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: Participants were asked to perform a writing exercise, and for half of the participants this exercise entailed describing an incident from their own life in which they felt completely in control. For the other half, the exercise entailed describing an incident from their own life in which they felt not at all in control. Through this procedure, participants briefly relive an experience in which they felt either in, or out of, control. After the writing exercise, participants responded to questions in which they indicate their belief in conspiracy theories. These studies found that people believe conspiracy theories more strongly after writing about an incident in which they felt out of control than after writing about an incident in which they felt in control.[12,17] These findings often are interpreted as evidence that feeling out of control—a core element of powerlessness—increases belief in conspiracy theories. But how solid is the proof for this assertion based on these experiments? After all, an alternative interpretation could be that reliving an experience where one had full control *reduces* conspiracy theories. The only way to find out who is changing their beliefs—the participants who relive a high versus a low control experience—is to include a third condition that is more neutral about feelings of control.

One study, conducted in Amsterdam, included such a neutral baseline condition.[18] Besides writing about an incident in which participants experienced high or low control, a third group of participants wrote about what they had for dinner the night before—a topic that does not explicitly focus on feelings of control. After that, participants were reminded of controversial policy that was widely in the Dutch news at the time this study was conducted. The policy pertained to the construction of a new underground metro line directly through the Amsterdam historical center. Although citizens had voted against this project in a referendum, authorities

moved forward with it anyways. Moreover, the project was over-budget and behind schedule. At the time the study was conducted, public hostility against this project had reached its peak as the underground constructions caused unforeseen damage to house foundations. Some of the old houses had to be evacuated as they literally were sinking into the ground. How did the control manipulation influence belief in conspiracy theories about this project—such as theories that Amsterdam city council members were bribed by the construction companies—among Amsterdam residents?

In keeping with previous research, participants who relived a high control experience believed such conspiracy theories less strongly than participants who relived a low control experience. Of interest, however, was how the participants in the neutral baseline condition responded to the questionnaire. These participants did not differ in their conspiracy beliefs from participants in the low control condition, and expressed stronger conspiracy beliefs than participants in the high control condition. These findings suggest that, apparently, reliving a high control experience may *reduce* people's belief in conspiracy theories. This is not to say that experiencing a low sense of control is unrelated to conspiracy theories: In all likelihood, the low control and neutral conditions did not differ given that base-rate control levels were already quite low in this experiment. All participants were reminded of unpopular and controversial policy that had harmful consequences within their city. More importantly, the conclusion that follows from this experiment is that empowering people—by reliving an experience in which participants had full control—reduces belief in conspiracy theories.

In addition, findings on the relationship between education and conspiracy theories support a role for empowerment in reducing conspiracy theories. Specifically, one common finding is that citizens are more likely to believe conspiracy theories if they are low as opposed

to high educated.[6,18,19] Why does high education reduce the likelihood that people believe conspiracy theories? Education is a long-term transformative experience for any individual, and hence, one cannot explain the effects of education with a single variable. One frequently noted effect of education is increased cognitive complexity: Through education people become better equipped to detect nuances across judgment domains; moreover, people learn not to simplify the complex problems that they encounter, but instead reflect analytically on them. Besides cognitive complexity, high education also increases one's self-esteem. Furthermore, people with high education tend to get better jobs and higher incomes (i.e., high social class), implying a less marginalized position in society. Of particular importance for the present discussion, an additional effect of high education is that it is empowering: Through education people learn how to independently solve problems, and they learn how to effectively influence their social environment. As such, highly educated people experience more control in their everyday lives.

One study examined why high education predicts decreased belief in conspiracy theories, and specifically investigated four possible mediators: cognitive complexity, self-esteem, social class, and feelings of powerlessness.[20] The relationships between these variables were investigated in two surveys within the Netherlands, one with a high sample size (over 4000 participants) and the other being a representative sample of the Dutch population. The results revealed no evidence for a role of self-esteem. Furthermore, the role of social class was small and inconsistent between both surveys. The other two variables, however, accounted for the relationship between education and conspiracy beliefs very well. As compared with people with low education levels, people with high education levels have higher cognitive complexity—as reflected in better analytic thinking skills and a reduced tendency to see societal problems as simple—reducing the likelihood that they believe conspiracy theories. Furthermore—and of

particular importance for the present purposes—people with high education levels also felt more in control of their own lives, reducing their belief in conspiracy theories. Put differently, education empowers people, and therefore education buffers against the temptation to embrace simplistic conspiracy theories when making sense of complex societal events.

While these empowering effects of education are promising and in line with the main argument presented here, they offer little practical added value for policy-makers who wish to implement interventions to reduce conspiracy theories among the public. Education is a rather long-term strategy, and both the public and policy-makers already widely recognize the value of providing good education to children. If anything, these insights add an additional reason why supporting good education is important. How can policy-makers empower the public more imminently, thereby decreasing the appeal of conspiracy theories?

## Procedural Justice

The field of procedural justice asserts that people evaluate authorities based on the quality of their decision-making procedures. More specifically, procedural justice refers to the extent to which people believe that authorities use fair or unfair decision-making procedures. Empirical research suggests that perceived procedural justice has impactful consequences for how citizens respond to the outcomes of decision-making processes. For instance, if people believe that procedures were fair they subsequently are more likely to accept unfavorable decisions, experience more positive and less negative emotions, and trust decision-makers more, as compared to when people believe that procedures were unfair.[21-24] In the following I propose that procedural justice is empowering, and that authorities can reduce the appeal of conspiracy theories by implementing procedural justice principles in decision-making.

In a classic paper, Leventhal noted that people evaluate six criteria to determine whether

not they evaluate decision-making procedures as fair.[25] These criteria are: (1) *Consistency*—People consider procedures as fair if they are applied consistently across persons and over time; (2) *Bias suppression*—Decision-making authorities should be independent and have no personal self-interest at stake in the decision at hand; (3) *Accuracy*—authorities should collect as much information as possible before making a decision, and base themselves on a full assessment of the available information. Moreover, authorities should retain transparent records of the information considered, so that they can be monitored and held accountable; (4) *Correctability*—There should be proper appeal procedures in place to correct for possible mistakes or oversights in the decision-making process; (5) *Representativeness*—The decision-making process must take the concerns, values, and opinions into account of the parties that are affected by the outcome of the decision-making process; and (6) *Ethicality*—Decision-making procedures should be compatible with fundamental moral and ethical values (for instance, they should not contain deception or invasion of privacy).

These six criteria inspired various interventions to increase perceived procedural justice among the public. One of the most well-known, and frequently replicated effects in procedural justice research is "voice": People evaluate procedures that allow them an opportunity to voice their opinion fairer than procedures that deny them such an opportunity.[26] Voice procedures most directly addresses the representativeness criterion, but may also help satisfy other criteria such as accuracy and ethicality. After being allowed voice, people evaluate the outcome of the decision-making process as fairer, feel more satisfied, experience their relationship with the decision-maker more positively, and perform better at tasks.[21-24] Other procedural justice interventions, that have comparable effects, is to consistently use the same procedures,[27,28] to take all the available information into account,[23] and to provide proper justifications for decisions.[29]

One explanation of these effects is that people feel empowered when authorities make an effort to be a procedurally fair decision-maker. An important distinction here is between decision versus process control.[30] Decision control refers to the extent to which people can directly influence the outcome of a decision-making process. Process control refers to the extent to which people feel actively involved, and taken seriously, in the decision-making procedures that lead to these outcomes. In practice, providing all citizens with decision-control is not always feasible: For instance, different recipients of a decision-making process often have conflicting interests, and it is impossible for decision-makers to satisfy the wishes of all parties involved. But then still, authorities can increase process control by ensuring that Leventhal's six procedural justice criteria are met, for instance by actively displaying an interest in the opinions of all the involved parties, by being transparent, and by being consistent between persons.

These empowering effects are resonated in relational models of procedural justice.[22] The relational models assert that while people to some extent value procedural justice for instrumental reasons (e.g., being able to voice an opinion increases the chance for a desired outcome) they particularly value procedural justice for symbolic reasons. People typically see group authorities as representative for a larger community, and hence, the way authorities treat people is diagnostic for their standing within this community. If authorities use fair procedures, people feel respected and empowered as full-fledged members of their community; but if authorities use unfair procedures, people feel disrespected and disempowered within their community. As such, procedural justice has important symbolic value to people by informing them of the extent to which they are worthy members of a valuable community.

One implication of these symbolic concerns is that people appreciate procedural justice even when faced with unfavorable decisions. In fact, a large body of research reveals that

procedural justice shapes perceptions of outcome fairness particularly when outcomes are unfavorable. When outcomes are favorable people consider the outcome fair regardless of the procedure; but people only find an unfavorable outcome fair when they believe the preceding procedure was fair.[21] Furthermore, people consider procedural justice more important than receiving favorable outcomes.[31] Finally, being allowed voice positively shapes perceptions of justice, even when it is clear that one's opinion did not influence the final decision.[32] People can hence experience decision-making procedures as empowering even when they receive an unfavorable decision, and this strongly influences people's appraisals of the decision-making process.

Given the link between empowerment and conspiracy theories, it is likely that when citizens believe that powerful authorities acted in a procedurally fair manner, they are less likely to believe conspiracy theories that implicate these authorities as part of a corrupt network. Indeed, the effects of procedural justice are closely associated with the psychological basis of conspiracy theories. For instance, feeling powerless suppresses any positive effects of voice procedures.[33] Moreover, procedural justice regulates negative emotions, particularly feelings of subjective uncertainty.[23] This insight has direct implications for conspiracy theories: The extent to which authorities act fairly or unfairly has been shown to influence conspiracy beliefs particularly when people feel uncertain.[15] Finally, conspiracy theories are strongly related with distrust,[4] and it is well-known that perceived procedural justice is closely associated with how much people trust decision-makers.[34]

One study directly tested the relationship between procedural justice and belief in conspiracy theories.[35] The study took place in an organizational setting, and hence investigated organizational conspiracy theories (i.e., employees' beliefs that managers conspire to reach

malevolent goals). With a questionnaire, employees rated their supervisors were on four different leadership styles. The first was *despotic* leadership: The extent to which a leader is punitive, and unwilling to tolerate criticism. The second leadership style was *laissez-faire* leadership, which is characterized by a lack of leadership: Laissez-faire leaders do not intervene unless absolutely necessary. The third leadership style was *charismatic* leadership: Charismatic leaders inspire employee to internalize the organizations' goals as their own. The fourth and final leadership style was *participative* leadership. This latter style is relevant for the present purposes, as participative leaders try to actively involve employees in important decision-making processes by asking for their inputs and opinions. Put differently, participative leaders try to implement procedural justice principles as central part of their leadership strategy.

The results revealed that both despotic and laissez-faire leadership predicted increased belief in organizational conspiracy theories among employees. These leadership styles are both destructive—either actively (despotic) or passively (laissez-faire)—and are disempowering by causing feelings of job insecurity. These destructive styles are hence counterproductive if one's goal is to reduce conspiracy theories. Charismatic leadership, in turn, was unrelated to organizational conspiracy beliefs. While charismatic leadership exerts positive effects on a range of other variables—such as intrinsic motivation—people are equally likely to perceive charismatic versus uncharismatic leaders as part of a conspiracy. Participative leadership, however, was associated with decreased belief in organizational conspiracy theories. This is evidence indicating that leaders who make procedural justice a signature of their leadership style successfully manage to decrease conspiracy theories among followers.

While the study on participative leadership is the first to suggest that implementing procedural justice principles may be an effective strategy to reduce conspiracy beliefs, also other

evidence points to a relationship between procedural justice and belief in conspiracy theories. For instance, it has been noted that conspiracy theorists often call for greater transparency.[36] Apparently, conspiracy theorists evaluate the transparency of decision-making processes to be unacceptably low, which suggests a link between belief in conspiracy theories and perceived procedural injustice. Relatedly, belief in conspiracy theories is positively related with support for democratic principles.[5] Conspiracy theorists hence express an increased need to voice their opinion in political decision-making, suggesting a belief that politicians do not listen enough to them. This assumption is in line with Hofstadter's notion that conspiracy theorists often feel voiceless.[11] Taken together, this suggests that conspiracy theorists often perceive procedural injustice in public governance.

## To Conclude

Conspiracy theories are prevalent and impactful in our society. Most of the effects of conspiracy theories are harmful: Belief in such theories may lead to negative emotions, irrational health behaviors, decreased civic virtue, hostility, aggression, and radicalization. There is good reason for policy makers to develop interventions that reduce conspiracy theories among the public. In the present contribution my aim was to highlight empowerment as tool to reduce conspiracy theories. This tool might be more effective than trying to rationally refute conspiracy theories: Many conspiracy theories are not rational to begin with, and moreover, rational reasoning is often not the root cause of conspiracy theories. Instead, negative emotions cause conspiracy theories, and empowering citizens may transform these negative emotions into a more constructive mindset that includes hope and optimism. In order to empower citizens, authorities may effectively implement procedural justice principles in their decision-making processes. Ensuring that all procedural justice criteria are met hence may contribute to a less

paranoid society.

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