

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall, David G. Myers

*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Why People Believe Conspiracy Theories

by David G. Myers

[Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. \(2017\). The psychology of conspiracy theories. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 26, 538–542.](#)

Surely you and your students have heard at least some of the following statements:

- NASA faked the moon landing.
- The Holocaust is a myth.
- The US government planned the 9/11 attacks, which were controlled demolitions.
- Crashed UFO spacecraft are stored at Nevada's Area 51.
- An international plot concealed Barack Obama's birthplace and made him president.
- Global warming is a hoax.
- The Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre was done to promote gun control.
- President Kennedy's assassination was planned by more than a lone assassin.
- Millions of illegal voters cost Donald Trump the popular vote.
- Russia hacked Democratic emails to help Trump win.

Indeed, you likely believe at least one of these (mindful that conspiracies do happen). Only one-third of Americans believe the official explanation of JFK's assassination — that one man alone was responsible (Enten, 2017). After the 2016 US presidential election, most voters (though only 20% of Trump supporters) agreed that Russian email hackers did attempt to influence the results (Frankovic, 2016).

But why do so many people believe theories that are just plain fake news? Why were 27% of respondents to a recent US National Comorbidity Survey “convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world” (Freeman & Bentall, 2017)? (In this survey, conspiracy beliefs were most common among less educated, lower income, unemployed, irreligious males.)

University of Kent researchers Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka (2018) offer some answers, but before sharing their conclusions, instructors might wish to assess their students' own conspiracy beliefs. Ask students to raise a hand if they agree with the following statement: “I am convinced there is a conspiracy behind many things in the world.” Or, if time permits, give students a selection of items from the [Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale](#).

Instructors could then invite students to spend 3 minutes writing (and sharing in small groups or with the class) their answers to two questions:

- *Examples*: What conspiracy theories — unwarranted explanations for events that involve secret plots by powerful, evil groups — are they aware of? For each, how many people would need to have kept the conspiracy a secret?
- *Psychological explanations*: What cognitive and social factors might fuel and sustain such conspiracy theories?

The Douglas team identifies three psychological motives underlying conspiracy beliefs:

- The *epistemic* (knowledge) motive: When bewildered by chaos or random events, people seek explanations. Faced with uncertainty, people turn to conspiracy theories to make sense of the world. They “provide broad, internally consistent explanations,” say Douglas and colleagues. Many people assume that big events require big causes.
- The *existential* (meaning of existence) motive: Faced with a changing world, people also seek safety and security to feel in control. To those feeling adrift, conspiracy theories may offer the hope of empowerment.
- The *social* motive: As social creatures, people welcome a group identity. The social definition of who we are supports our sense of self. When experiencing ostracism, people therefore become more accepting of superstitions and conspiracy theories. Thus, conspiracy theories are attractive to those who have, for example, been on the losing side of elections and who now embrace the belonging and shared reality of others in their threatened group.

With such dynamics at play, should we be surprised that conspiracy theories tend to cluster among the same individuals? Much as prejudices coexist — with antigay, anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and antiwomen sentiments often living inside the same skin — so people often believe in multiple conspiracies, even contradictory ones. In two studies by the Kent team, the more that people believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they also believed that she was murdered. And the more that they believed that Osama bin Laden was already dead when American forces raided his compound, the more they believed he was still alive (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

As a one-time researcher of group polarization, my hunch is that the suspicions that people bring to a group may further strengthen as they discuss them with like-minded others. Within the internet’s echo chamber, we selectively receive and feed one another information — and misinformation. Thus, over time, views may become more extreme. Suspicion may become conviction. Disagreements may escalate to demonization. Group polarization happens.

Thankfully, science education helps. Learning the science behind vaccines, space travel, and climate change matters. Teaching the critical thinking skills that can help people distinguish the falsities from the truth makes a difference. Science education at its best inoculates students against tomorrow’s fake news and prepares them to think smarter.

## References

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

Craig, M. A., & Richeson, J. A. (2017). Hispanic population growth engenders conservative shift among non-Hispanic racial minorities. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Advance online publication.

Enten, H. (2017, October 23). Most people believe in JFK conspiracy theories. *FiveThirtyEight*. Retrieved from [www.fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies](http://www.fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies)

Frankovic, K. (2016, December 27). Belief in conspiracies largely depends on political identity. *YouGov*. Retrieved from [today.yougov.com/news/2016/12/27/belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden](http://today.yougov.com/news/2016/12/27/belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden)

Freeman, D., & Bentall, R. P. (2017). The concomitants of conspiracy concerns. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *52*, 595–604.

Oliver, J. E., & Wong, J. (2003). Intergroup prejudice in multiethnic settings. *American Journal of Political Science*, *47*, 567–582.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*, 751–783.

Pew Research Center (2016). *In views of diversity, many Europeans are less positive than Americans*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/12/in-views-of-diversity-many-europeans-are-less-positive-than-americans/>

Richeson, J. A., & Shelton, J. N. (2007). Negotiating interracial interactions: Costs, consequences, and possibilities. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *16*, 316–320.

Schlueter, E., & Scheepers, P. (2010). The relationship between outgroup size and anti-outgroup attitudes: A theoretical synthesis and empirical test of group threat- and intergroup contact theory. *Social Science Research*, *39*, 285–295.

Schmid, K., Al Ramiah, A., & Hewstone, M. (2014). Neighborhood ethnic diversity and trust: The role of intergroup contact and perceived threat. *Psychological Science*, *25*, 665–674.

US Census Bureau (2015). *New Census Bureau report analyzes U.S. population projections*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/pressreleases/2015/cb15-tps16.html>

Wood, M., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *3*, 767–773.