



Research Article

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On Some Factors Contributing to Belief in Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine some of the factors contributing to belief in conspiracy theories. They have gained considerable popularity among the public in recent years. They react more and more often to several socially significant events taking place around us, while coming up with an alternative explanation, especially for those events that concern a larger number of people. Due to the fast introduction of the Internet and the rapid development in the field of information and communication technologies, systems and means, conspiracy theories are penetrating very significantly especially in the field of mass media and notably in the field of new media. Today, social networks are the medium with the greatest spread of various conspiracy theories. It is one of the primary reasons why conspiracy theories have become the subject of our scientific interest. With the use of relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, in this work we present our research findings and a look at some selected factors contributing to belief in conspiracy theories to readers from the professional and lay public.

Keywords: *conspiracy theories, society, media, people, events, aspects*

1. Introduction

In the last few years, we have increasingly come across various conspiracy theories that respond to several socially significant events taking place around us. Immediately after their media coverage, a whole series of significant and important events are the object of alternative explanations that challenge official positions or explanations. Conspiracy theories come up with an alternative explanation, especially for those events that involve a larger number of people. The belief that conspiracies are happening stems from human distrust and doubt. Conspiracy theories include a certain amount of mystery, which makes them more attractive and interesting. Among several, let's mention, for example, the events of September 11, 2001, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, the origin of the refugee crisis, the reasons for revealing the emissions scandal of the Volkswagen Company, or the spread of the coronavirus around the world. These, as well as many other events, received "new explanations" soon after their publication, which sought to reveal their

"true meaning, origin or causes".

Conspiracy theories today represent a phenomenon that, especially since the mentioned terrorist attacks in the United States of America that happened on September 11, 2001, has gained considerable popularity and has begun to permeate society. This situation has stimulated research into conspiracy theories as well as the emergence of publications that deal with the popularity of these theories and their impact on society. It is therefore a bit surprising that this topic, with rare exceptions, is absent in domestic written professional literature that would deal with this phenomenon. This absence was one of the inspirations why we chose this topic for our research. Even foreign publications and studies forgot about this topic for a long time. This situation really changed only in the 21st century. The reason may be the approach with which the field of conspiracy theories has been received in professional, academic and scientific fields (Swami, 2012). The problem was mainly caused by the fact that academics and researchers were afraid to professionally deal with conspiracy theories, because they could subsequently be labelled as conspiracy theorists themselves.

However, the need for research in this area is already unquestionable today. Conspiracy theories and the belief in these theories really represent a phenomenon that has a significant impact on contemporary society. In the United States of America, for example, during a public opinion poll, up to half of the respondents expressed their positive relationship or belief in some kind of conspiracy theory (Sides, 2015). Conspiracies had and still have an influence on the content component of the production of popular culture; they also significantly penetrate the field of mass media and especially the field of new media. Today, social networks are the medium with the greatest spread of various conspiracy theories. In the same way, society has an influence on how a given population approaches conspiracy thinking and how it positions itself to believe in these theories. The above-mentioned topics have become the subject of our interest, and therefore in this work, using relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, we bring to readers from the professional and lay public our findings and a view of some selected factors contributing to the belief in conspiracy theories.

2. Conspiracy Theories

2.1 *Conspiracies and conspiracy theories*

Conspiracy theories are not, as some might think, a new phenomenon, a product of the present time. Although their growth in the 21st century is unprecedented, we could have encountered them already in the past centuries, because it was already possible to observe the appearance of such theories in the Middle Ages. As an example, we can mention the witch hunts, when people explained certain phenomena as a conspiracy of women with the devil, which resulted in tragic events in the form of killing and burning women, or conspiracy theories associated with Judaism that persist to this day. Explanations of conspiracies involving the population professing the Jewish faith have changed over time, but what is important in this case is that the designation of Jews as those who are powerful and standing in the background in certain secret groups persists (van Prooijen - Douglas, 2018).

Conspiracy theories appeared in relatively large numbers even in the last century when explaining significant social or political events. These events include, for example, the assassination of US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1963. Already in 1966, three years after his death, more than half of Americans believed that the accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone but was just a set-up a figure in the whole conspiracy and as time went on, this belief became even more entrenched among the American population.

Other examples of conspiracy theories in the 20th century include the theory of the deliberate creation of the HIV virus and its use for the genocide of certain population groups, the FBI's involvement in the assassination of Martin Luther King (Goertzel, 1994), the staged moon landing (Swami et al., 2010) or the theory about the assassination of the British Princess Diana, or, conversely, the theory that she staged her death (Wood et al., 2012). We still encounter conspiracy theories on a large scale today. Especially thanks to the rapid expansion of the Internet and the massive use of

social networks, today there is a much greater probability that we will come across them more often than before (Wood - Douglas, 2013). A clear example can be the swarming theories about the situation surrounding the pandemic related to the Covid-19 disease (Uscinski et al., 2020) or the various theories about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Stempel et al., 2007).

It follows from the above that conspiracy theories are not limited to a certain territory or state. They may not only appear when explaining social events related to public and political life but may also occur in the work environment. And this is especially so in those cases when employees suspect executives from their workplace, company, or organization of bad intentions. Such conspiracy theories can emerge in any environment where there is tension between competing groups and subgroups. An example of a conspiracy theory that arose in the workplace could be the belief that executives are secretly planning to lay off a certain number of employees in order to use the savings to increase their own financial rewards (van Prooijen - Douglas, 2018) or that managers are trying to hire people interested in work through personal preferences (Douglas - Leite, 2017).

Although many theories may at first appear to be associated mainly with events from the United States of America or Western countries (Swami et al., 2010), conspiracy theories are widespread throughout the world, such as anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that they were created during the war in Yugoslavia and were spread by the local media (Byford - Billig, 2001). That is also why several authors have dealt with them and they have been the subject of research. However, despite this fact, or perhaps because of this widespread research into conspiracy theories and conspiracies, there is still no unified, universally accepted definition of what constitutes a conspiracy theory. At the same time, there is a need to distinguish several terms that may appear in the research of conspiracy theories and in this article. Therefore, below we offer a brief overview of the definitions of some terms associated with the issue of conspiracy theories.

Although the term conspiracy is often used when talking about conspiracy theories, these two terms should be distinguished from each other, because according to some authors they represent two different concepts. Conspiracies are generally defined as secret negotiations between two or more actors who are powerful (Douglas et al., 2019) and can (based on the purpose and circumstances) represent an action which, however, is not necessarily only bad, on the contrary, it can also be good (Pigden, 1995).

We present conspiracy theories in several views and definitions, which are not too different from each other, but will give us an indication of the development of this concept. First, we offer a definition according to which "conspiracy theories are a proposed explanation of events or events explained through the actions of a group of people who acted in secret" (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). Keeley (1999) further adds in his work that conspiracy theories deserve to be called theories because they offer an explanation of events and at the same time specify that it must be the action of a group, because according to him, the action of an individual cannot be considered a conspiracy. At the same time, he claims that such a group does not necessarily have to be very powerful, but it is enough if it plays a secret and significant role in the explained events.

Similarly, Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) say that there are many conspiracy theories in which no powerful actor figures. But this does not apply to conspiracy theories about events related to public life. In such a case, a powerful actor represents the starting point for conspiracy theories about influential and significant events. The authors define conspiracy theories as "efforts to explain events that involve the intrigues of powerful people who try to conceal their role in the given event and to keep this action secret at least until they succeed in achieving their goals" (Sunstein-Vermeule, 2009, p. 205).

As a third, we offer a definition that refers more specifically to social and political events. According to it, "conspiracy theories are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events, behind which there is a secret conspiracy of two or more powerful actors, which may be the government or any other powerful and malevolent group" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 44)

The mentioned definitions of conspiracy theories really differ only in details. All of them focus on explaining events with significant impacts on society, carried out by small, secretive, and powerful

groups of people. Douglas et al. (2019) also include the possibility that such a powerful actor is the state government. Uscinski (2019) goes even further when he mentions that scientists, non-governmental or religious organizations, or even foreign governments can be considered actors of the conspiracy. In addition to this clarification, he adds that "conspiracy theories can explain events that have already happened, are currently taking place, or are yet to happen" (Uscinski, 2019, p. 48). In other respects, it coincides with the above definitions of other authors.

Following on from the above, it can be concluded that the term conspiracy represents an action (activity) that someone commits as part of a conspiracy, and the term conspiracy theory represents the assumption that a given group committed, planned, implemented a conspiracy for a certain purpose. A similarly simple distinction between the terms conspiracy and conspiracy theory can also be found in Uscinski and Parent. According to them, "conspiracy theories are an expression of perception that aims to accuse someone, and conspiracies, on the other hand, are considered an act (activity) committed by the accused group" (Uscinski - Parent, 2014, p. 33).

However, if we mark an event as part of a conspiracy or conspiracy theory, it can often give the impression that the given information is automatically false and deceptive. But it is not like that. Conspiracy and conspiracy theory are not, by definition, as we can see above, based entirely on falsehoods and lies, as evidenced by conspiracy theories and conspiracies that eventually turn out to be true. A typical example of a true conspiracy is the Watergate case¹ (Groetzel 2010; Sutton - Douglas, 2014; Clarke 2002; Buenting - Taylor, 2010; van Prooijen - Douglas, 2018).

Buenting and Taylor (2010, p. 570) therefore say that conspiracy theories should be considered on a case-by-case basis. They distinguish between whether it is rational or irrational to believe a particular conspiracy theory, while this assessment of rationality should depend on the evidence presented for the given conspiracy theory. Other authors talk about conspiracies in terms of disinformation² and misconceptions³, but still try to point out that conspiracy theories can turn out to be true (Flynn et al., 2017), as was the case with the mentioned Watergate affair.

Related to this is the question of whether conspiracy theories can be characterized as a purely negative fact, or whether we can also find some positive signs in them. There are cases that show that belief in conspiracy explanations of events can have both positive and negative consequences. More often we come across the fact that only the negative effects of conspiracy theories are mentioned, but some authors and research also talk about positive consequences in connection with this explanation of events (Clarke, 2002; Fenster, 2008; Miller, 2002). However, some authors, even after presenting the positive effects of conspiracy theories, draw attention to the negatives associated with them. According to Swami and Coles, it can be, for example, "violence, distrust or threats to democracy" (Swami and Coles, 2010, p. 563).

2.2 Conspiracy belief and conspiracy thinking

In the previous subsection of the article, we presented the definitions of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, which, in order to create a comprehensive picture of the subject under investigation, we will

¹The Watergate case is the name given to the scandal surrounding US President Richard Nixon, which caused him to voluntarily resign from office in 1974. People around President Nixon broke into the headquarters of the Democratic Party with the aim of wiretapping this workplace. President Nixon initially denied knowing anything about the act, but eventually admitted that he was aware of the fact. In the end, Nixon resigned himself in 1974 under the threat of impeachment. See more: Barberio, 2020; Schudson, 2004

²Disinformation can be defined as the deliberate dissemination or promotion of false, deceptive and misleading information (Fetzer 2004a).

³Misconceptions can be characterized as a situation when people are convinced of some factual fact, but their belief about the matter is not supported by evidence. In the framework of misconceptions, it is thus possible to observe both false and unfounded beliefs about the world (Nyhan - Reifles, 2010).

add terms such as conspiracy belief and conspiracy thinking. These concepts are directly related to the issue of conspiracy theories and very often authors work with them because they are trying to find out if there are specific predispositions that determine a greater probability that a person will believe in conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy belief is broadly understood as belief in a particular conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy beliefs are mostly connected to various individual traits (Brotherton et al., 2013), but are not connected to the specific ideological background of a person who believes in conspiracy theories. Thus, they can appear in people both on the left side of the political spectrum and on its right side (Sutton - Douglas, 2020). According to Uscinski (2019), there can be several such conspiracy beliefs.

Conspiracy thinking or conspiracy mentality can be viewed as a general political attitude that predicts belief in conspiracy theories. It can therefore be assumed that conspiracy thinking means a greater tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and conspiracies (Sutton-Douglas, 2020; Imhoff-Bruder, 2014, Lewandowsky et al., 2013). As we can see, both concepts are very closely related. The presence of conspiracy belief, but also the presence of conspiracy thinking, represents a higher probability that a person will believe conspiracy theories.

In his work *Belief in Conspiracy Theories*, Groetzel (1994) called it the so-called monological belief system. It is a system in which a person who believes in one conspiracy theory will explain other events also through conspiracy theories, despite evidence contradicting the explanations through conspiracies. So, he/she does not take factual evidence into account, nor does he look for it in any way to verify his conspiracy explanation. For a person who believes in conspiracy theories, one belief in conspiracy theories is sufficient as evidence for other similar beliefs. In this context, Groetzel adds that "the more such beliefs a person has, the easier it is to accept a new conspiracy theory" (Groetzel, 1994, pp. 740-741).

Other authors, in connection with the belief in multiple conspiracy theories, talk about the so-called conspiracy worldview, which affirms the belief of the given person that everything has its hidden reason and origin. This worldview then facilitates the emergence and persistence of conspiratorial thinking. When events are viewed through such a conspiracy worldview, there is always a greater likelihood that no official explanation will be accepted, regardless of the details of the given explanation of the event (Dagnall et al., 2015). In this respect, the conspiracy worldview coincides with the monological belief system, because in neither of them is the evidence against conspiracy theories important. Indeed, if evidence is presented against conspiracy theories and is presented, for example, by official sources, then it is taken as deliberately created by those involved in the conspiracy (Keeley, 1999; Lewandowsky et al., 2013). It is seen as another act of a powerful and secretive group behind the event. Sustein and Vermeule (2009) identify this resistance to evidence presented from official positions as one of the main features of conspiracy theories.

When conspiracy thinking or a conspiracy worldview occurs, it is enough to be exposed to several conspiracy theories, because belief in one conspiracy theory increases the probability that the individual will also believe in the others. Interestingly, this higher probability of believing in such theories also applies to belief in opposing conspiracy theories. As an example of this phenomenon, Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) mention, for example, the conspiracy theories about the death of Princess Diana, of which a large number have been formed since her death. Some of them say that she was murdered, and some, on the contrary, say that she faked her own death. These two explanations of what happened to the Princess of Wales that day seem completely contradictory at first glance. But that doesn't mean that someone can't believe in both, of course, as long as we look at them through the lens of believing in conspiracy theories. People who believe the conspiracy theory that she was murdered are very likely to believe the conspiracy theory that Princess Diana faked her own death. And they will believe it despite the mutual and completely obvious contradiction of these two claims (Wood et al., 2012).

2.3 Consequences of believing in conspiracy theories

As already indicated in the first sub-chapter, there are a number of consequences associated with belief in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are viewed positively by some authors, at least in some points, even though most of them immediately draw attention to the negative consequences, which are significantly more numerous. For example, Clarke (2002, p. 148) cites three situations that, according to him, demonstrate the positive consequences of conspiracies and thus speak in favour of conspiracy theories:

- a) maintaining openness in society, which can transform itself to prevent collusion,
- b) improving the explanation of events through non-conspiracy reasons,
- c) the possibility of uncovering a real conspiracy, which is demonstrated by the example of the Watergate case.

In addition to Clark, other authors also look at conspiracy theories from the point of view of the benefits they are supposed to bring to public life. They state a higher transparency, or even the evolution of a conspiracy theory into a social movement promoting change in society with positive consequences. In addition to the mentioned positive impacts, we can also observe impacts in the political sphere of citizens' lives. However, there is no consensus on whether the consequences are purely negative in the political field, or whether it is possible to observe positive political consequences of conspiracy theories as well.

In his work, Kim (2019) claims that belief in conspiracy theories can lead people to want to get involved in changing a state of society that they believe is not ideal. Conspiracy thinking can therefore lead to higher political involvement of the public, to higher involvement in public affairs. On the other hand, political engagement also ranks among the negative effects of exposure to conspiracy theories, as there are opinions and evidence that belief in conspiracy theories, on the contrary, reduces public involvement in political matters. Exposure to conspiracy theories thus reduces political involvement and can also induce a negative relationship towards top state officials (Einstein and Glick 2015).

Research, as mentioned above, focuses more on the negative consequences of conspiracy theories, which may be due to their perceived numerical superiority over the positive consequences or their perceived seriousness. Among the negative consequences of conspiracy theories are health impacts (Groetzel 2010), because a frequent topic of conspiracy theories is either vaccination in general or vaccination against specific diseases. These theories have a significant impact on people's willingness to have themselves or their children vaccinated (Jolley - Douglas, 2014).

A significant role in this trend was played by a study⁴ in which the author states that vaccination can cause autism. In the field of health, it is not a single conspiracy theory, there are several in this field, for example, about genetically modified foods, about cancer caused by the use of mobile phones, about the HIV virus or about contraception as a form of genocide aimed at African Americans or other races (Oliver - Wood, 2014b⁵). Belief in health or climate change conspiracy theories is often associated with a general rejection of expert and scientific claims (Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Uscinski et al., 2020).

In this case as well, as with conspiracy thinking or worldview, it is true that if a person believes in one conspiracy theory, the probability that he will also believe in other conspiracy theories (even contradictory ones) increases. This means that if people reject scientific evidence for an event that is the subject of conspiracy theories, such as the landing of American astronauts on the moon, then there is a higher probability that they will also reject scientific data for other events related to, for

⁴A study published in 1998 by Andrew Wakefield was compromised and eventually retracted, but the theory of a correlation between vaccination and autism persisted (Jolley-Douglas, 2014).

⁵In addition to the vaccination theory, Oliver and Wood (2014b) also dealt with theories about genetically modified foods, cancer caused by mobile phones, and conspiracy theories about HIV.

example, climate change or the HIV virus (Lewandowsky et al. 2013), or currently the coronavirus causing the disease Covid-19 (Uscinski et al. 2020).^{6,7}

3. Factors Contributing to Belief in Conspiracy Theories

If we observe belief in conspiracy theories in someone, it can be connected to certain factors. Factors that contribute to belief in conspiracy theories include, for example, certain personality traits, belief in paranormal phenomena, or selected feelings that are predominantly negative in nature, as well as some other factors. In this part of the article, we will present and focus on those factors that can significantly contribute to the fact that people so often and to such a large extent believe in conspiracy theories.

Today it is already obvious that conspiracy theories gained a wider space for their search, communication, and dissemination with the development of the Internet and social networks. In the current period, which is associated with the coronavirus pandemic, environmental risks, and currently also with the conflict in Ukraine, we can clearly observe how many conspiracy theories only about the coronavirus and the Covid-19 disease, climate change and about the reasons and causes of Russian aggression have appeared during the past months (Hajdúková, Kuchtová, 2020; Kurilovská, Müllerová, 2022). This proves that people explain events that are unexpected and crisis for them by means of conspiracy theories and belief in them. Therefore, conspiracy theories are mainly created in connection with such events as, for example, wars, conflicts, terrorist attacks, assassinations of important personalities, epidemics/pandemics, large-scale fires, floods or accidents. It is precisely for this reason that it is not only interesting, but also necessary to study and research the factors influencing belief in conspiracy theories. There are a large number of reasons that contribute to a stronger belief in conspiracy theories, so in the next subchapters of the article (also due to limited space) we will focus on only some of these factors.

"Belief in conspiracy theories provides conspiracy believers with a simple, coherent, logical, and thoughtful explanation for significant social and political events that appear to be complex" (Darwin et al., 2011, p. 1289). As we have already indicated, very often conspiratorial thinking or a conspiratorial worldview is associated with individual traits. This is also why several authors associate belief in conspiracy theories with certain personality traits of people (for example, Lewandowsky et al. 2013), but also with anomie⁸ (Groetzl, 1994), narcissism (van der Linden et al., 2020) or belief in paranormal phenomena (Drinkwater et al., 2012). According to research conducted by Darwin et al. (2011), however, there are no stronger correlations between belief in the paranormal phenomena and

⁶These tendencies to reject scientific and professional data are often called denialism, in which rhetorical arguments are used to create a debate whose purpose is to reject scientific data. In addition, it tries to reject and disrupt the consensus prevailing over these data (Diethelm - Mckee, 2009). Denialism can be seen as a psychological predisposition that leads us to reject scientific and professional information (Uscinski et al. 2020).

⁷Blogs that specifically focus on supporting conspiracy theories can also contribute to the rejection of scientific evidence and subsequent belief in conspiracy theories. Lewandowsky et al. (2013) point out in this regard that the influence of blogs on spreading or strengthening conspiracy beliefs should not be underestimated. But at the same time, they also admit that blogs and the Internet are also used by the other side, that is, the one that, on the contrary, tries to spread scientific evidence and expert opinions. In his text, Lewandowsky specifically talks about blogs supporting or refuting climate change. Both of these trends can be related to the expansion and, in most cases, the daily use of the Internet and social networks. The Internet and social networks have become a place where people can exchange their opinions within a few seconds. They can therefore be characterized as factors that helped the spread of denialism (McKee - Diethelm, 2010).

⁸Anomie represents a situation or condition in which a person feels personal unrest and feels misunderstood by the surrounding and social world (Douglas et al., 2017).

belief in conspiracy theories. Instead, he cites paranoid thinking⁹ or schizotypy¹⁰ as contributing factors to conspiracy belief (Darwin et al., 2011, p. 1289).

Other research, on the other hand, confirms that conspiracy belief and conspiracy thinking are associated with human feelings such as feelings of alienation, hostility, or feeling disadvantaged (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999, p. 638) offer in their work several reasons why some people believe in conspiracy theories. Among these reasons is that conspiracies help people make sense of the complex world around them by providing simple explanations for complex and significant events. Furthermore, according to the authors, people can use conspiratorial explanations of events to justify their own problems or give vent to their anger or generally hostile behaviour through conspiracies.

Another factor that is often associated with the prediction of conspiracy belief is the feeling of helplessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; van Prooijen, 2017) or also the feeling of control. Specifically, it is about how a person himself perceives control over himself or the environment, or whether he feels that he is being manipulated by someone or something and can therefore feel control over himself, or vice versa, whether he feels that he himself has control over people. According to research findings, feeling in control predicts belief in conspiracies when a person feels that they are losing control. This means that he himself at that moment feels under someone's supervision, influence or control. The same applies in the opposite direction. When someone does not feel control over himself from the external environment, but perceives that he has his surroundings more under his own control, the probability of believing in conspiracy theories decreases (van Prooijen - Acker, 2015; Mao et al. 2020; Douglas et al. , 2019).

According to some authors, belief in some conspiracy theories can be associated with minorities (Groetzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). For example, Groetzel (1994) found in his research that minority status strongly influenced belief in some conspiracy theories. Specifically, he observed that minority status was positively correlated with belief in conspiracies about Iran and the hostages or about Japan and the US economy. At the same time, however, he found that minority status was unrelated to other conspiracy theories. For example, he found no connection between minorities and conspiracy theories about the assassination of President J. F. Kennedy or that the government and military are obfuscating evidence of the presence of unidentified flying objects on Earth.

Other authors (Mancosu et al. 2017; Douglas et al. 2016) have examined belief in conspiracy theories in relation to religious belief. Religious belief, like conspiracy belief, focuses attention on someone who has control over the lives of individuals. This means that it turns to powerful beings who can control and direct our lives (Galliford - Furnham, 2017). This also proves that there are many factors that influence belief in conspiracy theories.

Factors that may or may not contribute to belief in conspiracy theories include ideological beliefs and party preferences. Some authors observed and confirmed the connection between conspiracy beliefs and the choice of a political party or ideologies (van Prooijen et al., 2015; Douglas et al., 2019), while others, on the contrary, did not confirm the expected connection (Oliver - Wood, 2014a). For example, Uscinski et al. (2020) proved this interconnection in their research and argue

⁹Paranoid thinking may be a strong predictor of belief in conspiracy theories, but people who display paranoid traits cannot be completely equated with those who believe in conspiracy theories, as Imhoff and Lamberty (2018) point out. According to them, paranoid thinking is associated with the same factors as low trust, suspiciousness, or lack of control, but they differ, for example, in where and from whom people with conspiratorial or paranoid thinking perceive a threat. According to the authors, conspiracy theories perceive a threat from a small group of people, but it can be dangerous for everyone, and on the contrary, a paranoid person usually perceives threats only for his own person and perceives them from everyone around him. They see belief in conspiracy theories more as an attitude, opinion, or belief about a social situation than as some kind of psychopathology to which paranoid thinking falls.

¹⁰Social anxiety, suspiciousness or paranoid thinking are mentioned as features of schizotypy (Darwin et al., 2011, p. 1290).

that ideology and partisanship is strongly associated with belief in conspiracy theories. In addition to the mentioned factors, the authors also focused on such factors as distrust in other people (Freeman et al., 2020; Douglas – Leite, 2017), distrust or low trust in institutions (Miller et al., 2016), level of education (Uscinski – Parent, 2014; Oliver – Wood, 2014a), social status (Mao et al., 2020) or populist beliefs (Silva et al., 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017).

3.1 Distrust

Trust is an important part of everyday life as well as life inside a democratic society. However, this does not mean that a certain amount of scepticism or distrust is destructive for society. However, in the case of conspiracy theories, we are talking about distrust, which could be described as irrational (Bartlett - Miller, 2010). Conspiracy theories carry a certain suspicion towards small and powerful groups with the fact that these groups try to harm not only one specific person, but also all others (Imhoff - Lamberty, 2018). It is therefore logical that distrust grows out of suspicion. In addition to suspicion within conspiracy beliefs, distrust can also emerge as a defence, in cases where a person feels vulnerable¹¹, easily attacked, or even already attacked¹² (Freeman et al., 2020). Therefore, we can say that one of the important factors related to belief in conspiracy theories is distrust, or low trust of people in their surroundings, that is, people's distrust of other people with whom they interact.

Distrust or low trust of people in official state institutions is often cited as a predisposition to conspiracy belief, which is clearly related to a reluctance to accept, and therefore distrust, official explanations of important events. According to the presented research, this factor can be viewed as a consequence, but also as a predictor of belief in conspiracy theories.¹³

Some research has also focused on the possible relationship between distrust or low trust in other people and belief in conspiracy theories (Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Pap et al. 1999). It was Goertzel (1994) who came up with the causal link between conspiracy beliefs and distrust of other people, who observed that belief in conspiracies, was linked to trust in other people in his research. In their work, Jovančević and Milicevic (2020) proved that general trust affects the perception of conspiracy theories. Specifically, they observed that trust in other people has an impact on respondents' opinion about how the coronavirus originated.¹⁴ This relationship was observed between the low level of general trust and the theory about the intentional origin of this disease.

Conspiracy theories are often based on political events, especially those that are associated with psychological states or processes leading to an increase in distrust, a feeling of helplessness, etc. within the framework of conspiracy beliefs. Therefore, one of the main factors cited as influencing belief in conspiracy theories is distrust in state, political and official institutions. Although some research did not find a connection between political trust and conspiracies (Mancosu et al., 2017), a large part of the works does not deny their relationship. This relationship is the same as in distrust of other people. People who have little or no trust in government institutions are more likely to believe

¹¹Trust, by its very nature, is prone to vulnerability. By placing trust in another person, group or institution, an individual who trusts something or someone opens himself up to possible harm from the person to whom he gave his trust (Levi - Stoker, 2000).

¹²A situation where people feel more vulnerable to attacks can be related to poor psychological well-being and negative emotions. An example of such feelings can be low self-esteem, a feeling of helplessness or a tendency to anger (Freeman et al., 2020). These feelings are mentioned at the beginning of the second chapter as factors that may influence the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.

¹³Lower levels of trust in institutions are associated with both conspiracy beliefs and populist beliefs (Silva et al., 2017).

¹⁴In their article, Jovančević and Milicevic also talk about following certain rules related to the virus. The people who maintained general trust were more likely to comply with the measures set in the given state, which the authors attribute to the indispensability of general trust for the functioning of society in the social world (Jovančević – Milicevic, 2020)

in conspiracy theories.¹⁵

Einstein and Glick (2013) claim that distrust can arise, for example, from a situation where the public discovers political scandals of top state officials. Distrust then grows from these political scandals, which in turn can lead to a higher susceptibility to fall into conspiracy beliefs. And even if political scandals are not explicitly revealed, it can happen that in the framework of a political or electoral struggle, political representatives start attacking each other or, even worse, start attacking the basic institutions of the state. And this attack can have significant negative consequences for society through cynicism and distrust (Einstein - Glick, 2015).

3.2 Lower social status

In addition to distrust, a person's lower social status is also among the factors that significantly contribute to belief in conspiracy theories. In this article, social status is viewed through the level of education achieved and also through the amount of income. This means that a person belonging to a group with a lower social status will have a lower level of educational attainment, and in addition will have a lower monthly income. A lower social status does not necessarily have to relate to both mentioned attributes, but only with one of them, i.e., only with a lower level of education or only with low income. Thus, it is generally considered that a lower social status is a prerequisite for a person to believe conspiracy theories more easily. This means that people with higher social status should be less prone to such beliefs (Douglas et al. 2016; van Prooijen 2017; Mao et al. 2020; Goertzel 1994; Mancosu et al. 2017).

Several studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories is negatively associated with education, so we assume that a lower level of education increases the likelihood that a person will succumb to conspiracy thinking (Sutton - Douglas, 2020). This may be due to the fact that the level of education is associated with a certain level of analytical thinking. A prerequisite for susceptibility to belief in conspiracy theories is a low level of analytical thinking, which occurs to a certain extent with a low level of education. Therefore, if a person achieves lower levels of analytical thinking, he is more likely to believe in a simpler solution, and this belief will then lead him to believe in conspiracy theories in a large part of cases (Mao et al., 2020).

In this context, it is necessary to mention that, for example, according to Uscinski et al. (2020), the connection between education and conspiratorial thinking is not clear-cut. In their research, they did not find any correlation between the level of education achieved and belief in conspiracy theories. Only a small and insignificant connection in the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and education was observed in their research by Galliford and Furnham (2017). This relationship related to conspiracy theories in general, but also specifically to conspiracy theories from the field of healthcare. They found almost no connection between education level and conspiracy theories. However, as indicated above, most research have confirmed this theory about the correlation of education and conspiracy theories, for example Douglas et al. (2016).

Van Prooijen (2017), in the context of the above, presents in his work some mediators that mediate this relationship, that is, the relationship between education and belief in conspiracy theories. According to him, the mediators include a feeling of helplessness¹⁶, subjective social class¹⁷

¹⁵The relationship of distrust in state institutions and belief in conspiracy theories also appears in conspiracy theories that do not contain specific accusations of official state representatives of conspiracy (Douglas et al., 2017).

¹⁶Education is also associated with how people perceive control over their own lives from society (van Prooijen 2017).

¹⁷Education affects both objective and subjective social class. Objective social class includes factors such as income, level of education or employment, in which education itself can affect both income and employment. Objective social class shows how we are perceived not only by our immediate surroundings, but also by the wider society around us. Subjective social class, on the other hand, represents a subjective assessment of how a person perceives himself on the social ladder (Mao et al. 2020). Subjective social class can be influenced by education in the sense that if people achieve higher levels of education and associated degrees, they may assume and perceive themselves to be more respected and, in addition, generally have higher incomes.

and also belief in simple solutions. At the same time, he points out that there are other psychological factors behind this relationship, because education is connected to cognitive¹⁸, emotional, and social processes. This is because education can provide people with attributes that help them not fall into believing conspiracy theories when they are exposed to them.

A factor that, in addition to education level, is often pointed to in connection with low social status and belief in conspiracy theories is low income. Douglas et al. (2019) point out, however, that the relationship between the level of income and belief in conspiracy theories is not as clear-cut as between education and belief in such theories. This is because there is a possibility that employers do not wish to hire individuals who show a high level of conspiratorial thinking. For example, Freeman et al. (2020), who investigated belief in conspiracy theories regarding the coronavirus pandemic in the UK population, expected a relationship between income level and conspiracy belief. Specifically, they predicted that people who are more on the fringes of society will explain events through conspiracy theories. These individuals should include people with lower incomes, low levels of education and lower levels of psychological well-being. However, the expected clear relationship between the amount of income and conspiracy theories was not observed in their sample. In contrast, the relationship between education level and belief in conspiracy theories was confirmed.¹⁹ Overall, however, research confirms that social status has a significant impact on whether or not a person is more prone to believe in conspiracy theories.

3.3 Political factors

Ideology represents our opinions, beliefs or values about how we perceive the world around us, or how we think it should be (van der Linden et al., 2020). Conspiracy belief or conspiracy worldview is considered a general political attitude (Imhoff – Bruder, 2014), and therefore, according to some authors, ideology should be significantly associated with belief in conspiracy theories. Political factors that can influence belief in such theories therefore include ideological beliefs and party identification or party preferences. Some research refutes the connection between these factors and conspiracy beliefs (Oliver and Wood 2014a), but a larger number of authors and their research confirm the mentioned connection (van Prooijen et al., 2015; Douglas et al., 2019; Sutton – Douglas, 2020).

There are also differences between the studies in which ideologies or which position on the left-right axis has a greater influence on belief in conspiracy theories. So, it is not entirely clear where specifically and within which ideological or party mindset they are strongest. More often, belief in conspiracy theories is attributed to people with political conservatism. This is also confirmed by the research of van der Linden et al. (2020), who found that American conservatives are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than people with liberal beliefs, and at the same time that they are more likely to fall for a conspiracy view of the world, or a conspiracy worldview. So belief in specific conspiracy theories will also mean a higher degree of belief in other similar theories. He sees the connection between conservative ideologies and belief in conspiracy theories in distrust of governing

¹⁸People who achieve a higher level of cognitive complexity are better positioned to achieve a higher level of education, and consequently education then develops their cognitive complexity. Like higher educational attainment, increased cognitive complexity reduces the likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen 2017).

¹⁹An interesting fact may be the fact that individuals who do not believe in conspiracy theories and show lower conspiracy thinking are often employed by government agencies, the armed forces and armed services, or work in the financial industry (Douglas et al. 2019). The findings are proof that the current situation surrounding the pandemic is fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories. In addition to social factors in relation to conspiracy thinking, they also examined the impact of belief in coronavirus conspiracy theories on compliance with government measures or willingness to test and vaccinate. These relationships have been confirmed in research. People who showed higher conspiracy belief are less compliant with government measures, less willing to get tested for Covid-19, and also less willing to get vaccinated against the coronavirus (Freeman et al., 2020).

bodies and paranoid thinking²⁰, or with their distrust of expert and scientific opinions, or information from the mainstream media.

This susceptibility of conservatives to conspiracy theories might also be explained by the fact that people with conservative beliefs share false or misleading information on social networks much more often than liberals (Jost et al., 2018). It can be deduced from this that they will also share information about events that are explained through ideological conspiracy theories more often. However, the connection between conservative, right-wing ideological thinking and conspiracy beliefs is not entirely clear-cut, as some conspiracy theories are, on the contrary, associated with more left-wing positions.²¹ It is confirmed that on the left side of the political spectrum, conspiracy theories are also present, even quite popular.

If we deviate a little from ideological asymmetry or ideological symmetry in the probability of believing in conspiracy theories, we will see that people are also influenced by the party preference they show. An example can be the so-called feeling of defeat, which is associated with the situation when one party wins the electoral battle and is therefore stronger and powerful, while the supporters of the other party, which lost the election, on the contrary, feel hurt and powerless. The authors therefore point to a stronger belief in conspiracies that accuse the winning party of electoral fraud.²² Voters and party supporters explain the "unfairness" of electoral defeat in this simple way (Edelson et al., 2017; Enders - Smallpage, 2018).

Election fraud is exactly what conspiracy theories are defined as above. It is the action of a certain group of people who have gained power and through this power secretly act for their own benefit. However, if there is a possibility that one party has actually committed fraud, then it is highly likely that its supporters will not accept this claim of fraud as true. However, in the case of fraud by the rival party, they would make it clear that they do not like such actions (Beaulieu, 2014; Edelson et al., 2017). In addition to feeling defeated, conspiracy belief is also related to party preferences in such a way that supporters of one party are more likely to believe conspiracy theories about events in which a representative of a rival political party is supposed to participate as a malevolent agent (Enders - Smallpage, 2018). This may be due to the fact that party identification represents belonging to a specific group due to its influence on a person's personal identity (Uscinski et al. 2016).

In connection with political factors, some researchers pay attention to whether political extremism also has an effect on conspiracy belief. This influence has been confirmed in many studies (Sutton - Douglas, 2020; van Prooijen et al., 2015; Douglas et al., 2019; Bartlett - Miller, 2010).²³ As with other ideological positions or party preferences, there is no consensus on whether conspiracy belief appears equally at both ends of the ideological spectrum. Some authors claim that belief in conspiracy theories can be found to a roughly similar extent on the right and on the left, i.e., both extremist positions of the ideological spectrum (van Prooijen et al. 2015; Mancosu et al. 2017).

Other authors hold the opinion that belief in conspiracy theories is primarily the domain of

²⁰For more, see Hofstadter (1965), who deals with American politics and the paranoid style of thinking in his text.

²¹In this context, it should be noted that most research examining ideology and party preferences in relation to conspiracy beliefs originates from or focuses on cases from the United States or Western Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to take the results of observations from other countries with the knowledge that it is necessary to look at ideologies in more detail from the point of view of what signs and values they are specifically defined by. This is pointed out, for example, by Stoica and Umbres (2020), who conducted research on conspiracy theories in Romania. According to them, left-wing symbols are common for part of Central and all of Eastern Europe, while in the countries of Western Europe, on the contrary, they are symbols for right-minded voters of political parties.

²²Democrats and Republicans in the US each focus on something different in conspiracy theories about election fraud. For example, Democrats focus on institutional actors and their role in electoral fraud, while Republicans tend to focus on systematic and large-scale illegal vote casting (Edelson et al., 2017).

²³Radicalization and political extremism can also be seen as a consequence of belief in conspiracy theories (Bartlett - Miller, 2010). In this article, however, political extremism is predominantly viewed as a predisposition that leads to belief in conspiracy theories.

right-wing extremism (Sustein-Vermeule, 2009) and authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999). Van der Linden et al. (2020) confirm this asymmetry by observing a significantly higher probability of believing in conspiracy theories among supporters of right-wing extremism and conservatism compared to extreme liberals or leftists. At the same time, with political extremism, there is a risk that exposure to conspiracy theories and belief in them will further radicalize thinking, which can gradually lead to violent acts in the given group (Bartlett - Miller, 2010). In addition to radicalization, other adverse phenomena such as fear, hostility or conflicts between groups can be observed in the relationship between political extremism and conspiracy theories (van Prooijen - Acker, 2015).

The reasons why political extremism is considered a contributing factor to belief in conspiracy theories can be seen in some of the characteristics associated with it. Political extremism is characterized by the fact that, on the one hand, it looks at events through a highly structured style of thinking, but on the other hand, it also tends to view issues and problems of public life in black and white. Adherents mostly get and receive information through their environment showing political extremism; that is, they tend to ignore or distrust other sources of information. Such non-admission of information other than that which confirms their political position is called crippled epistemology (van Prooijen et al., 2015).

Populism²⁴ and populist beliefs are also factors that can influence belief in conspiracy theories. In this context, we can observe some common features that appear in both conspiracy beliefs and populist thinking (Mancosu et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2017; Sutton and Douglas, 2020). Some authors have noticed this connection between conspiracy thinking and populism and have begun to explore these similarities in more depth. It is mainly about the perception of the elites, who in conspiracy theories are very often considered to be the groups behind the conspiracies. Conspiracy theory talks about powerful groups that are behind the explained events, acting secretly and only for their own interest. A similar view of elites or powerful groups can also be observed in populist beliefs. Populism understands elites as a corrupt group of people who act only in favour of their own interests and are not afraid to act at the expense of the people. In addition to a higher perception of conspiracy theories among populists, there is also a higher probability that populists will openly use conspiracy theories to attack their opponents, who are mostly representatives of elites (Silva et al., 2017).

For populist-minded individuals, attacking the elites is perceived as a struggle of the good people, or good populists against evil, i.e., elites (Mancuso et al. 2017). The fight with the elites is usually presented as a fight between good and evil. That is, they tend to explain events through the melodramatic narrative common to conspiracy theories and populist thinking. The authors assume that the explanation of events through melodramatic narration better corresponds to the processing of political information of the individual, who uses it to explain events that do not make sense to him and are generally confusing for him (Oliver - Wood, 2014a).

4. Conclusion

Due to the fact that in the last few years, due to the enormous progress in the spread of the Internet and in the development of information and communication technologies, systems and means, we increasingly encounter various theories that respond to several socially significant events taking place around us, the aim of this the work was, using the relevant methods of qualitative theoretical scientific research, to investigate one of the phenomena of the current modern information society - conspiracy theories. We found that they represent a phenomenon that can be looked at from different points of view, both in terms of their scope and the size of their sphere of influence, as well as based on their originators, causes, or what roles they have in society or what their motivations are. And although conspiracy theories and tendencies towards conspiracy theorizing have been

²⁴Populism can be simply described by two signs, which intertwine with populist thinking across different states. These features include an emphasis on the role of the people and criticism of elites (Silva et al., 2017).

characteristic of people throughout the long historical development of human society, they entered wider awareness only in the 21st century, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Based on the examination of certain selected factors contributing to the belief in conspiracy theories, we can conclude that there is a connection between the increase in the popularity of conspiracy thinking and socially significant events that took place under unclear circumstances, or whose official explanation was not sufficiently convincing for a part of the population. As we indicated above, the development of the Internet and the massive use of social networks played a significant role in this area, which raised conspiracy theorizing to a new level. While until then conspiracy theorists had very limited opportunities to spread their theories, with the more massive development and availability of Internet connections and the active use of various social networks, they have gained a powerful tool to associate and share their theories about supposed conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories represent a topic within which it is difficult or impossible to formulate clear conclusions and attitudes. Just as it is impossible to condemn every supporter of conspiracy theories as a paranoid suffering from cognitive distortion, so it is also impossible to label every theorist as a truth-seeking and injustice-fighting individual. While some theories are so outlandish that it is obvious from the start that they are mere figments of a wild imagination, some theories not only have at least a partial basis in reality but may prove to be partially or completely true over time. This situation further complicates the attitude towards the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. This points to the fact that they cannot be seen as a general set to which all conspiracy theories belong but must be seen as separate and distinct entities in their own context. In an individual approach to this topic, it is therefore necessary to focus on specific aspects of individual theories with a critical distance and try to form an opinion on a specific conspiracy based on them. This way of thinking could lead to finding out whether a certain theory is at least partially relevant and whether it tries to point out a possible problem, the detection and subsequent solution of which would be useful and desirable for society, or whether it is just a purposeful accusation that aims harm the subject who is the target of the accusation.

In the very conclusion, we would like to express the assumption that the goals of our work have been achieved. During the implementation of the research, other factors contributing to the belief in conspiracy theories naturally appeared, which would deserve a more detailed investigation. Other questions also emerged that would need to be addressed more in order to clarify the issue of conspiracy theories. We thus gained further inspiration and plan to address the mentioned topics in our further research.

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