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Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations

Jan-Willem van Prooijen
VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands; The Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement, The Netherlands

Karen M Douglas
University of Kent, UK

Abstract
In the present contribution, we examine the link between societal crisis situations and belief in conspiracy theories. Contrary to common assumptions, belief in conspiracy theories has been prevalent throughout human history. We first illustrate historical incidents suggesting that societal crisis situations—defined as impactful and rapid societal change that calls established power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question—have stimulated belief in conspiracy theories. We then review the psychological literature to explain *why* this is the case. Evidence suggests that the aversive feelings that people experience when in crisis—fear, uncertainty, and the feeling of being out of control—stimulate a motivation to make sense of the situation, increasing the likelihood of perceiving conspiracies in social situations. We then explain that after being formed, conspiracy theories can become historical narratives that may spread through cultural transmission. We conclude that conspiracy theories originate particularly in crisis situations and may form the basis for how people subsequently remember and mentally represent a historical event.

Introduction

People continuously experience substantial uncertainty and fear due to societal crisis situations, such as terrorist attacks, plane crashes, natural disasters, or war. While it is surprisingly difficult to provide an objective definition of "crisis" as a historical concept— as labeling an event as a "crisis" almost necessarily requires a subjective judgment, and the significance of an event to justify

Corresponding author:
Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, VU Amsterdam,
Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: j.w.van.prooijen@vu.nl

that label often can only be evaluated in retrospect (Roitman, 2011)—in this contribution, we utilize a working definition of societal crisis as impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question. Since people have a fundamental need to understand why events occurred, particularly in the case of negative or unexpected events (Brückmuller et al., this issue), crisis situations often elicit sense-making narratives among citizens that become part of their representations of history. Many of these narratives take the form of conspiracy theories, commonly defined as explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement in order to achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent (Zonis and Joseph, 1994). Central to this definition is a group, or coalition, of powerful and evil-minded individuals, distinguishing conspiracy beliefs from other forms of belief (e.g. religion, paranormal belief, and superstition). While some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true (e.g. the Watergate and Iran–Contra scandals), most conspiracy theories in history have no evidence to support them (Pipes, 1997). Well-known examples of conspiracy theories as explanations of societal crises are allegations that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was behind the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) or that the Bush administration was involved in plotting the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009).

In the present contribution, we focus on the role that societal crisis situations play in people's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and the implications of this for how people make sense of, and remember, past events. We specifically examine whether, and why, societal crisis situations stimulate belief in conspiracy theories. To do so, we integrate historical insights about crisis events that have taken place and stimulated conspiracy theories, with psychological insights about underlying mental processes leading to conspiracy beliefs. In the following, we first examine how prevalent conspiracy theories have been throughout history. Are conspiracy theories mainly a product of our modern, digital age, facilitated and perpetuated by Internet and social media? Or, have conspiracy theories been prevalent among citizens throughout history? As a second step, we provide examples in both near and distant history of how crisis situations were intimately connected to the appearance of, and widespread belief in, conspiracy theories. As a third step, we describe the underlying psychological dynamics of how crisis situations may stimulate belief in conspiracy theories. As a final step, we explain that once formed, conspiracy theories can stabilize into coherent narratives that influence how people remember, and think about, past events.

Are conspiracy theories unique to our modern time?

A common idea among lay people, journalists, and academics seems to be that we now live in an "age of conspiracism." To some extent, this assumption is understandable: Conspiracy theories can be found everywhere on the Internet, and statistics reveal that large portions of ordinary citizens endorse them for a wide range of topics (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). As a consequence, both authors of this article are regularly approached by journalists who typically ask whether—or even downright assume that—conspiracy beliefs are "on the rise" in our current era. But is this actually true? What does the empirical evidence say about the prevalence of conspiracy thinking over time?

In an admirable and exceptionally labor-intensive research project, Uscinski and Parent (2014) randomly selected a total of 104,803 published letters that US citizens sent to the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* between 1890 and 2010. These researchers, and a team of trained assistants, coded the letters for conspiratorial content. Each era has its own crisis situations, of course, and accordingly the content of specific conspiracy theories varied substantially over time. But more interesting was the *prevalence* of conspiracy theories: The extent to which these letters

contained conspiracy theories fluctuated but did not increase over time. If anything, there were two spikes in the data suggesting increased conspiratorial content; however, these spikes were not in the current decade. The first spike occurred shortly before the year 1900, at the height of the second industrial revolution—a period that was characterized by the rise of major companies, quick technological progress, and rapidly changing power structures. Such major societal change is a recipe for feelings of insecurity among citizens, particularly those who feel powerless or voiceless (Hofstadter, 1966). The second spike occurred during the late 1940s and the early 1950s—a period that marked the beginning of the Cold War. Many of the conspiracy theories that were ventilated during that period assumed an association between groups or institutions with communism (e.g. McCarthyism). The core conclusion that emerges from these data is that conspiracy theories have not increased over time, and if there ever has been an "age of conspiracism," it is not in the present decade. Uscinski and Parent reason that, insofar as the Internet plays a role in conspiracy theorizing, its role seems restricted to replacing other means of communication (e.g. word-of-mouth).

A comparable conclusion emerges from a study by Andeweg (2014), who studied how citizens feel about politicians, political parties, and democracy, within various European Union (EU) countries. His study specifically examined whether the trust that people have in politicians and political parties, and their satisfaction with the political system, has declined over time. The data on satisfaction with democracy range from 1974 to 2012, and the data on trust range from 1997 to 2012. The results suggest that although across EU member states political trust and satisfaction tend to be low, they are not declining. There have been within-country fluctuations throughout the years, but these fluctuations seem mostly due to specific historical events (e.g. economic recession vs prosperity) and do not reflect structural changes. Although Andeweg (2014) did not directly assess belief in conspiracy theories, measures of trust in, and satisfaction with, politicians have been found to closely predict such beliefs (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994). Combined with Uscinski and Parent's (2014) data, these findings offer little evidence for the proposition that conspiracy theories are unique to our digital age.

Furthermore, there is also little evidence to support the idea that conspiracy theories are specific to Western cultures. Studies have revealed substantial conspiracy theorizing among citizens around the world, including Eastern Europe (Golec de Zavala and Cichocka, 2012), Asia (Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 2015; Swami, 2012), South Africa (Grebe and Nattrass, 2012), and the Middle East (Zonis and Joseph, 1994). A more plausible conclusion, therefore, is that a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories is part of human nature and that people have been susceptible to such beliefs throughout history. We propose a fluid, situational factor to predict such beliefs, namely, the presence versus absence of crisis situations. As each generation typically faces a range of societal crisis situations, such as revolutions, wars, economic recessions, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters, this would explain why conspiracy theorizing has been prevalent throughout history. Furthermore, while no research has yet studied cultural differences in conspiracy belief, our line of reasoning suggests that possible cultural differences are likely to be attributable to variations in the extent to which cultures experience uncertainty and fear (e.g. low- vs high-trust cultures).

Historical crises and conspiracy theories

Various major crisis events have taken place in recent history, and these events have inspired substantial conspiracy theorizing. Only recently, the world has seen economic and financial crises, which have been associated with various conspiracy theories (e.g. the theory that the financial crisis was caused by democratic bankers to get Obama elected in 2008). Furthermore, our world is facing a crisis pertaining to climate change, which has elicited a climate change denial movement, and conspiracy theories, suggesting that climate change is a hoax. Various wars were fought (e.g.

Iraq and Afghanistan), and the motives to participate in these wars have been questioned in conspiracy theories, suggesting a prominent role of oil companies in secret political decision-making. Finally, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have produced conspiracy theories, suggesting that the attacks were an inside job or that the US government deliberately failed to prevent the attacks (Dunbar and Reagan, 2011). Thus, many crisis situations took place, and almost invariably, these crisis situations led large groups of citizens to embrace conspiracy theories.

While many conspiracy theories nowadays implicate governmental institutions (e.g. the CIA) or major companies (e.g. the pharmaceutical industry), various other societal groups have also frequently been implicated in conspiracy theories. One group that has often been accused of conspiracy formation is the Jewish population. Jewish conspiracy theories—suggesting, for instance, that there is a Jewish plot to achieve world domination—still fuel anti-Semitism in various parts of the world, such as Malaysia (Swami, 2012), Turkey (Nefes, 2015), and Poland (Golec de Zavala and Cichocka, 2012). Such conspiratorial anti-Semitism is a recurring issue throughout history. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, Jewish conspiracy theories were a major part of Hitler's speeches and a potent force in inspiring the Holocaust (Snyder, 2015). For instance, Hitler blamed the German defeat in World War I (WWI) on a Jewish conspiracy. Furthermore, he believed that Soviet communism was a Jewish conspiracy, a theory commonly referred to as "Judeo-Bolshevism." Somewhat ironically, Joseph Stalin entertained similar conspiracy theories, suggesting that the Jews were responsible for the rise of Nazism (for details on Jewish conspiracy theories shortly before and during World War II (WWII), see Pipes, 1997). Also in Medieval times, the European Jewish population was a target of conspiracy theorizing, including being blamed for setbacks during the Crusades and for causing disease epidemics, such as plague (Brotherton, 2015).

Even back in the Roman era, there are prominent examples of conspiracy theories, and these are typically connected to major crisis situations. During the year AD 64, the great fire of Rome erupted. Aided by the wind and the wooden construction of the houses, the fire lasted for almost a week, transforming Rome into an inferno. Once the fire stopped, most of Rome was destroyed. Many people died or were left homeless. Emperor Nero was out of town when the fire started, and he returned to Rome to organize help for the victims. Around the same time, however, conspiracy theories started to spread, which asserted that Nero and his associates deliberately started the fire in order to rebuild Rome according to his own vision. In addition, these conspiracy theories stated that Nero was singing while Rome was burning (for a more elaborate description, see Brotherton, 2015). Apparently, Nero was not amused when hearing about the conspiracy theories. In response, he came up with his own conspiracy theory, blaming the Christian community for initiating the fire and spreading the rumors—leading many Christians to be crucified or burned alive.[1]

One might reason that these examples are just anecdotes and think of examples of conspiracy theories that appear unconnected to a specific societal crisis (e.g. the moon landings and the government hiding evidence for intelligent extraterrestrial life). However, while these latter conspiracy theories do not emerge from an objectively "real" crisis, they do make assumptions of a powerful government that deceives citizens in a deliberate and highly ingenious fashion. Such conspiracy theories therefore still originate from subjective perceptions of a nation being in crisis. More important for the present purposes is that societal crisis situations almost invariably elicit conspiracy theories. These considerations suggest that conspiracy theories are initiated by the subjective thoughts and feelings that people have when confronted with societal crisis situations, such as a fire, a disease epidemic, a war, a plane crash, or a terrorist strike. In the following section, we examine the psychological literature to answer the question of why conspiracy theories emerge in such contexts.

The psychology of conspiracy beliefs

What psychological function does believing in conspiracy theories have for perceivers, and how is this relevant in crisis situations? Conspiracy theories provide people with simplified answers, specifically to questions of how a certain crisis situation emerged, and which societal actors can and cannot be trusted. These answers are highly relevant for how people cope with crisis situations. Crisis situations are likely to have the psychological effect on people that they become uncertain or feel that they cannot control their environment anymore. Conspiracy theories address these feelings by enabling precautionary actions to the alleged conspirators—leading to increased vigilance that may be useful in exposing, combating, or avoiding the conspiracy. Put differently, a conspiracy theory helps people to make sense of the world by specifying the causes of important events, which further helps them predict, and anticipate, the future. Hofstadter (1966) noted that conspiracy theories help people comprehend complex events that are difficult to understand otherwise, by attributing these events to a powerful and evil enemy group. More generally, a desire to make sense of the world is a core motive underlying belief in conspiracy theories (see also Bale, 2007). Such sense-making is particularly likely to stimulate conspiracy beliefs in a social context that involves hostile or ideologically dissimilar outgroups. Such a competitive intergroup setting promotes a need to be vigilant, given that the powerful outgroup may cause more harm in the future, and conspiracy beliefs enable perceivers to estimate what the outgroup is capable of.

It has been noted that people's motivation to make sense of their environment increases when they feel that they are not in control of a situation or when they experience subjective feelings of uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2009). The psychological concepts of lacking control and experiencing subjective uncertainty are closely interrelated, and both describe the aversive experience of being in situations where it is unclear what the future may hold. Such experiences are threatening, as people have a basic need to experience a certain level of control over their environment and to know what to expect from that environment. Feelings of control and certainty enable people to effectively navigate the world by successfully seizing on opportunities, avoiding threats, and making good choices that contribute constructively to one's wellbeing. When people are anxious and uncertain, they seek to restore control through enhanced cognitive activity to increase comprehension of the situation that they find themselves in (see also Park, 2010). Put differently, when people experience such aversive feelings, they engage in increased sense-making activities in order to imbue a situation with meaning and purpose.

If belief in conspiracy theories is a way of making sense of a situation, it follows that such beliefs are increasingly likely to the extent that people experience uncertainty or a lack of control. This assertion would provide an explanation for why conspiracy theories emerge in societal crisis situations: People often experience such situations as uncontrollable, and hence, they are a cause of substantial uncertainty and anxiety among citizens. Moreover, it is often easy to connect societal crises to the purposeful misdeeds of hostile groups, making it likely that many citizens consider the possibility of secret conspiracy formation. In a seminal psychological experiment, one group of research participants read a scenario where a president was shot and killed. Another group of participants read the same scenario with one difference, namely, the assassin missed and the president survived. Subsequently, participants were asked to what extent they believed that a conspiratorial network was behind the attack: Was the assassination (attempt) the work of a lone wolf or of a conspiracy? Results revealed that when the president was killed, people were more likely to believe a conspiracy was behind the attack than when the president survived (McCauley and Jacques, 1979). Other studies found further support for such "consequence-cause matching" in conspiracy beliefs, referring to the idea that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories to the extent that the consequences of an event are more harmful. For instance, LeBoeuf and Norton

(2012) found that a political assassination was more likely attributed to a conspiracy if it led to a war than if it did not lead to a war. Such consequence-cause matching in conspiracy beliefs is due to an increased motivation to make sense of the event (Van Prooijen and Van Dijk, 2014).

These studies suggest that specific impactful societal events—such as the assassination of a president—produce specific conspiracy theories (i.e. about the assassination). Feelings of uncertainty, and the fear of being out of control, also appear to predict a more general tendency to explain events that happen in the world through conspiracy theories, however, including conspiracy theories that are conceptually unrelated to the source of uncertainty (e.g. Kossowska and Bukowski, 2015). For instance, research suggests that people who have a relatively strong external locus of control—which is a structural tendency to attribute one's own successes and failures to factors that are out of one's own control—are more likely to report high levels of interpersonal mistrust, paranoia, and belief in conspiracy theories (Hamsher et al., 1968; Mirowsky and Ross, 1983). Likewise, people who feel powerless are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014), as are people who strongly experience fear of death (Newheiser et al., 2011).

The above-mentioned findings are correlational, and hence, these studies do not reveal whether uncertainty causes conspiracy beliefs, or vice versa. In experimental psychological research, however, researchers have attempted to establish causality: Does the experience of lacking control, or subjective feelings of uncertainty, *increase* belief in conspiracy theories? To examine this question, various studies have attempted to induce these feelings in research participants. An example is a study by Whitson and Galinsky (2008), in which one group of research participants wrote down a past experience where they felt that they personally lacked control. Compared to other participants—who had written about a less threatening experience—these participants were subsequently more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that were unrelated to the out-of-control experience (for other illustrations, see Sullivan et al., 2010; Van Prooijen and Acker, 2015). Likewise, other studies asked participants to describe a situation in their life where they felt uncertain. Such an uncertainty induction subsequently increased belief in conspiracy theories about various societal issues, provided that the relevant authorities were considered immoral (Van Prooijen and Jostmann, 2013; see also Van Prooijen, 2016). Taken together, these findings suggest that lacking control, or subjective uncertainty, often increases people's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.

The relationship between uncertainty and conspiracy beliefs has substantial implications for understanding how people psychologically cope with adversity in their everyday life. For instance, Crocker et al. (1999) investigated conspiracy beliefs among societal minority groups (i.e. African Americans). Their findings reveal that minority group members who face real problems—such as racial discrimination—are more likely than majority group members to attribute these problems to conspiracies. Furthermore, Van Prooijen and De Vries (2016) investigated organizational conspiracy beliefs: What factors predict whether or not employees suspect their managers of conspiring toward evil goals? Results of their study revealed that feelings of job insecurity—that is, uncertainty about whether one's job will continue to exist in the future—was a main predictor of such organizational conspiracy beliefs (see also Douglas and Leite, 2016, for studies on conspiracy beliefs in organizations). These findings underscore that in a variety of settings, subjectively experiencing uncertainty or powerlessness is a recipe for conspiracy beliefs.

While conspiracy beliefs are a response to anxiety and uncertainty, it is not a given that they actually help to reduce such feelings. In fact, research reveals that exposure to conspiracy theories *increases* feelings of powerlessness, which, in turn, leads to a variety of maladaptive behavioral intentions, such as withdrawal from politics, a decreased willingness to reduce one's carbon footprint (in response to climate conspiracy belief), and a decreased willingness to have a child vaccinated (in response to vaccine conspiracy beliefs; Jolley and Douglas, 2014a, 2014b; see also

Douglas and Sutton, 2015). Conspiracy theories also appear to influence people without their awareness (Douglas and Sutton, 2008). We speculate here that conspiracy theories are likely to have some psychological payoff for perceivers, for instance, by reassuring them that harmful incidents do not occur at random, thereby enabling them to prepare for the dangers entailed by the suspected conspiracy. At the same time, believing that the world is filled with evil conspiracies is likely to invoke a host of negative emotions, which may help explain why belief in one conspiracy theory stimulates belief in other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994; Wood et al., 2012).

In sum, belief in conspiracy theories is intimately connected with feelings of fear, uncertainty, or being out of control, and it is likely that societal crisis situations often arouse such feelings in people. As such, these insights can explain why conspiracy theories flourish particularly in societal crisis situations. The main underlying process for this connection is that uncertainty stimulates a desire to make sense of one's social environment.

Implications for historical narratives

What are the implications of these psychological processes for how people remember and transmit information about past events? Here, we propose that while conspiracy theories may originate through the emotional processes of lacking control or feeling uncertain, at a relatively fast pace they can become coherent narratives that shape people's representations of history (see also Hilton and Liu, this issue). The feature of conspiracy theories that they summarize complex events into a simplified story—typically involving a powerful enemy group (i.e. the conspiracy) that deliberately organizes and carries out an evil plan— makes such theories ideally suited for cultural transmission as they are easily understood by lay people (see Bilewicz et al., this issue; Bruckmüller et al., this issue). It has been noted that people typically make sense of past events as "lay historians" who—unlike professional historians—rarely base their conclusions on direct historical sources. Instead, lay historians transmit historical narratives to others based on their imperfect memory, as well as on other imperfect sources of information such as folklore, novels, films, and the like (see Klein, 2013).

As a consequence, conspiracy theories may spread over time and become part of people's mental representations of important historical events, long after the feelings of uncertainty and fear that the events initially caused have dissipated. A case in point is the assassination of JFK on 22 November 1963 in Dallas, Texas. This event produced an instant shock in the United States and, indeed, in the entire world. For many people, the JFK assassination continues to be a "flashbulb memory," as they still know exactly where they were and what they were doing when they first heard the news (see also Luminet and Spijkerman, this issue). The event also gave rise to major conspiracy theories, making allegations that powerful groups such as the CIA, the KGB, Cuba, or organized crime were behind the assassination. Various polls suggest that ever since this event took place, the majority of US citizens have believed in one of the conspiracy theories about this event (Pipes, 1997).

Of particular interest for the present purposes is how the proportion of citizens that endorsed a JFK conspiracy theory has developed over time. Longitudinal Gallup polling revealed that, in the 3 years directly after the assassination, slightly more than 50% of US citizens believed that JFK had been murdered as part of a conspiracy (see Swift, 2013, for an overview of these Gallup polls). It stands to reason that, after these first few years, the uncertainty and fear that were caused by the Kennedy assassination had dissipated among the public. There were various other societal crises going on to worry about (e.g. the Vietnam War; substantial societal changes, such as those initiated by civil rights movements). Nevertheless, the proportion of citizens that believed in a JFK conspiracy theory gradually *increased* over the years, reaching a high of 81% in 1975. In the

following years, up until 2003, these proportions remained consistently above 70% and peaked again at 81% in the early 2000s. Only in recent years these numbers have started to decrease, although they are currently still above 60%—which is higher than directly after JFK assassination itself (Swift, 2013).

While uncertainty and fear may have contributed to the genesis of JFK conspiracy theories back in 1963, it is difficult to account for these numbers through these emotional processes. There has been variation in the number of crises throughout the past few decades that citizens encountered (e.g. economic recession vs prosperity; war vs peace), but this waxing and waning of societal crises are not visible in the Gallup figures (Swift, 2013). Furthermore, taking into account that the figures are very high also in recent years, it is quite likely that many people who were not even born in 1963 endorse a JFK conspiracy theory. Instead, we propose that conspiracy theories can become coherent historical narratives that are transmitted to future generations as if they were facts, even if the actual facts do not provide compelling evidence for the conspiracy theory. What starts as a psychological response to cope with distressing feelings can become part of people's representations of history.

Not all conspiracy theories make history this way, and in fact, the plausibility that people accord to certain conspiracy theories can also decrease over time as a function of new insights. For instance, it was common for citizens to believe that many young women conspired as witches with the Devil back in the seventeenth century, and this conspiracy theory in all likelihood emerged through similar processes as other conspiracy theories discussed in this article. Nevertheless, it is a safe guess that few modern European citizens would endorse such beliefs today (although comparable witchcraft conspiracy theories are still common in other parts of the world, for example, parts of Africa; West and Sanders, 2003). In a similar vein, we can only speculate as to how JFK conspiracy theories will develop in the future—particularly when the final classified documents about this incident are released to the public. Be that as it may, our conclusion is that while conspiracy theories are initially based on the emotional experiences associated with imminent crisis situations, they may soon after stabilize into coherent narratives that are part of how people remember the past.

Concluding remarks

This contribution sought to examine the relationship between societal crisis situations and belief in conspiracy theories. Building on an integration of historical observations with basic psychological research, we can draw the following conclusions. First, conspiracy theories are not unique to our current time or culture. People of all eras and cultures are likely to believe in conspiracy theories, provided that they are confronted with societal crisis situations. Second, this relationship between societal crisis situations and belief in conspiracy theories is attributable to feelings of fear, uncertainty, and being out of control. These feelings instigate sense-making processes that increase the likelihood that people perceive conspiracies in their social environment. Third, after being formed, conspiracy theories can become part of lay representations of history and are transmitted to new generations as coherent narratives even though people do not experience uncertainty about past crisis situations anymore. Taken together, these processes might explain why human history is replete with widespread belief in conspiracy theories.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. The original historical source reporting the fire of Rome, the Nero conspiracy theory, and Nero's reaction toward Christians is Tacitus (Annal XV, 38-44) and can be read at http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Tacitus/TacitusAnnals15.html

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Author biographies

Jan-Willem van Prooijen is an associate professor at the Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology in VU Amsterdam and senior researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). His research focuses on conspiracy beliefs, feelings of injustice, and ideological extremism.

Karen M Douglas is a professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Her research focuses on the psychology of conspiracy theories, sexism in language, and the psychology of modern communication technology.