2023

Examining Conspiracy Theories: Reevaluating the Assumption that Their Supporters are Paranoid (2023-2024)

Soren C. Jung
SUNY Cortland, soren.jung@cortland.edu

“Examining Conspiracy Theories: Reevaluating the Assumption that Their Supporters are Paranoid” Soren C. Jung (research inquiry example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

A research inquiry uses sustained, student-led research to join a conversation, or in this case, to explore a question or unexplained phenomenon. Here Jung uses research to contextualize, understand, and offer a different viewpoint on why conspiracy theories remain so popular when they are so commonly condemned. In addition to the conspiracy theories, Jung places emphasis on reevaluating common narratives about conspiracy theory *supporters* as paranoid, uneducated, or misinformed. He raises questions about historical precedents and supporter motivations, at the same time that he concludes with the reminder that the evidence of health consequences from Covid-19 infection are neither theoretical nor speculative. As you read Jung’s essay, consider:

- How does Jung use structure in his research inquiry? If the essay is considered in three parts (definitions/theory, history of Big Tobacco companies, and then Covid-19 vaccine conspiracy theories,) how do these parts operate? What is the purpose of each section of research? How does it inform you as the reader?
- Jung spends a considerable amount of time considering the notorious actions of conspiring and colluding on the part of Big Tobacco companies. Why is this important to his main topic about conspiracy theories? What are some historical precedents or seemingly adjacent topics of research for your own research inquiry? How might expanding your own research scope be effective or ineffective depending on your goals?
- In the conclusion, Jung states a “main takeaway” for his essay. Why is that reminder about the difference between evidence and speculative theory important to this particular topic or Jung’s main purpose? How would that or would that not work in your own topic?

Examining Conspiracy Theories: Reevaluating the Assumption that Their Supporters are Paranoid by Soren C. Jung

Conspiracy theories have become a topic of rich discussion among the American public in recent years. Whether it is the recent slew of conspiracies surrounding the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic or the spread of the QAnon conspiracy theory, these theories seem to be finding support across the nation. Of course, conspiracy theories are not a new trend, as they have existed for centuries. Many people consider these conspiracy theories to be dangerous, spreading false information and baseless assumptions that promote civic unrest and sometimes violence. For their supporters, however, conspiracy theories represent a resistance to the establishment, an attempt to uncover a dark truth that they believe lies behind the official narrative. Most people deplore conspiracy theories, and there are a plethora of articles and publications that lament their continued popularity. Typically, these discussions deride conspiracy theorists as ignorant,

uneducated, or even paranoid. As this paper will address, the criticism of conspiracy theories as stubbornly mistaken misses the mark.

As the term suggests, conspiracy theories are simply concepts about possible, yet to be uncovered conspiracies. So, what is a conspiracy? A conspiracy is defined as "a combination of persons for an evil or unlawful purpose; an agreement between two or more persons to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible" (Oxford English Dictionary). With this definition in mind, let us check the definition of "conspiracy theory": "The theory that an event or phenomenon occurs as a result of a conspiracy between interested parties; spec. a belief that some covert but influential agency (typically political in motivation and oppressive in intent) is responsible for an unexplained event" (Oxford English Dictionary). It may seem from the dictionary that believing in a conspiracy theory is not a bad thing at all. After all, conspiracies, by definition, are virtually never good, and trying to uncover them would certainly be good. However, we will soon find out that many do not view conspiracy theories and their supporters in a positive light.

In "The Paranoid Style of American Politics," Richard Hofstadter examines the trend of extreme exaggeration and conspiratorial thinking prevalent in American politics (Hofstadter, 1964). Key in this theme are worries about defending the nation (or even fighting to regain control) from external or internal forces trying to subvert and corrupt it. These opposing forces are often seen as having allegiances to organizations or loyalty to ideas other than the United States and democracy. Hofstadter argues that there is a paranoid trend in how some political ideas are processed in American politics, a recurrent fear among some Americans that outsiders or powerful insiders with un-American purposes are subverting and destroying parts of their society. This common theme was combined in the late 19th century with Nativism, fearing immigrants would harm the Protestant U.S. democracy. Later, the conspiratorial thinking shifted to see America as already being lost to outside forces, which true Americans must defeat to regain control and save America before it is destroyed. Instead of religious groups, the threat was now communists, though the strong atheistic elements of communism could certainly be seen as a threat to traditional American Protestantism.

After this historical synopsis, Hofstadter argues that supporters of conspiracy theories see themselves and their supposed opponents in simplified terms of good vs. evil, exaggerating the capabilities of their supposed enemy to create an image that is really a projection of themselves. In Hofstadter's view, conspiracy theorists wish they could be as convincing and powerful as they portray their opponents to be. This projection can include elements that the paranoid thinker idealizes and elements that he or she openly deplores but may secretly wish for. And despite such illogical conclusions, the paranoid thinkers seek to protect and prove their stance through rigorous fact-gathering. Hofstadter concludes by saying that paranoid conspiracy theorists, due to their black and white views of the world, have unrealistic expectations of politics, causing them to be left out – an exclusion that only strengthens their conspiratorial views (Hofstadter, 1964).

Even with Hofstadter's decades old warning against conspiracy thinking, conspiracy theories have continued well into the 21st century. The arguments against them have continued, as well, often along similar lines. Richard Friedman's recent article "Why Conspiracy Theories Are So Alluring" explains that the complexity and chaos of our world can drive some people to believe in conspiracies theories, which provide a simplified, narrative-driven way to view otherwise bewildering and sometimes frightening developments (Friedman, 2021). Friedman looks at two

of the Covid-19 conspiracy theories, about the virus's creation and about the vaccine's being used to implant microchips. He points out that both theories have a slight grain of credibility, as both are theoretically possible. The second theory, that the vaccine is part a plot by our government to create a total system of surveillance, has a credible starting point in the concern that we are all being secretly observed and manipulated by unseen powers. Friedman is a psychologist, and he explains that psychologically, human beings are "hard-wired" to find answers that are most consistent with our worldview, not answers that are truly correct (Friedman, 2021). He observes that social media echo chambers are contributing to this effect, reinforcing our previously held beliefs. Another of his key ideas is that the human propensity for pattern recognition can sometimes lead people to assign meaning to random events. As human beings, we prefer to think that things happen for a reason, and it is unsettling to think some of the most consequential events are accidental. Essentially, conspiracies are so alluring to us because they assign a meaning to how the world operates (Friedman, 2021).

In her 2020 *Vice* article "World Leaders Are Hyping Bogus COVID Cures," Anna Merlan suggests that populist leaders such as Trump promoted phony cures for Covid-19 because they wanted to dissuade people from believing that their government could solve their problems and instead to foster belief in the anti-elitist strongmen that these leaders envision themselves as. As Merlan notes, the World Health Organization (WHO) had put out warnings that several studies on the use of Ivermectin as an effective Covid-19 treatment were highly flawed and that the public should wait for more credible research. Such warnings worked paradoxically to serve the purposes of leaders like Trump, who claimed that their miracle cures had worked for them and who urged the public to put its faith in them alone and not in any public institutions (Merlan, 2020). It is nearly an axiom for conspiracy theorists that public institutions are not to be trusted.

Continuing the discussion of Covid-19 related conspiracies and in another effort to discourage such ideas, Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders wrote, "The Coronavirus Conspiracy Boom," where they discuss the results of their research on conspiracy theory belief amongst Americans. They conclude that group attachments, including to political parties, and "conspiracy thinking" – a certain mind-set – are the chief factors. Further, they suggest that without influential figures shaping beliefs through group attachments, there would be "a natural ceiling in conspiracy beliefs" (Uscinski & Enders, 2020). As they explain, people tend to associate their own group as being correct and righteous while simultaneously viewing the opposition group as wrong or even downright evil (Enders & Uscinski, 2020).

The arguments presented in the articles above tend to focus on specific theories that are plainly wrong, and they regard the people who believe in conspiracy theories as plainly wrong, too. Whether misguided, uneducated, or even paranoid, these believers are dismissed in one way or another. Few writers have acknowledged that there are sometimes good reasons for people to believe in a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories often derive from people's fears about the world, fears that are grounded in aspects of our everyday lives. Once people learn of conspiracies that really did happen, this knowledge can work to undermine our trust in official explanations. While conspiracy theories are often overblown, the core concern is almost always based on real situations that people worry about. After all, if large and apparently reliable institutions have given us false assurances before, couldn't they do so again? For instance, if big corporations have conspired to protect

their profits by concealing necessary information about their products, is there any reason to think the public interest is more important to them now?

It was in 1950 that research was first published linking tobacco use to increased risk of cancer (Doll & Hill, 1950). In the years to follow, more and more evidence would accumulate, showing that tobacco products were dangerous. However, tobacco corporations and tobacco products remained incredibly popular through much of the late 20th century. This continued success despite the mounting evidence against tobacco can be attributed to the litany of tactics used by Big Tobacco to mislead the public about the health consequences of tobacco use. For many years the misinformation came from tobacco companies working independently. In 1977, however, several of them started to coordinate their efforts in a conspiracy known as "Operation Berkshire" (Francey & Chapman, 2000).

Operation Berkshire was the covert name given by the chairman of Imperial Tobacco at the time, Tony Garrett, for a series of meetings and agreements between the executives of the world's seven largest tobacco companies: Philip Morris, R J Reynolds, British-American Tobacco, Rothmans, Reemtsma, Gallaher, and Imperial (Francey & Chapman, 2000). Here they agreed to secretly coordinate their efforts on various topics, including growing concerns in the public sphere and within governments about the health effects of smoking:

> The agenda for Operation Berkshire included determining areas for future cooperation in matters relating to smoking and health, discussing the feasibility of joint industry research into the benefits of smoking, and mounting a programme of "smoker reassurance" to counter the increasing social unacceptability of smoking. (Francey & Chapman, 2000)

At the heart of the conspiracy, tobacco corporations acknowledged among themselves that their products posed health risks to users, but they did so only internally. Francey and Chapman quote an internal document from British American Tobacco, dated May 16th, 1980, to show how challenging it was for such companies to maintain the pretense that smoking was harmless:

> The company's position on causation is simply not believed by the overwhelming majority of independent observers, scientists and doctors . . . The industry is unable to argue satisfactorily for its own continued existence, because all arguments eventually lead back to the primary issue of causation, and on this point our position is unacceptable . . . our position on causation, which we have maintained for some twenty years in order to defend our industry is in danger of becoming the very factor which inhibits our long term viability.

This document swiftly erases any idea that Big Tobacco was innocent and unaware of the science. As the internal disagreements show, some companies recognized that what they were doing was wrong and deceptive. Even so, Operation Berkshire would continue and expand.

Officially named the International Committee on Smoking Issues (ICOSI) in 1977, later becoming the International Tobacco Information Center (INFOTAB) in 1981, the conspiracy was technically in the open although never public-facing and still very secretive and vague about its intentions (McDaniel et al., 2008). Through these international organizations, more local, nation-specific taskforces were created, called National Manufacturer Associations (NMA's)

(Francey & Chapman, 2000). As Francey and Chapman report, the NMA's were used to direct pro-tobacco campaigns in individual nations:

> "Operation Mayfly" illustrates the role of the national manufacturers' associations. This project, conceived by the International Tobacco Information Centre, was for a "long term communications plan" implemented in response to the World Health Organization's campaign "Smoking or health—the choice is yours." Operation Mayfly involved a 1981 "field test" utilising the tobacco institutes of Australia and New Zealand ". . . to influence, modify or change public opinion to the industry, smokers and smoking, to create a more favourable climate however directly or indirectly."

Although the number of NMA's started out relatively limited, by 1985, INFOTAB had expanded to cover 57 nations (McDaniel et al. 2008). Through these mechanisms, from 1982-1984, INFOTAB was able to lead successful campaigns against tobacco legislation in over 10 nations (McDaniel et al. 2008).

The tobacco corporations put aside their competition with one another and, for over twenty years, actively conspired to mislead the public and to fight against government regulations. They understood that the scientific consensus was against them and that smoking tobacco was harmful. Yet they not only continued to promote smoking; they set out deliberately to mislead and obfuscate the public about the risks. They did this to make as much money as possible and for as long as they could manage. Their top executives travelled around the world to meet in secret, planning how best to manipulate the public and protect their bottom lines.

Conspiracies like Operation Berkshire show us that it can be dangerous to take a corporation's word at face value. Big corporations work to maximize profit. If they can get away with selling a harmful product to make more money, they will lie about the product without a moment's hesitation.

With Operation Berkshire fresh in our minds, let us turn our attention to a conspiracy theory that remains unproven, one of the myriads of theories that challenge the established narrative around Covid-19 vaccines. Many of these theories question the safety of particular vaccines. Other theories question if there are hidden, nefarious purposes for promoting the vaccines and requiring people to take them. There are so many anti-vaccination conspiracy theories that it is impossible to address them all here, except to say that taken together they demonstrate a widespread rejection of the official narrative.

What could explain this attitude of rejection? Is there any reason for people to be worried about a possible conspiracy regarding vaccines? To see what is driving the counter-narratives, what value they might have, and how to take account of them by putting them in context, let's look at the theory that Big Pharma has knowingly produced vaccines with potentially harmful side effects that they are hiding from doctors and patients.

Let's start by discussing the money side. How much money have pharmaceutical corporations made since the start of the pandemic? As of May 2021, CNN reported, "Covid-19 vaccines have created at least nine new billionaires after shares in companies producing the shots soared" (Ziady, 2021). According to *The Guardian*, in 2021 Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna were each projected to earn twenty billion U.S. dollars or greater (Kollewe, 2021). As you can see, despite

many millions of Americans suffering economic hardship during the pandemic, the pharmaceutical companies and their executives are earning more money than ever before.

As fallout from Operation Berkshire, many medical journals have blocked research funded by tobacco companies (McCambridge, 2016); and it would not be surprising if pharmaceutical companies were also colluding. As of now, research into Covid-19 that is funded by pharmaceutical companies is permitted in many journals. It makes sense that this potential problem would be a cause for concern, however, and it should not be dismissed out of hand as "conspiratorial thinking."

The connection between money and medicine is vexing, and it accounts for much of the distrust surrounding Big Pharma. It may even be true that Covid-19 vaccines have potentially harmful short- or long-term side effects and that it is wrong for Big Pharma to advertise them as perfectly safe. This conspiracy theory remains just a theory: it has yet to be proven. Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that the immediate and long-term effects of catching Covid-19 are very real and can be very serious. Covid-19 has caused millions of deaths so far, and in some people, it has significantly impaired cognitive ability and respiratory function long after what would otherwise have seemed a full recovery. The power of Covid-19 virus is being researched with a vengeance, and more is being uncovered every day. Meanwhile the Covid-19 vaccines have been shown to significantly reduce the chance of infection and to greatly diminish the risk of death and other serious health consequences.

The vaccines may negatively impact you somehow in the long run; however, right now, we know that Covid-19 is dangerous, and we can protect against it with the vaccine. So, while your fears are certainly not invalid, the dangers of Covid-19 are demonstrably higher than the dangers of the vaccine right now, and the vaccine is the safer option.

The main takeaway is that people who believe in conspiracy theories are not to be dismissed as uneducated or paranoid. Like the people who are fearful of the Covid-19 vaccines, they are drawn to conspiracy theories because the theories answer to a deep and legitimate anxiety. Most of us are anxious about the future. This anxiety is bound to be exacerbated if we cannot trust the institutions of our society, including big corporations, the scientific community, and the government. Trust in institutions is weakened when a real conspiracy is unearthed. Big Tobacco lied to the world for decades, showing just how money-hungry corporations can be. Even if the actual conspiracy is rarely discussed anymore, it imparted a lesson: you should question what corporations say, they are not looking out for your best interests, they just want your money.

Even if many of their conclusions are wrong, conspiracy theorists are not wrong to question pharmaceutical corporations and to be wary. More generally, the people who believe in conspiracy theories are anxious, not because they are paranoid but because they understand that institutions have often conspired to hide the truth. They want to explore alternative explanations before they can possibly trust the official narrative. Like students in more conventional fields, they should be encouraged to pursue their own leads and to find their own paths to the truth.

References

Doll, R., & Hill, A. B. (1950). Smoking and carcinoma of the lung; preliminary report. *British Medical Journal*, *2* (4682), 739–748. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.2.4682.739

Francey, N, & Chapman, S. (2000). "Operation Berkshire": the international tobacco companies' conspiracy. *British Medical Journal*, 321(7257), 371–374. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.321.7257.371

Friedman, R. A. (2021, February 12). Why conspiracy theories are so alluring. *The New York Review of Books*. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2021/02/12/why-conspiracy-theories-are-so-alluring/

Hofstadter, R. (1964, November). The paranoid style in American politics. *Harper's Magazine*, 77–86. https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/

Hornsey, Harris, E. A., & Fielding, K. S. (2018). The psychological roots of anti-vaccination attitudes: a 24-nation investigation. *Health Psychology*, 37(4), 307–315. https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000586

Kollewe, J. (2021, March 6). From Pfizer to Moderna: Who's making billions from covid-19 vaccines? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/mar/06/from-pfizer-to-moderna-whos-making-billions-from-covid-vaccines

McCambridge, J. (2016). Ethical issues raised by tobacco industry-linked research in the era of e-cigarettes. *Addiction* (Abingdon, England), 111(8), 1334–1335. https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13308

McDaniel, P. A., Intinarelli, G., & Malone, R. E. (2008). Tobacco industry issues management organizations: creating a global corporate network to undermine public health. *Globalization and Health*, *4*, 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/1744-8603-4-2

Merlan, A. (2020, August 13). World leaders are hyping bogus COVID cures. *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en/article/889eva/world-leaders-are-hyping-bogus-covid-cures

Uscinski, J. E, and Enders, A.M. (2020, April 30). The coronavirus conspiracy boom. *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/what-can-coronavirus-tell-us-about-conspiracy-theories/610894/

Ziady, H. (2021, May 21). Covid vaccine profits mint 9 new pharma billionaires. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/21/business/covid-vaccine-billionaires/index.html