

 CONSPIRACY BELIEFS

Randomness dismissal and conspiracy beliefs

“ the relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy theory belief remains complex and highly context-dependent ”

There is a small but robust relationship between endorsement of conspiracy beliefs and willingness to dismiss random explanations for events, according to a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. People higher in randomness dismissal are more likely to endorse a variety of conspiracy beliefs, but this effect is small and contextually sensitive.

Conspiracy theories are narratives people use to explain events as the result of malevolent plotting on the part of secretive entities or groups. In particular, such explanations rely on dismissing randomness as a potential cause of events. As such, some researchers suggest that a tendency to dismiss randomness might predict greater conspiracy belief. “The idea that people who dismiss randomness as a possible cause of an event are also more drawn to conspiratorial narratives is popular, in both academic and non-academic discourse about conspiracy theories,” says lead author Anni Sternisko.

Several papers have found evidence for such a relationship. However, others have found no effect or modest effects that disappeared when certain moderators were included. To reconcile this mixed literature, Anni Sternisko, Sylvian Delouvée and Jay Van Bavel replicated an influential study and performed a meta-analysis.

The authors hoped to eliminate alternative explanations for the randomness dismissal–conspiracy belief relationship. Specifically, they used a diverse cross-cultural and demographically representative sample to address a limitation of past studies, which relied on samples

of college students. In addition, they used a large sample to rule out insufficient power as an explanation for the conflicting literature. The authors also explored differences in participant education level as a potential third variable that might influence conspiracy belief.

In the replication study, an online sample of 814 US and Swiss participants completed several individual difference measures of conspiracy ideation, randomness dismissal, education and belief in various conspiracy theories (for example, that the moon landing was faked). Finally, participants read fictitious scenarios and were then asked to report how much they agreed with three potential explanations for the described event: two relying on non-conspiratorial explanations, and one suggesting a conspiracy at work.

The results were mixed. Although no significant relationship emerged in response to the two fictitious scenarios, responses to the individual differences measures revealed a positive relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy theory belief among the Swiss participants — but not the US participants. “Most studies that found a relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy ideation were conducted in the US, and most studies that did not find such evidence were conducted in Europe,” explains Sternisko. “We found the opposite: randomness dismissal was related to conspiracy belief among Swiss but not US participants.” The predicted moderating role of education was not significant.

The authors then conducted a meta-analysis of both published

and unpublished literature on the relationship between randomness dismissal and support for conspiracy theories. Their analysis of 55 effect sizes found that greater randomness dismissal was associated with increased conspiracy ideation. Although the meta-analytic effect size was small, the authors did not find evidence for publication bias against null results.

In sum, both the preregistered replication and the meta-analysis found support for a small relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy ideation. However, culture moderated this relationship in an unexpected fashion that was the opposite of past work. Daily COVID-19 rates had increased dramatically in Switzerland at the time of the study, to three times greater than the COVID-19 rate in the US, which might explain the cultural differences that emerged. Other variables — such as existential motives and valuing rationality — might also moderate the relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy belief.

The relationship between randomness dismissal and conspiracy theory belief remains complex and highly context-dependent. However, this paper provides an important step towards explaining which contexts might strengthen that relationship. “Although those ‘it depends’ messages can be disappointing,” says Sternisko, “they are important.”

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