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EDITORIAL

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND CULTURAL VALUES

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Conspiracy theories are ubiquitous across times and cultures: They have been widespread across Western and Eastern cultures, modern and traditional societies, ancient and recent civilizations. The theoretical perspective that conspiracy beliefs are rooted in a set of evolved psychological mechanisms is almost generally accepted. But apart from the similarities between cultures, it is very probable that also cultural differences exist in people's predilection towards conspiracy thinking.

Conspiracy theories have occurred across times and cultures. Exceeding the idea that we now live in an 'age of conspiracism', conspiracy theories were present in the entire 20th century, the dark ages, the Roman empire, and ancient Greek mythology.

Moreover, conspiracy theories have been observed across cultures worldwide, including various countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Conspiracy theories are also common in traditional societies – including native tribes in the Amazon and villages in rural parts of Africa – where people often ascribe their group's misfortune to sorcery committed by a conspiracy in an enemy village. But despite the cultural ubiquity of conspiracy theories, research has not investigated how culture may be associated with conspiracy beliefs so far.

Research suggests that belief in conspiracy theories (CT) stems from basic psychological mechanisms and is linked to other belief systems (e.g. religious beliefs). While most research has extensively examined individual and contextual variables associated with CT beliefs, very few has yet investigated the role of culture.

What makes an individual believe in conspiracy theories (CTs)? In the past years, a lot of studies has analysed why some people believe in narratives about a secret group of malevolent actors that pursues a hidden plot with the intent to secure or strengthen its own power among others, by hurting or even destroying the in-group of the believer.

Conspiracy beliefs and an ample conspiracy mentality binding them together are significant topics in today's psychology, including due to potential societal costs that are associated with them. Despite anecdotal evidence supporting the omnipresence of such beliefs all over the world, very few researchers have investigated cross-cultural differences.

Suspecting that a group of people or institution have made secret arrangement to their own benefit and at the expense of the public is a ordinary reality. Supporting these beliefs, without strong evidence, offers the illusion of having certain knowledge about the world and thus being able to control it. It is an important matter to explore regional and cultural differences in the readiness to engage in conspiracy thinking. Only a few studies have systematically explored conspiracy beliefs in a cross-cultural perspective. First associations have been explored with country-level indicators of the Hofstede dimensions.

It is of particular interest to learn to what extent conspiracy can be considered as irrational and paranoid and to what extent they are rational reaction to social contexts that have deficiencies in transparency.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is a framework for cross-cultural psychology, developed by Geert Hofstede. It shows the effects of a society's culture on the values of its members, and how these values relate to behaviour, using a structure derived from factor analysis. Among the six cultural value dimensions he proposed, uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to define a clear set of beliefs and rules that seek to prevent ambiguous situations, and they do not tolerate unconventional behaviours. In the same vein, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance do not make efforts to eliminate uncertainty, since they value a flexible future.

It is reasonable to consider that a cultural preference for reducing uncertainty might stimulate the endorsement of conspiracy theories, since conspiratorial beliefs produce a way to approach unclear situations.

Could we consider the history of humankind to be a history of conspiracy theories?