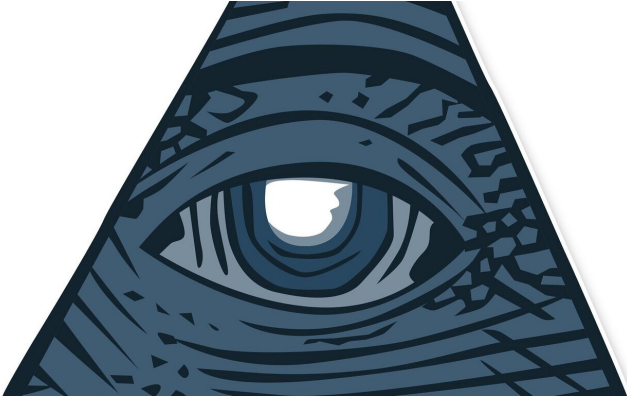


# Disagreeable people found to be more prone to conspiracy theories

25 August 2021, by Tim Christie



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People who are antagonistic, exploitative and generally disagreeable are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, according to recent study from a UO researcher.

Cameron Kay, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology, found that people who possess personality traits known as the "Dark Tetrad" are more likely to believe Princess Diana's death was orchestrated by the British royal family, that the moon landing was faked, and that alien spacecraft are being stored at Area 51, among other conspiracy theories. Kay's study was published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

The traits of the Dark Tetrad are Machiavellianism (manipulativeness and cynicism); narcissism (vanity and self-obsession); psychopathy (impulsivity and callousness); and sadism (cruelty and abusiveness). Most people have elements of some of these traits, Kay said.

"In plain terms, it seems like disagreeable people, who score high in these traits, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories," Kay said. "They

are prone to odd beliefs. They don't feel like they are in control of their lives. They are robbed of their agency and have an innate distrust of other people and organizations like the government."

To conduct his study, Kay recruited 500 [undergraduate students](#) at the UO to complete a one-hour survey designed to measure the traits in question as well as belief in conspiracy theories (26 students were ultimately excluded). The survey also measured tendencies to have unusual beliefs, to feel a lack of control over one's future, to desire control, to trust others, and to feel a need to be unique.

In analyzing the results, Kay found evidence that aspects of all four of the Dark Tetrad traits are associated with conspiracist ideation. Nearly all of the associations were attributable to the tendency of those with disagreeable personalities to hold odd beliefs, be fatalistic and distrust others.

Kay got interested in conspiracy theories and the people who believe them while working on his master's degree in journalism at the UO in 2017, during which he talked with and learned about a group of people in Portland who believe that Earth is flat.

"Most people think conspiracy theorists are crackpots," he said. "Talking to these people, I felt there was more going on. Some wanted to socially connect with other people. A small subset wanted to take advantage of other people. I wanted to see what underlies these beliefs and theories."

Being able to determine why certain people believe [conspiracy theories](#) may lead to ways to combat misinformation and decrease belief in [conspiracy theories](#), he said.

"The long-term goal is to come up with ways to decrease conspiracist ideation among people with these personality traits," he said.

**More information:** Cameron S. Kay, Actors of the most fiendish character: Explaining the associations between the Dark Tetrad and conspiracist ideation, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.paid.2020.110543](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110543)

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