



FlashReport

The dark side of meaning-making: How social exclusion leads to superstitious thinking



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Social exclusion leads to endorsement of superstitious and conspiratorial beliefs.
- Search for meaning mediates between social exclusion and superstitious thinking.
- Social inclusion could be used as a means of counteracting conspiratorial beliefs.

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ABSTRACT

This paper tests a meaning-making model of conspiratorial thinking by considering how one's search for meaning mediates between social exclusion and the endorsement of conspiratorial (Study 1) and superstitious (Study 2) beliefs. In Study 1, participants first wrote about a self-selected personal event that involved a social interaction, they then indicated how socially excluded they felt after the event, and, finally, they rated their endorsement of three well-known conspiracy theories. In Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to a Social Inclusion, a Social Exclusion, or a Control condition, after which they indicated the association between improbable events in three scenarios. In addition, both studies mechanistically tested the relation between social exclusion and conspiratorial/superstitious thinking by measuring the participants' tendency to search for meaning. Both Study 1 (correlational) and Study 2 (experimental) offer support for the hypothesis that social exclusion is associated with superstitious/conspiratorial beliefs. One's search for meaning, correlational analyses revealed, mediated this relation. We discuss the implication of the findings for community-wide belief dynamics and we propose that social inclusion could be used to diminish the dissemination of superstitious beliefs and conspiracy theories.

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Meaning-making is a fundamental characteristic of thinking minds. Expose a person to a set of completely unrelated events and observe the complex ways in which human minds create connections, tell stories, and go beyond what is given to imbue chaos with order. We are concerned here with understanding the conditions under which one's tendency to search for meaning backfires and leads to conspiratorial thinking and superstitious beliefs.

Decades of investigation into the processes involved in meaning-making revealed that it is an automatically triggered (Kahneman, 2013), evolutionary adaptive (Foster & Kokko, 2009; Sherman, 2002), and developmentally dynamical (Tronick & Beeghly, 2011) feature of the cognitive system. It influences information processing from perception (Heider & Simmel, 1944), to more complex mnemonic (Bartlett,

1932; Schacter, 2002) and decisional (Nickerson, 1998) processes. For the most part, this ability to make sense of a complex world has positive consequences. It has been shown to result in mental and physical health benefits (Ownsworth & Nash, 2015), increased well-being (Cacioppo, Hawkley, Rickett, & Masi, 2005; Shek, 1992), emotion regulation (Ochsner, Silvers, & Buhle, 2012) and adjustment to trauma (Park, 2010). But the ability to search for meaning sometimes backfires. In an effort after meaning individuals falsely remember events that they haven't actually experienced (Clancy, 2005; Schacter, 2001), they preferentially process belief consistent information (Snyder & Swann, 1978) and engage in motivated reasoning as a way to maintain internal consistency (Kunda, 1990).

One important way in which meaning search could backfire is when meaning is assigned to meaningless events. Recent research hints at the fact that the tendency to endorse conspiracy theories could be seen as an exaggeration of the processes involved in meaning search. Whitson and Galinsky (2008), for example, find that when people are made to

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feel uncertain or when they lack control over a situation they are more likely to endorse superstitious beliefs and conspiracy theories. Complementarily, affirming control has been found to result in reduced beliefs in conspiracy theories (Prooijen & Acker, 2015). We reasoned that: (1) one particular instance in which people are made to feel uncertain and might be motivated to reestablish control by engaging in search for meaning are situations involving social exclusion, and (2) this search for meaning might, in turn, make people particularly prone to endorse superstitious beliefs and conspiratorial thinking. Both premises are supported by previous research. Stillman et al. (2009), for instance, found that social exclusion is associated with feelings of meaninglessness. Even though loss of meaning does not necessarily trigger meaning search, previous research has found a moderate correlation between meaning presence and meaning search (Grouden & Jose, 2015). As for the relation between meaning search and superstitious beliefs, Routledge, Roylance, and Abeyta (2015) provide experimental evidence that threatening meaning results in increased belief in miraculous stories. This research suggests the possibility that threatening meaning does not necessarily lead to loss of meaning, but rather triggers a search for meaning that increases one's belief in these miraculous stories. In essence, we contend, in order for one's effort after meaning to backfire it is not sufficient for one to experience a loss of meaning, one needs to actively engage in searching for meaning. No research to date has investigated, however, in a mechanistic fashion, the relation between social exclusion, search for meaning, and belief in conspiratorial beliefs. In Study 1, we wanted to first establish whether feeling socially excluded is (correlationally) associated with the endorsement of conspiratorial beliefs, and whether this relation is mediated by one's tendency to search for meaning. In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated social exclusion and we measured the degree to which people endorsed superstitious beliefs. For both studies we reported all measures, manipulations, and exclusions.

1. Study 1

1.1. Methods

1.1.1. Participants

We sought to recruit 120 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, a sample size deemed adequate to conduct regression analyses for the proposed mediation model. Due to Mechanical Turk's recruitment process a total of 123 participants completed the study. Four participants did not describe any event during the Social Event Description phase, which resulted in a final sample of 119 participants (50% female). The participants had an average age of 37.23 years ($SD = 13.11$).

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

As part of the study, participants went through four phases. (1) In the *Social Event Description phase* participants were asked to write about a recent unpleasant event that involved interacting with one's close friend(s). For guidance, they were asked to briefly describe the event, their reaction to it, their friend(s)' reaction to it, and the aftermath, in no more than 1000 characters. (2) Next, in the *Emotional Evaluation phase*, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt 14 emotions (6 positive and 8 negative) taken from PANAS (Crawford & Henry, 2004) on a 1 (Slightly) to 5 (Extremely) point scale. "Exclusion," our emotion of interest, was on the list. (3) Participants were then asked to complete the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), which contained 10 statements for which participants indicated their agreement/disagreement on a 1 (Absolutely Untrue) to 7 (Absolutely True) point scale. Five questions were part of the *Meaning Search* sub-scale (e.g., "I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life") and 5 were part of *Meaning Present* sub-scale (e.g., "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose"). (4) Finally, participants indicated the degree to which they endorse three *conspiratorial beliefs*, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely). The beliefs

were: (a) Pharmaceutical companies withhold cures for financial reasons, (b) Governments use messages below the level of awareness to influence people's decisions, and (c) events in the Bermuda Triangle constitute evidence of paranormal activity.

1.1.3. Results

1.1.3.1. Manipulation check and reliability analyses. The Social Event Description manipulation was meant to elicit more negative than positive emotions, which was indeed the case (M -Negative = 2.50, $SD = 0.90$; M -Positive = 1.92, $SD = 0.91$), $t(118) = 4.39$, Cohen's $d = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$. There was also variation in the degree to which participants felt Excluded ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.19$), with 44% of participants selecting that they felt excluded at least "A little."

We were also concerned about potential floor effects for conspiratorial beliefs, but descriptive analyses show adequate variation in responses, with the average for the three conspiratorial beliefs of 2.98 ($SD = 1.56$) on a 1–7 scale. All the three scenarios loaded on the same factor, and had a moderate to high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha of 0.77). Similarly, the Meaning in Life subscales had high reliability scores (Meaning Search = 0.94 and Meaning Presence = 0.96).

1.1.3.2. Mediation analysis. The relationship between Exclusion and Conspiratorial beliefs was mediated by Meaning Search, but not by Meaning Presence. As Fig. 1 illustrates, the standardized regression coefficient between Exclusion and Conspiratorial beliefs was statistically significant, as were the standardized regression coefficients between Exclusion and Meaning Search and between Meaning Search and Conspiratorial Beliefs. We tested the significance of the indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. The unstandardized indirect effect was computed for each of 10,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was 0.06, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.01 to 0.14. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant. A similar bootstrapping procedure with Meaning presence as a mediator revealed a non-significant indirect effect of 0.00, with the 95% confidence intervals ranging from -0.03 to 0.04 (Tables 1 and 2).

1.1.4. Discussion

This pattern of results is supportive of our hypothesis. When people feel socially excluded they are more likely to endorse superstitious beliefs. The mechanism, as supported by the mediation analysis, involves one's tendency to search for meaning. This suggests that the meaning-making propensities of the cognitive system may backfire and lead to erroneous judgments. These conclusions are, however, limited by the correlational approach we undertook in Study 1. For Study 2, we will test the same hypothesis by using an experimental approach. We will manipulate the degree of social exclusion and we will measure the endorsement of superstitious beliefs. We hypothesize that participants in the exclusion condition will endorse superstitious beliefs to a larger extent than those in the inclusion or the control conditions. In addition, we

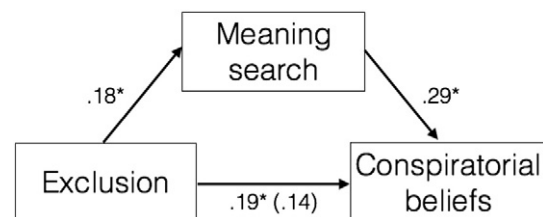


Fig. 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between Exclusion and Conspiratorial beliefs as mediated by Meaning search. The standardized regression coefficient between Exclusion and Conspiratorial beliefs, controlling for Meaning search, is in parentheses.

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