

“WAKE UP, SHEEPLE!”

Conspiracy theories and Māori during the COVID-19 pandemic

*Byron William Rangiwai**

Abstract

This situation report outlines some of the literature about conspiracy theories and its application to Māori during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report shows that while there are some psychological factors at play with regard to vulnerability to conspiracy theories, it appears that issues around power and powerlessness are most applicable to Māori, given our historical and political context. The report also advocates for a manaakitanga-informed approach to dealing with whānau who are disseminating conspiracy theories. A manaakitanga-informed approach is about continuing to treat whānau and friends with respect and supporting and nurturing relationships.

Keywords

conspiracy theory, conspiracy thinking, COVID-19, vulnerability, power/powerlessness, manaakitanga-informed approach

A conspiracy theory can be defined as assertions of secrecy and plotting by a powerful group—religious, political or ethnic—who work together to facilitate an evil plan (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Kofta et al., 2020; Moscovici, 1987; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). For conspiracy theorists, this highly secretive and sinister group provides an “explanation for any negative event that occurs within domestic or international politics, in the economy, in the legal system” (Kofta et al., 2020, p. 902).

“Conspiracy theories are as countless as they are

confusing” (Shermer, 2020, p. 13). Kumareswaran (2014) opines that it is more probable for those with high levels of belief in conspiracy theories to present with high levels of psychopathology—such as paranoia, delusion, general mental pathology and schizotypal traits. Kumareswaran (2014) also contends there are links between powerlessness and the need for those who believe in conspiracy theories to draw connections between “unrelated stimuli” (illusory pattern perception) to establish a “sense of control” (p. 198). Individuals may turn to conspiracy theories when feeling

* Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Manawa, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Whare. Senior Lecturer, School of Healthcare and Social Practice, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: brangiwai@gmail.com

anxious (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) or powerless (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), or when they lack sociopolitical control (Bruder et al., 2013). Conspiracy theories, therefore, provide a mechanism for restoring a sense of control and order (Jolley et al., 2020; Shermer, 2020).

Kofta et al. (2020) argue that political “uncontrollability” can cause people to feel powerless and experience an “enduring loss of personal influence” in a world “void of structure and order” (p. 901). Political powerlessness is a significant contributing factor to conspiracy theorising (Moulding et al., 2016). Indeed, a sense of a loss of control in general has been discovered to encourage conspiracy thinking (Sullivan et al., 2010; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

When conspiracy theories spread throughout a community, the result can be the rejection of public policy and fear of medical advice and experts (Kumareswaran, 2014; Rose, 2017). These theories often seek to invalidate commonly accepted, and typically less threatening, accounts (Aaronovitch, 2009; Bruder et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2014). For example, a conspiracy theory that posited that HIV was a human-made genocidal weapon correlated with inconsistent safe-sex practices and so presented repercussions for public health (Bird & Bogart, 2005; Bogart et al., 2010; Bogart et al., 2011; Kumareswaran, 2014). Another prominent conspiracy theory holds that global warming is a hoax or is over-emphasised by self-interested scientists (Rose, 2017). The danger of this conspiracy theory, of course, is its consequences for the environment (Rose, 2017).

The claim that COVID-19 is nothing more than harmless flu, despite warnings from the likes of Di Giorgio (2020) that “COVID-19 is not just a flu” (p. 1), is an example of a COVID-19 conspiracy theory. Indeed, Georgiou et al. (2020) argue that resistance to public health advice about COVID-19 is linked to conspiracy theories. Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) report that the conspiratorial notion that COVID-19 is not a severe disease correlates with resistance to preventative public health recommendations. While being sceptical and critical of the media and the government is a good thing, doing so without the necessary tools for analysis can be problematic, especially if this results in endangering the health and wellbeing of whānau.

In an article entitled “The Rise of Māori MAGA”, Ngata (2020) traces some of the most prominent conspiracy theories to the far right and white supremacy. These conspiracy theories in particular seem to affect Māori the most (Ngata,

2020). Ngata (2020) argues that the far right creates and disseminates conspiracy theories to engender social discord. She maintains that the right and the far right know that in the event of social unrest, they will “come out on top” as the “ultimate power over military and police might” as part of a “white supremacist structure” (Ngata, 2020, “Conspiracy theories” section, para. 3).

White supremacist ideas are obviously at odds with Māori. However, the ideas are packaged in a way that appeals to the disenfranchised: “those who feel that their rights have been taken away ... and who have an inherent distrust of the state and media, along with a distaste for authorities” (Ngata, 2020, “Crossover” section, para. 2). Māori are already suspicious of the government due to colonialism, oppression and intergenerational trauma, which makes Māori susceptible to belief in conspiracy theories (Ngata, 2020). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic provides the “perfect storm” for triggering the “psychological, political, and situational factors” that drive conspiratorial thinking (Miller, 2020, p. 1).

Social media platforms like Facebook have been inundated with conspiratorial discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The term “sheep” is a neologism that contracts “sheep” and “people” and is commonly used on social media platforms by conspiracy theorists against non-conspiracy theorists as an insult (Šetka-Čilić & Ilić-Plauc, 2021). Conspiracy theorists implore their followers to wake up and protect “our rights and freedoms”, lest the economy be destroyed “before our very eyes!” (Rushing, 2020, p. S57).

Of concern, an overwhelming number of Māori seem to be perpetuating and disseminating COVID-19 conspiracy theories within their whānau. The immediate danger of these particular conspiracy theories for Māori—besides the political and psychological perils mentioned above—is that they promote the rejection of public health advice. According to Durrheim and Baker (2020), the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic was the last time when, as a planet, we confronted a “similar calamitous infectious disease” (p. e17). During the influenza pandemic, Māori died at eight times the rate of Pākehā (Pool, 2019; Rice, 2018). Indeed, the Crown has continuously failed to address equity issues for Māori, which means that COVID-19 will undoubtedly have more impact on Māori than Pākehā (King et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theories that endanger Māori health during a world health pandemic are dangerous. Addressing Māori who disseminate conspiracy theories and the recent trend on Facebook which

calls for the “unfriending” of conspiracy theorists, Rapira (2020) contends that by doing so Māori would be “excluding and shaming” those who feel “ostracised, misunderstood, powerless or neglected” (para. 3). Rapira (2020) argues for an approach to conspiratorial thinking within whānau that acknowledges the historical and systemic issues at play and looks for systemic solutions. A recent *Newshub* article titled “Block or Engage? How to Deal with Whānau Caught Up in Conspiracies” interviews Tina Ngata (cited above), who states that it is important to understand the perspectives of whānau and engage with aroha and manaakitanga (Forbes, 2020, para. 11).

I advocate for a manaakitanga-informed approach to dealing with whānau who engage with and spread conspiracy theories. Like Ngata (2020), I recognise the historical and political context that Māori are located within and the associated triggers that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate. Manaakitanga is about nurturing relationships, which can be fragile (Mead, 2016). Indeed, all tikanga are “underpinned by the high value placed upon manaakitanga”, and this means “being very careful about how others are treated” (Mead, 2016, p. 33). In the context of conspiracy thinking among whānau, this means that it is important to be respectful of differing views and to understand the contributing factors—such as white supremacist propaganda, psychological vulnerability and powerlessness—that lead to the adoption of conspiracy theories. A manaakitanga-informed approach ensures that respect is upheld and whakapapa relationships maintained.

As an avid user of Facebook, I engage with Māori from all walks of life. I have seen a great number of my whānau, hapū and iwi members believing in and disseminating conspiracy theories on their Facebook pages. If their views found their way on to my Facebook page, I let them know privately that I did not want that information on my page. I reminded my relatives and friends that respect is a two-way street and that if we were to remain connected via social media, my wishes for my page would need to be respected. I approached my relatives in the spirit of manaakitanga, with a manaakitanga-formed approach, understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a great deal of uncertainty and stress.

During these unprecedented times, it is more important than ever for Māori to remain united in their whānau, despite the sometimes vast differences in opinions. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment of fear which enhances the susceptibility of Māori—as a disenfranchised

group—to conspiratorial thinking. Looking beyond the social media posts and focusing on the whakapapa that joins people together, while also adhering to Māori values such as manaakitanga, is surely a better solution than accusatorial language and isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused Māori to shift towards digitising some aspects of tikanga, such as tangihanga (Rangiwai & Sciascia, 2021). Therefore, the manaakitanga-informed approach advocated for here is a tikanga-based approach that Māori can practise via social media. Drawing upon whakapapa connections and common ground, a manaakitanga-informed approach allows us to respectfully establish boundaries with our whānau engaged in conspiracy theories while remaining digitally connected to one another.

Glossary

aroha	love, compassion, sympathy
hapū	sub-tribe/s, pregnant
iwi	tribe/s, bones
manaakitanga	hospitality
Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand
Pākehā	New Zealanders of European descent
tangihanga	funeral practices encompassing days of mourning and ritual
tikanga	Māori customs, practices, ethics
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	family/families, birth

References

- Aaronovitch, D. (2009). *Voodoo histories: The role of the conspiracy theory in shaping modern history*. Jonathan Cape.
- Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, W. L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, 20(3), 637–647. <https://doi.org/dhm3s4>
- Bird, S. T., & Bogart, L. M. (2005). Conspiracy beliefs about HIV/AIDS and birth control among African Americans: Implications for the prevention of HIV, other STIs, and unintended pregnancy. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(1), 109–126. <https://doi.org/d9857p>
- Bogart, L. M., Galvan, F. H., Wagner, G. J., & Klein, D. J. (2011). Longitudinal association of HIV conspiracy beliefs with sexual risk among black males living with HIV. *AIDS and Behavior*, 15(6), 1180–1186. <https://doi.org/ftqgrc>
- Bogart, L. M., Wagner, G., Galvan, F. H., & Banks, D. (2010). Conspiracy beliefs about HIV are related to antiretroviral treatment nonadherence among African American men with HIV. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes*, 53(5), 648–655. <https://doi.org/djn7h6>
- Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across

- cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 225. <https://doi.org/gbftj>
- Di Giorgio, A. (2020). COVID-19 is not just a flu. Learn from Italy and act now. *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease*, 35, 1–2. <https://doi.org/ggr2zk>
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(3), 544–552. <https://doi.org/fp9jg5>
- Durrheim, D. N., & Baker, M. G. (2020). COVID-19—a very visible pandemic. *The Lancet*, 396(10248), e17. <https://doi.org/gg7n2d>
- Forbes, M. (2020, August 16). Block or engage? How to deal with whānau caught up in conspiracies? *Newshub*. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/08/block-or-engage-how-to-deal-with-wh-nau-caught-up-in-conspiracies.html>
- Georgiou, N., Delfabbro, P., & Balzan, R. (2020). COVID-19-related conspiracy beliefs and their relationships with perceived stress and pre-existing conspiracy beliefs. *Personality and Individual Difference*, 166, 1–6. <https://doi.org/ghh84r>
- Grzesiak-Feldman, M. (2013). The effect of high-anxiety situations on conspiracy thinking. *Current Psychology*, 32, 100–118. <https://doi.org/f4ph96>
- Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. (2020). A bioweapon or a hoax? The link between distinct conspiracy beliefs about the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak and pandemic behaviour. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/gg4cq5>
- Jolley, D., Meleady, R., & Douglas, K. M. (2020). Exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories promotes prejudice which spreads across groups. *British Journal of Psychology*, 111, 17–35. <https://doi.org/ggvqg2>
- King, P., Cormack, D., McLeod, M., Harris, R., & Gurney, J. (2020, April 14). COVID-19 and Māori health—when equity is more than a word. *Sciblogs*. <https://sciblogs.co.nz/public-health-expert/2020/04/14/covid-19-and-maori-health-when-equity-is-more-than-a-word/>
- Kofta, M., Soral, W., & Bilewicz, M. (2020). What breeds conspiracy antisemitism? The role of political uncontrollability and uncertainty in the belief in Jewish conspiracy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition*, 118(5), 900–918. <https://doi.org/ggh5tk>
- Kumareswaran, D. J. (2014). *The psychopathological foundations of conspiracy theorists* [Doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington]. ResearchArchive. <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/handle/10063/3603>
- Mead, H. M. (2016). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. Huia.
- Miller, J. M. (2020). Psychological, political, and situational factors combine to boost COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/gjsc8j>
- Moscovici, S. (1987). The conspiracy mentality. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 151–169). Springer-Verlag. <https://doi.org/bdw6zs>
- Moulding, R., Nix-Carnell, S., Schnabel, A., Nedeljkovic, M., Burnside, E. E., Lentini, A. F., & Mehzabin, N. (2016). Better the devil you know than a world you don't? Intolerance of uncertainty and worldview explanations for belief in conspiracy theories. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 98, 345–354. <https://doi.org/ggxbv5>
- Ngata, T. (2020, August 9). The rise of Māori MAGA. *E-Tangata*. <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/the-rise-of-maori-maga/>
- Pool, I. (2019). Māori epidemiological transition. In *Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/death-rates-and-life-expectancy/page-5>
- Rangiwai, B. W., & Sciascia, A. D. (2021). The impacts of COVID-19 on tangihanga. *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, 5(1), 1–14. <https://www.journalofglobalindigeneity.com/article/19435-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-tangihanga>
- Rapira, L. O. (2020, August 13). How to talk to whānau about conspiracies. *The Spinoff*. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/13-08-2020/how-to-talk-to-whanau-about-conspiracies/>
- Rice, G. (2018). “That terrible time”: Reflections on the 1918 influenza pandemic in New Zealand. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 131(1481), 6–8.
- Rose, C. L. (2017). *The measurement and prediction of conspiracy beliefs* [Doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington]. ResearchArchive. <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/handle/10063/6420>
- Rushing, S. (2020). On bodies, anti-bodies, and the body politic in viral times. *Theory & Event*, 23(4), S53–S60.
- Šetka-Čilić, I., & Ilić-Plauc, J. (2021). Today's usage of neologisms in social media communication. *Društvene i Humanističke Studije*, 6(1), 115–140. <https://doi.org/gcbp>
- Shermer, M. (2020). Why people believe conspiracy theories. *Skeptic*, 25(1), 12–17.
- Sullivan, D., Laudau, M. J., & Rothschild, Z. K. (2010). An existential function of enemyship: Evidence that people attribute influence to personal and political enemies to compensate for threats to control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 434–449. <https://doi.org/ddz4b5>
- Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 24(6), 749–761. <https://doi.org/dmsq4p>
- van Prooijen, J. W., & Acker, M. (2015). The influence of control on belief in conspiracy theories: Conceptual and applied extensions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 29, 753–761. <https://doi.org/f7tx93>
- Whitson, J. A., & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). Lacking control increases illusory pattern perception. *Science*, 322, 115–117. <https://doi.org/cg5>
- Zonis, M., & Joseph, C. M. (1994). Conspiracy thinking in the Middle East. *Political Psychology*, 15(3), 443–459. <https://doi.org/bjwcnf>