

Compensatory function of conspiracy beliefs: Search for meaning in life moderates relationship between negative emotionality, stress and information control conspiracy beliefs

Peter Halama

Institute of Experimental Psychology

Centre of Social and Psychological Sciences, Slovak Academy of Sciences

Bratislava, Slovakia

Introduction

- Conspiracy beliefs are unverified and relatively implausible allegations, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people (Brotherton & French, 2014)
- One of the psychological assumptions explaining conspiracy beliefs is related to human desire to make sense of social environment (Van Prooijen, Acker, 2015)
- Emotions that reflect uncertainty about the world (e.g., worry, fear, surprise) activate the need to imbue the world with order and structure and lead people to embrace conspiracies (Whitson et al., 2015)
- Accepting conspiracy beliefs can be a mean of gaining control and sense of meaning for individuals facing negative emotions

Goal of the study

- To study relationship between negative emotions and states as anxiety, depression, perceived stress, and information control conspiracy (beliefs in unethical control and suppression of information by organizations)
- To identify the relationship of meaning in life presence and search to information control conspiracy
- To study moderation effect of meaning on the relationship between negative emotions and conspiracy

Method

Sample

- 542 Slovak participants from general population recruited through online panel managed by the survey agency
- 268 males, 274 females
- mean age 41,79 years, ranged from 18 to 86

Measures

- **Information Control Conspiracy Scale (ICC)** containing 5 selected items from long-form Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (Brotherton et al, 2013), e.g. *A lot of information about diseases and treatments is withheld from the public*
- facets **Anxiety** and **Depression** from **Big Five Inventory -2** (Soto, John, 2017)
- **Perceived Stress Scale** (Cohen et al., 1983) – 10-item long measure of amount of stress and lack of control in the past month
- **Meaning in Life Questionnaire** (Steger et al., 2006) – measuring two factors of meaning: **Meaning Presence** (measures the subjective sense that one's life is meaningful) and **Search for Meaning** (measures the drive and orientation toward finding meaning in one's life)

Analysis

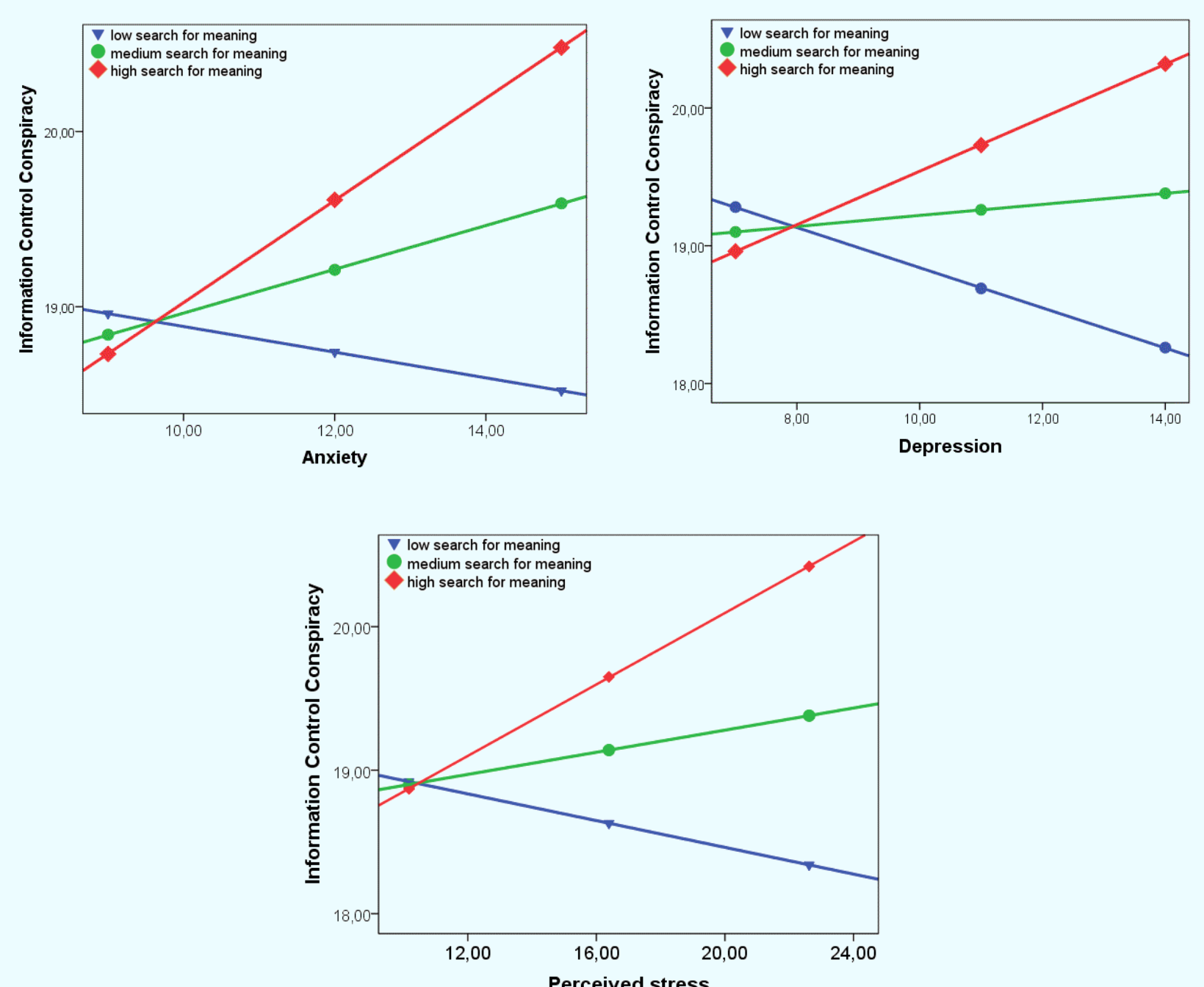
- Pearson correlation analysis
- Moderation analysis based on regression approach using PROCESS Macro for SPSS developed by A.F. Hayes

Table 1 Pearson correlations between variables

	Information Control Conspiracy	Anxiety	Depression	Perceived Stress	Meaning Presence
Anxiety	0.067	—			
Depression	0.005	0.633**	—		
Perceived Stress	0.063	0.503**	0.594**	—	
Meaning Presence	0.038	-0.391**	-0.542**	-0.503**	—
Meaning Search	0.095*	0.022	-0.044	0.034	0.151**

* $p \leq 0,05$, ** $p \leq 0,01$

Figure 1 Graphical representations of significant moderation effects of search for meaning



Results and conclusions

- A correlation analysis showed no relationships between negative emotional dispositions and perceived stress and information control conspiracy
- Moderation analysis showed that search for meaning in life but not presence of meaning, significantly moderates the relationship between negative emotionality, stress and conspiracy beliefs
- People with negative emotions and stress, who show high search for meaning in their life, are more susceptible to information control conspiracy beliefs
- The results support the assumption of the compensatory function of conspiracy beliefs and suggest that persons experiencing negative emotions together with the need to find meaning in life can accept conspiracy beliefs as a way of their meaning-making process.

References

- Brotherton, R., & French, C. C. (2014). Belief in conspiracy theories and susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28(2), 238-248.
- Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 279.
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 386-396.
- Soto, C. J., & John, O. P. (2017). The next Big Five Inventory (BFI-2): Developing and assessing a hierarchical model with 15 facets to enhance bandwidth, fidelity, and predictive power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(1), 117-143
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1), 80-93
- Van Prooijen, J. W., & Acker, M. (2015). The influence of control on belief in conspiracy theories: Conceptual and applied extensions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 29(5), 753-761.
- Whitson, J. A., Galinsky, A. D., & Kay, A. (2015). The emotional roots of conspiratorial perceptions, system justification, and belief in the paranormal. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 56, 89-95.