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, Aker, 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 means 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, and 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 (Stegel 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 analysis.
- Moderation analysis based on regression approach using PROCESS Macro for SPSS developed by A.F. Hayes.

Table 1 Pearson correlations between variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Control Conspiracy</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Perceived Stress</th>
<th>Meaning Presence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.063**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.503</td>
<td>0.594**</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Stress</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>0.503**</td>
<td>0.503**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Presence</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Search</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>0.151**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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