



TARGETING EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Additional Materials on Combating Conspiracy Theories



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Additional Materials on combating different Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theories

Introduction

Conspiracy theories have been a part of human society probably from times immemorial. Conspiracy theories claim that a group of people or an organization are secretly plotting to deceive and possibly harm the unaware community. In recent years, however, the popularity and visibility of conspiracy theories has been increasing. There are conspiracy theories touching nearly every conceivable topic: science, health, media, environment, ethnic or cultural groups, migration, terrorism, political parties, religions, and all kinds of things related to politics. Iconic examples of conspiracy theories are that the attacks on important buildings in the USA on 11th September 2001 (known as “9/11”) were an “inside job”, meaning that the US government played some crucial part in it; that water condensation caused by jet engines of commercial airliners is actually trails of chemical or biological agents sprayed into the air in order to control the population; or that governments and scientists conspire to hide the true shape of the planet (flat earth theory). Other theories are less innocent or entertaining, as they claim that certain groups of the population plot against overall society (antisemitic conspiracy theories, anti-Muslim conspiracy theories, anti-feminist conspiracy theories), as there are robust indicators that such conspiracy theories contribute to real-world violence and crime.

In the last decades, the scholarly interest in the functions, structures, and effects of conspiracy theories has grown as well. According to the COMPACT research group¹, conspiracy theories in general fulfil an important role in the lives of their ‘believers’. Conspiracy theories satisfy the need for a simple explanation in times of complex realities, requiring the denial of many facts in order to sustain their internal logic and consistency. They exclude chaos, coincidence and provide simplistic, accessible explanations. They are a strategy for dealing with uncertainty and resolving ambiguity. Moreover, conspiracy theories blame people rather than abstract forces for political events and developments in society. The “they” vs. “us” dynamic is a typical form of “othering”: drawing a line between an in-group and an outgroup, associating the outgroup with all evils of society. Conspiracy theories relieve those who believe in them of responsibility. Since powerful conspirators are blamed for everything that happens, the believers themselves cannot have had impact on events and developments. Furthermore, conspiracy theories allow those who believe in them to distinguish themselves from the mass of people. People adhering to such theories often try to gain respect that they may be unable to gain in other ways.

¹ COMPACT Education Group. (2020). *Guide To Conspiracy Theories*. Cost.

The consequences of conspiracy theories are diverse. Some scholars notice benefits that could come with conspiracy theories. For example, they state that conspiracy theories could encourage governments to be more transparent, they can reveal inconsistencies of official versions of events, and they may open up discussions about issues that would otherwise be closed.² However, the drawbacks of conspiracy theories seem to outweigh their potential benefits. Studies show that conspiracy theories influence political attitudes and decrease political trust. This can lead to decreasing engagement in the political system, e.g. by lower participation in elections, and can destabilize the system of democracy. Moreover, conspiracy theories promote negative, hateful attitudes and prejudices towards groups, such as Jews, Muslims, women etc. These attitudes can then help justify oppression of these groups and violent behaviour towards them. Conspiracy theories are also associated with increased radicalized and extremist behaviour. Furthermore, conspiracy theories not only harm other people. They also harm the 'believers' themselves, for example when people make decisions that are dangerous to their health. An obvious example is extreme reservation towards vaccination based on fake arguments promoted through conspiracy theories. And finally, denying facts established by science, for example denying facts about climate change on planet Earth, reinforces detrimental behaviour towards the environment in total.³

All in all, conspiracy theories are linked to harmful social, health, environmental and political consequences and therefore should be treated with caution. It is important to take action against the spread of conspiracy theories and to convince people that believing in conspiracies is not the solution to their problems.

According to the TEACH-Survey (see www.teach-erasmus.eu) adult educators in Germany, Austria, Sweden and Bulgaria meet conspiracy theories in their workplace regularly. (The study covered these four countries; therefore we limit our statement here to them.)

For example, 10-14.5 % of adult educators in Germany (10 %), Austria (12.6 %), Sweden (14.5 %), and 35.7 % of Bulgarian adult educators report being confronted with climate change conspiracy theories regularly.

Conspiracy theories related to vaccination and conspiracy theories on Covid-19 are represented in the adult educators' workplace in a significant percentage in Germany, Austria and Sweden (between 15-30 %) and in Bulgaria (63.0- 71,5 %).

² Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S. & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 3-35.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>

³ Ibid.

Additionally, also U.S.-related conspiracy theories made it to the adult educators' field of action: 10.2 % of German, 13.6 % Austrian, 14.6 % Swedish and 40.6 % of Bulgarian adult educators reported being confronted with the statement "The U.S. government was involved in the 9/11 attacks" throughout the year of 2019/20. Last but not least it is important to state that also – a very small, but still perceivable – number of adult educators in Europe do believe in conspiracy theories themselves. For example between 4.2% and 8.4 % of adult educators in Germany, Austria, Sweden, and 57.5 % of those in Bulgaria are convinced that the media is deceiving the public on purpose.⁴

Aims of this Module

The goal of this module is to give participants of the workshop an opportunity to activate and share their knowledge and experience about conspiracy theories as they have possibly met them already in "normal" life or at the workplace as teaching staff in adult education organisations. Using both the implicit knowledge of the group, and some additional input through teaching aids, the group will both broaden their understanding of conspiracy mindsets, and look deeper into the world-views of some interesting proponents of conspiracy peddling. They will also discuss how to act or react when facing conspiracy theories.

The overall goal is to empower adult educators in their ability to deal with conspiracy theories and to develop ideas for dealing with them in their classrooms.

How to use

This programme is primarily intended to be used as a blueprint for setting up training seminars for professionals in adult education. The programme of this one-day workshop can be used as stand alone. It can also be used as propaedeutic for the for one or several of the other, thematically specialised seminars collected in this handbook, for example the module on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, the module on Media-related conspiracy theories, the module on anti-feminist conspiracy theories, and so on.

The basic idea is that, by use of the curriculum laid out below, any experienced adult educator should be able to organise a workshop, without being himself or herself too much of a specialist on conspiracy theories. The curriculum comes with all teaching aids necessary to implement the workshop.

The by-default setup would be a workshop of about 20 participants, organised as a physical event (classroom event), but the workshop can also be adapted for online implementation.

⁴ The high numbers in Bulgaria can be explained with certain characteristics of media landscape in this country.



Trigger warning

The content of the TEACH-Handbook includes readings and other content that some participants may find offensive and/or traumatizing.

The goal of the handbook for trainings is to provide an open space for the critical and civil exchange of ideas. Some parts of the handbook and discussions will probably touch sensitive topics such as anti-Semitic and xenophobic motivated violence as well as misogynist beliefs. This content might be disturbing to some, so we as the TEACH-team encourage you to prepare yourself as well as the participants of your workshop emotionally beforehand. If you believe that your participants might find the discussion or even the participation in the exercises to be traumatizing, you may choose to encourage your participants to decide freely (not) to participate in the discussion on certain topics or to leave the classroom.

We ask you to forewarn participants about potentially disturbing content and to encourage all participants to help to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity. Furthermore, we ask you to leave no discriminating statement that you might touch upon without context. Make sure to embed all materials to a context, stating that the aim of the modules is a profound examination of conspiracy theory content in order to be able to protect oneself in the best possible way in the event of a confrontation with that kind of content⁵.

⁵ Adapted from University of Waterloo (2021): Trigger Warning. Retrieved from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/trigger>

Exercise Instructions

Warm-up: Conspiracy Theories and where we meet them

Aim	The activity aims at introducing the topic of conspiracy theories in general. Participants exchange experience they had so far with conspiracy theories. They reflect on situations where an intervention seems necessary.
Duration	20 – 25 minutes
Preparation	Circle of chairs facing a pinboard where participants can then cooperatively arrange their Index cards.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Index cards, pens, pinboard.

Instruction:

Step I: Conspiracy theory associations (3-5 minutes)

- The trainer hands out 4 Index cards to each participant.
- Trainer asks participants to write down on the Index cards associations they have when thinking of the term “conspiracy theory”. (One word or one sentence per paper slip.) The trainer instructs all participants by asking the question “what terms/ideas/pictures/associations come to your mind when hearing “conspiracy theory”?

Step II: Developing categories (10 minutes)

- Trainer asks participants to try and group the Index cards into categories by arranging them on the pinboard. Participants decide themselves what categories to create.
- Once all cards are successfully grouped, participants try to find a name for each group. (Possible categories could be: “Absurdity”, “Not sure if conspiracy theory or not”, “True core of a theory”, “Against democratic structures”)
- Trainer lets participants discuss the categories and the conspiracy theories they cover.
- In case an association brought up is unclear for other participants, the person who contributed it should be asked to explain.

Step III: Discussion (15 - 20 minutes):

- Trainer asks participants whether they have been confronted with any of the conspiracy theories mentioned on the board, and how they reacted when they heard it.
- The discussion may go on for a while.
- Close the discussion once each participant had the chance to speak.

Exercise 1: Danger, Credibility and Reality-relatedness of Conspiracy Theories

Aim	Raising awareness in the group for the dimensions of the field of “conspiratorial thinking”, and for the rich variety of CTs that are popular currently or in the recent past. In the next step, participants start to think about deeper roots and consequences of CTs.
Duration	2 hours
Preparation	Two large wallpapers are needed, one with a coordinate grid, one with a table grid (see figures below). These should be prepared in advance
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wallpaper (pinboard paper) prepared with a coordinate grid (two axes), as in Figure 1 below. x axis = Threat to democratic society (no threat, low, considerable, high, very high) y axis = Credibility (totally incredible, some core of truth, half-true, mostly true, completely true) Sticky paper dots (or similar) in two colours (red and green or so) Wallpaper with table grid, three columns (as in Figure 2 below).
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, a list of popular conspiracy theories (Exercise 1 list popular theories) is in the appendix. This can be used by the trainer to support the brainstorming if too little terms come up from the group itself. Trainer can hand out Index cards with these names of CTs randomly to participants, and let participants guess (or report from their circumstantial knowledge) what this is about. A sample table grid (Exercise 1 sample table grid). This is meant only as an example for the trainer, not to be shown to participants. Their Step is to come up with their own genuine ideas.

Instruction

Step I: Collecting CTs (0 - 15 min)

a) *If there is already a crowd-sourced list of CTs [0 min]*

➔ **Use the existing collection:** When CTs have already been collected in a previous activity, this activity may simply use those.

b) *If CTs have not yet been crowd-sourced: [15 min]*

- Participants sit in a circle, with a view to a pinboard.
- Trainer clarifies the concept of “conspiracy theory” briefly (depending on what level of common understanding is currently available in the group).

➔ **Collecting conspiracy theories:** Trainer asks participants to brainstorm for conspiracy theories they have heard of, they have met, etc. - without respect of their

source (met in class, seen on Youtube, heard from friends, or whatever). - Participants name the theories, and write the names on Index cards. Index cards are collected on the pinboard (trainer or a volunteer try to order them when pinning them to the wall, to group identical or similar ones).

Step II: Group thinking about credibility and danger of conspiracy theories (30 min)

- Once the names of conspiracy theories are pinned to the pinboard, and there are no more suggestions, the trainer presents participants with a new pinboard with a two-dimensional grid with the axes “threat to democratic society” and “Relatedness to real issues” (alternatively: “credibility” / “having some truth to it” / “degree of reference to reality”). Like this:

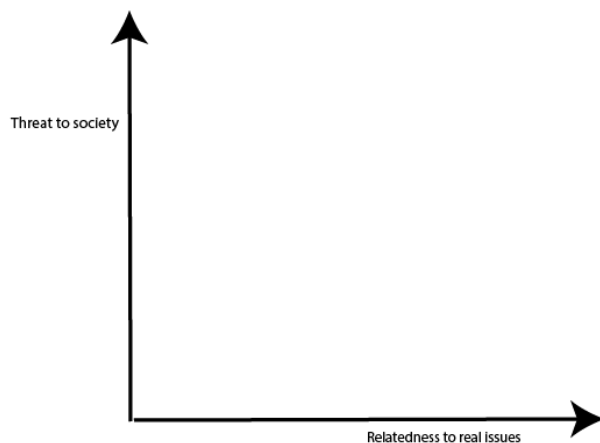


Fig. 1 - Coordinate grid (blanco)

- Trainer now asks participants to pick Index cards with names of conspiracy theories and place them in the grid. Trainer may ask people to rise – who ever feels inspired to – step forward to the pinboard, pick one paper slip, read the name of the conspiracy theory aloud, then place it on the grid, considering the values of the x and axis, and explain to the group why he/she thinks this conspiracy theory should be placed there. The group can join in and discuss, and thus eventually some place in the grid will be found where the paper slip finally gets pinned. Then the next participant can step forward, pick a card and so on.
- Once all CTs are placed (and their placement has been discussed), the trainer hands out to participants red and green sticky notes (sticky labels, sticky dots). The Step is for everybody to stick these labels to those conspiracy theories he or she had already had contact with via media (green sticky note) and in real life (face to face) (red sticky note).
- Brief final discussion in plenary circle.

Step III: “True elements in fancy stories” (60-75 min)⁶

- Trainer asks participants to copy the same names of conspiracy theories as used before over to a second set of Index cards. (Trainer may rely on the self-organizing power of the group to handle this.) Index cards are to be handed over to the trainer. [5 min]
- Trainer splits the group into teams of 3-5 for group work. (The trainer may use any method she/he likes for forming the groups.) [5 min]
- Trainer hands out to each group an equal number of conspiracy theory cards from the table to work with (typically 4-5 per group)
- Then the trainer explains what the teams are going to do. Here is how he could do this: [5 min]

Your Step in the teams is the following: For each of the conspiracy theories on your Index cards, try to create a brief definition in one sentence or two. Use complete sentences, not just keywords. Think of brief definitions as in a dictionary: For example: “The Reptiloid conspiracy theory claims that humankind is ruled by a class of aliens who live on earth looking like humans, but actually are reptiles.” If you have any doubts about the conspiracy theory you can discuss this in your team. Write your definition on a paper slip.

Once you have your definition written down, discuss in your team what could be “elements of truth” in that conspiracy theory. The idea is this: Every conspiracy does in some way relate to reality. This does not mean the theory is true. It means that the theory uses some elements from the real world, and often these elements are what makes the theory plausible to people. You can also call it “the closest link to reality”.

For example, a link to reality for the Reptiloid belief could be that some people (especially powerful ones) sometimes do evil, cruel things that seem inexplicable to us as normal human beings. [Trainer could add here more examples, see [Exercise_1_sample_table_grid](#)].

Write down your ideas for “links to reality” on separate Index cards (that you will later attach to the table on the wallpaper). You can collect as many “links to reality” per conspiracy theory as you want, but typical would be 1-3.

*You have 30 minutes time for working in the small teams.
Questions? No? Okay, then start now!*

⁶ This could also be implemented as a separate activity

- Teams start working on the Step [30 min].
- Trainer uses the time to prepare a wallpaper like this (if it wasn't prepared in advanced):

Name of the CT	Brief definition of the CT	Link(s) to reality

Fig. 2 - Table grid (blanco)

- When time is over (and teams are ready) the trainer asks everybody to gather in the plenary circle. [So far we spent 45 min]
- Trainer asks the teams to present their work:
 - What conspiracy theory did they work with
 - what brief definition have they come up with
 - what "links to reality" did they find.
- Rather than letting Team 1 present all their conspiracy theories and then let Team 2 do the same. The trainer can ask Team 1 to present one theory, then Team 2 to present one of theirs, then Team 3 one of theirs, and so on, until all conspiracy theories are covered. [15 min, o 60 in total]

Step IV: Final discussion (15 minutes)

- Gathered in a plenary circle, facing all the wallpapers produced in this exercise. The group discusses, led by the trainer (or alternatively by an ad-hoc trainer) the following:
 - What did we learn about CTs?
 - Were there things or insights new for us?
 - Was the method used helpful? Why? Why not?

Exercise 2: Conspiracy theories on steroids or - A little fun with David Icke

Aim	A funny activity that a) reminds people of core elements of most far-fetched conspiracy thinking, and b) makes them acquainted with one of the most prominent active conspiracy theory propagandists (and inventors), the British ex-football player and now writer David Icke [pronounced: ayk]
Duration	20 minutes
Preparation	Trainer should have read the materials provided in „Resources“.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A funny sound object for each participant (participants can be asked to bring sound objects from home, e.g. rubber ducks, horns, etc.) • If the competitive approach is used: little chocolate bars, or similar things as prizes for quick honkers.
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise_2_David_Icke Brief portrait of David Icke from Wikipedia • Exercise_2_introduction_book Introduction to Icke's Book „Secret“ • Exercise_2_bingo_chart Bingo chart using terms from Icke's world

Instruction:

Step I: Read and honk (10 minutes)

- The group is seated in a circle. Trainer hands out the text "Summary of David Icke's world view" ([Exercise_2_David_Icke](#)).
- Each participant should have a funny sound object (horn, bath tub duck, bicycle bell, triangle, whatever) for giving a signal. If this was logistically not feasible, the alternative is e.g. clapping hands or shouting "oink".
- A volunteer who is good at reading aloud, starts to read the text slowly so that everybody can follow.
- Everybody listens to the summary being read, and pays attention especially to typical terms from the world of conspiracy thinking. As soon as one spots such a term, the person gives an acoustic sign with their instrument.
- The person who honked explains what the word is, and what its role or relevance is in the world of conspiracy thinking. (The others may then join in and help clarify the term.)
- Variation: If you want to make this competitive, the teacher can hand out small prizes to first-honkers, e.g. a piece of chocolate.
- The term is then written on the whiteboard, or pinned to the pinboard.

Step II: Discussion (10 minutes)

Trainer starts a summary discussion:

- What did we experience?
- What is our feeling about Icke?
- Have we encountered these conspiracy theory elements before?
- Why do so many people believe in such stories?

Possible for variations of the game

Variation 1 (longer read)

Don't use the summary of Icke's world, rather use an original text: the introduction to his book "The Big Secret". ([Exercise_2_introduction_book](#))

Variant 2 (Bingo)

Similar, but instead of giving acoustic signs, everybody has a conspiracy bingo card and ticks off terms that appear.

Exercise 3: Reasoning with the unreasonable – Conspiracy theories in role play

Aim	A playful approach to conspiracy theories as a form of social interaction. Participants practice conspiracy thinking and conspiracy narrating, as well as fighting against such behaviour. Afterwards they analyse what happened in the group.
Duration	45 minutes
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A separate room is necessary where the volunteer team can prepare
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exercise_3_cheat_sheet - Cheat sheet for the volunteers

Instruction:

Step I: Role play (30 minutes)

The trainer explains what will happen:

- 2-4 volunteers are asked to play conspiracy theorists. The volunteers will have to come up with a crude conspiracy theory (see suggestion below) and confront the rest of the group with it, trying to convince them of the credibility of the theory. The Step of the others will be to question it and argue against the theory.
- Once the volunteers are selected, they are given ten minutes to prepare in a separate room. (Ideally they should be accompanied by a second trainer or trainer to help them prepare.) The volunteers familiarize themselves with their role and their conspiracy theory.
- Their goal should be to present their theory as fervently as possible.
- They should use their preparation time to think about what creative arguments and erroneous “evidence” they could use to support their theory.
- To support them, the trainer can hand out to them a cheat sheet with instructions ([Exercise_4_cheat_sheet](#))
- The conspiracy theory to be presented is deliberately absurd:

Suggested conspiracy theory:

Public transport is a secret instrument of the car industry! - Delays and cancellations of buses and trains are artificially created to make everyday life more difficult for customers. The orchestrated hassle is meant to encourage people to buy and use cars.

- While the conspiracy theorists prepare in a separate room, the rest of the group prepare themselves as well. They consider what kind of arguments and strategies they might use to counter a conspiracy theory (e.g. demanding evidence, questioning sources, doubting logic, etc.).
- Now the conspiracy team re-enters the room. They present their conspiracy theory, backing it with whatever they see as good arguments. The rest of the group tries to de-convince them.

- Trainer(s) pay attention that both groups get enough opportunity to speak.
- The debate lasts for a couple of minutes (usually 5-10, but of course it depends on the group.)

Notes for trainers

This exercise is about letting participants experience a) manipulative communication dynamics and b) inaccessibility to rational arguments. Depending on the experience of participants, it may be necessary to help the volunteers prepare for their roles as conspiracy peddlers. They should help them to be creative and help them to not shy away from the grotesque and the bizarre.

On the **cheat sheet** ([Exercise_3_cheat_sheet](#)), there are tips for how to behave as a conspiracy peddler. The trainer should be aware of them and help the volunteers use them. However: With all the necessary enthusiasm for one's own role - the other group also needs sufficient space for counter-talk and skeptical questions, so that they too can try something out.

Step II: Wrapping up (15 minutes)

- The trainer announces that now the roles are ending and that from now on everybody is themselves again (at this point it is a good idea to change the order of seating, to signal the change of situation.).
- Participants share their impressions. *How did they experience the exercise?*
- In the next step, the debate will be analysed systematically.
 - *What happened, what did we observe?*
 - *What discussion techniques did we use?*
- First ask the "Conspiracy theorists":
 - *What was your strategy?*
- Then ask the rest of the group:
 - *What did you do to counter the conspiracy theory arguments?*
 - *What arguments or what rhetorical means did work well against the conspiracy theories?*
 - *What were the successes?*
 - *Were there alternative methods that could have been used?*
- Ask the Conspiracy peddlers:
 - *Were there moments when you were convinced by the other side?*

Exercise 4: Developing ideas for responding to conspiracy theories (25/10 Crowd Sourcing)

Aim	Setting free creative ideas for tackling the difficult problem of how to deal with conspiracy peddlers. Use the implicit experience of participants, in a very interactive fun procedure. We use here a group activity method called 25/10 Crowd Sourcing. It is a method to help a crowd of people generate and sort their bold ideas for action in 30 minutes or less.
Duration	30 minutes
Preparation	Trainer must be well-acquainted with the rules of the game. He/she must be able to explain the proceedings to the group in a clear way. Reading this instruction and memorizing the steps will do the trick.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Index cards • Pens • Flipchart or other large paper to write on • Space: Open space where people can mill around

Instruction:

Step I: Introduction by trainer (5 minutes)

Trainer explains the principles of the game.

Step II: Playing (20 minutes)

Trainer presents the scenario:

"You are faced with a group of participants where one person starts talking during the lesson break about Covid-19 being fake, and vaccination serves for implanting micro-chips to people.⁷ What could you do? - Think of possible interventions; they may be realistic, but also bold and unrealistic. Don't be afraid of thinking of unconventional things."

- Each participant takes a paper slip. They think about "bold" (unusual, surprising, interesting, unorthodox...) ways to react to the conspiracy theorist (or interact with him/her). They note their idea down in brief terms. (They have 2 minutes to think and write their ideas down.) - Trainer indicates the time with a gong or similar.
- People start milling around in the room and vividly swap cards between each other, as often as they pass a person. (This process can last 3 minutes, it is fun for people)

⁷ Trainer may of course select another conspiracy theory, depending on where the seminar is held, and with what participants.

- On the next gong signal, everybody stops with the card they happen to hold, reads it, considers it, and rates the idea presented there with numbers 1-5 (low - high), note the number down on the back of the card. (It is no bad idea to do this underneath a folded-back part of the card so that later participants cannot see previous assessments).
- On the next gong, everyone starts to mill around again, swapping cards, then assessing the card they hold, noting down their rating. This repeats five times. After the fifth round, cards will have five ratings noted on them.
- Now participants add up the scores on their cards and note down the sum.
- In the plenary circle (or everybody just flocking around the trainer), with a flip chart (or so) visible to everybody, start calling for: "Who has a card scoring 25?" (25 is the highest possible rating after 5 cycles). Holders of such cards read them, and you as the trainer will write this on top of the flipchart. If there are several cards scoring 25, all are noted down. Next, you as the trainer ask: "Who has 24?", and so on – typically until a list of ten possible (and highly rated) ways to encounter conspiracy talk is compiled.

Step III: Discuss the results (5 minutes)

- Gathered in the plenary circle, the groups discuss the experience. Trainer can start with asking: "How did you experience this exercise", and later continue with discussing the ranking of ideas on how to react on the Flipchart. (Flipchart must be visible to the plenary circle, of course)

Wrap-up: Conspiracy Cloud

Aim	The aim of this activity is to reflect on the participants' handling with different conspiracy theories in their classroom. Moreover, they reflect on strategies they have learned for dealing with conspiracy theories.
Duration	45 minutes
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare copies of the worksheet, one for each participant • Make sure there is enough space for the group to stand in a concentric double-circle
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worksheet (Wrap_up_wordcloud) • (Ball)

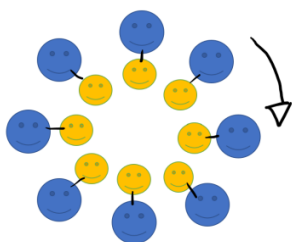
Instruction:

Step I: Where would I (not) intervene? (10 minutes)

- Trainer hands out a copy of the worksheet ([Wrap_up_wordcloud](#)) to each participant.
- Participants read the different conspiracy theories on the worksheet. They mark those where they, if a student expressed this theory in their classroom, would intervene.
- Moreover, participants consider which utterances they would leave uncommented and why.

Step II: Face-to-face conversation (25 minutes)

- Participants separate into two groups of roughly equal size. Then they form two concentric circles (see figure below) with people in the outer circle (blue smileys) facing people in the inner circle (yellow smileys), so that every participant faces another one. (If there is an odd number of participants there can be one group of three, or the trainer joins in as well to make numbers even.)
- Participants will discuss a certain question with the person opposite to them (see questions below). They have five minutes to discuss.
- When the five minutes are over, participants from the outer circle take two steps clockwise so that they face a new partner and discuss a different question. This procedure repeats five times.



Questions for the face-to-face conversation are:

- First round: When would you intervene immediately and why?
- Second round: Which statement would you leave uncommented and why?
- Third round: What do you think is the most challenging issue in dealing with conspiracy theories?
- Fourth round: Which strategy do you think is the most helpful one for dealing with conspiracy theories in the classroom?
- Fifth round: What will you do differently now in your classroom after the workshop?

Step III: Lessons learned (10 minutes)

- All participants return to their normal seats (plenary circle)
- Trainer asks participants to say one sentence describing a 'lesson learned' during the workshop. The difficulty is: Participants should try to not repeat what has already been said. They can refer back to the conversations they had in the previous Step. You can follow the sitting order or use a ball to throw between participants – each participant should get the chance to speak once.

Extra Material

Containing extra material for:

Exercise 1

Exercise 2

Exercise 3

Wrap-up

Exercise 1: Danger, Credibility and Reality-relatedness of Conspiracy Theories

Exercise_1_list_popular_theories

Popular conspiracy theories

- ➔ A list of conspiracy theories as popular in 2021
- ➔ Can be used as cheat sheet in various exercises

- ◆ 9/11 was an inside job
- ◆ SARS-CoV-II came from a Chinese laboratory
- ◆ A Jewish elite attempts to rule the world
- ◆ Covid-19 is not worse than a regular flu
- ◆ There are lizard people living on earth
- ◆ The Nazis have a secret base on the back of the moon
- ◆ The US government hides alien flying machines (or aliens themselves)
- ◆ Pyramids in Egypt were built by aliens
- ◆ Governments and scientists hide the true shape of planet earth from us
- ◆ Bill Gates tries to implant micro chips to people
- ◆ An economic elite tries to transform the world economy to global socialism
- ◆ Nicola Tesla actually detected a source of free energy
- ◆ US Americans destabilize the Near East to weaken Europe
- ◆ Russia influenced the presidential elections in the USA 2016
- ◆ After WWII, NATO run a secret Army in Europe, called the "Stay-Behind-Organisation"
- ◆ John F. Kennedy was murdered by the CIA
- ◆ The World Trade Center in NY was shattered by an underground nuclear bomb
- ◆ Commercial airplanes are used to spray chemicals in the atmosphere to control population
- ◆ There is a secret force called Satan that makes people do bad things
- ◆ Sharia law is being creepingly implemented in Western countries
- ◆ Aliens have visited earth, and governments are hiding this from us
- ◆ There are sources of free energy, and companies are hiding it from us

Exercise 1: Danger, Credibility and Reality-relatedness of Conspiracy Theories

Exercise_1_sample_table_grid

Sample Table Grid

This table is meant as an aid for the trainer who prepares the workshop. The idea is not to share it with participants. The idea of the activity is that participants cooperatively come up with a table like this themselves, by compiling it on a large pinboard. The table here is only to give the trainer an idea of how the result could look.

Name	Story claims that...	Point of reference in reality
9/11	Attack on World Trade Center in NY and other buildings in the US in Sept. 2001 was orchestrated by the US government.	Various questions open
Reptiloids	Earth is dominated by a race of human-like reptiles	Some powerful people's evil behaviour seems inexplicable to us normal people.
Jews rule the world	Jews try in a concerted way to rule the world.	Historical developments led to Jews live in many countries, and made some of them engage in financial activities (but also other educated areas of work)
The Great Replacement	Hidden forces secretly orchestrate the destruction of European society by Muslim mass immigration	Migration
Chemtrails	Governments try to control or harm population by spraying chemicals into atmosphere	Airplane jet turbines cause condensation + general mistrust in government
Chips in vaccines	Bill Gates tries to control humankind by implanting microchips into people	- Dominant role of MS Windows - Vaccination campaigns by international bodies - Distrust towards government - Donations of Gates to WHO

Exercise 2: Conspiracy theories on steroids or – A little fun with David Icke

Exercise_2_David_Icke

David Icke – Conspiracy Myths on Steroids

Description of David Icke's perspective on the world as presented in his books (most famously "The Big Secret", 1999). The description is a copy of an article on him in Wikipedia.⁸

Icke combines the theses of many different authors from esotericism, ufology and conspiracy literature into a "super-conspiracy theory". In his book *The Rebellion of the Robots*, published in the original English in 1994, Icke combines an anti-elitist, ecological and spiritual worldview with a wide range of far-right conspiracy theories, beliefs and paranoid clichés of the conspiracy cults and fears of the American militia movement. He holds that much of civilisation is controlled by a secret and pyramid-like organisational structure called "The Brotherhood", which he identifies with the Illuminati, in truth a radical Enlightenment secret society that ceased operations after being banned in 1785. Icke believes the order exists to this day, its goal being the establishment of a "new world order" in which the whole world would be enslaved. To this end, he approvingly quotes the Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion, an anti-Semitic forgery from the beginning of the 20th century, which was supposed to provide evidence for a Jewish world conspiracy, but emphasises that it is not about Jews at all, but about the Illuminati. Nevertheless, his publisher terminated his cooperation because of his anti-Semitic undertones. After an interview, the journalist Jon Ronson criticised Icke's metaphorical understanding of the word Jew: "You no longer need to be Jewish to be Jewish."

In his 1999 work *The Biggest Secret* and the books and lectures since, Icke expands more specifically on the group that would be at the head of this organisation: A minority with special genetic traits, created by crossing humans with extraterrestrial reptiloid races, which is allegedly reported in Genesis 6:4. Following theses of pre-astronautics, he assumes that humans did not evolve but were genetically created by the extraterrestrial Anunnaki to work for them as slaves. The Anunnaki needed "monoatomic" gold for their transdimensional journeys. Icke identifies hybrids between them and humans as Aryans: they were originally the overseers of humanity. Since their genes are unstable, their bodies can also take on a reptiloid form (Icke calls them *shapeshifts*). In order to retain their human form, they depended on the consumption of human blood and flesh, so they were vampires. This was the true motive of the Satanism allegedly practised in these circles. The majority of the European aristocracy descended from lines of descent that could be

⁸ Wikipedia Entry on David Icke. Retrieved from: [online](#), (Accessed on 15.6.2021), German version. The English text here is a translation by the TEACH team.

traced back to early antiquity and in particular to the Sumerian culture. The Catholic Church is only a front organisation for a millennia-old Babylonian cult that includes human sacrifice and incest. Icke counts leading politicians and high nobility such as the British royal family and almost all presidents of the United States among the reptiloids. The aliens would hide in cavities inside the earth and try to control mankind by deliberately inducing fear: This was the background to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Princess Diana. They would also implant people with RFID chips in order to better control them in a global all-encompassing surveillance state and dominate them through a centralised world government; they also wanted to abolish cash so that everyone would have to pay with their implanted chip. This idea goes back to the interpretation of the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:17) widespread in evangelical dispensationalism. Icke explained the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 as an attempt by the Illuminati to enforce the “new world order”: An interdimensional being had channeled to him that President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair had known about the attacks before they happened; he predicted that in the near future numerous celebrities would undergo cosmetic surgery that would in fact serve mind control; the goal was to use these “genetically manipulated [...] zombies” to increase acceptance of the new rule among the masses.

Exercise 2: Conspiracy theories on steroids or – A little fun with David Icke

Exercise_2_introduction_book

David Icke: The Biggest Secret – Introduction

Parts of the book „The Biggest Secret“ can be found online on several sources. The easiest way is to search for the book on Amazon : [click here](#)

Search path: amazon.de → “The Biggest Secret” → “Look into the Book”

The entire introduction can be viewed as a book sample there (also available in German and French).

Exercise 2: Conspiracy theories on steroids or – A little fun with David Icke

Exercise_2_bingo_chart

Jews	Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion
Reptiloid	Pyramide
Annunaki	Elite
Shapeshifts	UFO
Vampire	Brotherhood
Satan	Illuminati
Babylon	New world order
Chips	Lady Di
9/11	

[Developed by the TEACH team for the project purpose]

Exercise 3: Reasoning with the unreasonable: Conspiracy theories in role play

Exercise_3_cheat_sheet

Conspiracy theories debating club

Instructions for the conspiracy theorists

Your Step:

Present the following conspiracy theory to the group:

Public transport is a secret tool of the car industry! - Delays and cancellations of buses and trains are deliberately created to make everyday life more difficult for customers. The artificially created hassle is meant to encourage people to buy and use cars.

Tips for implementation:

- Act as if you are knowledgeable and enlightened. Make an effort to convince the "blinded".
- Express arbitrary suspicions and spread rumours, which you then present as truth ("They say / know that ...").
- Use whatever you can think of as supposed proof for your theory. Repeat your arguments many times and remain stubborn.
- Meet critical questions with counter-questions. Simply turn counter-arguments around until they seem to support your theory.
- Refer to dubious sources (e.g. alleged statistics of some institutions, gladly also "secret information").

Examples of arguments you might use

"Busses are deliberately late all the time to drive more people to get a car!"

"The prices are not so expensive for nothing! It's all tactics!"

"It's not for nothing that all buses are always from the same car manufacturers!"

"The whole thing is controlled by the automotive industry, which is secretly making plans to install sales markets where it seems pointless at first glance."

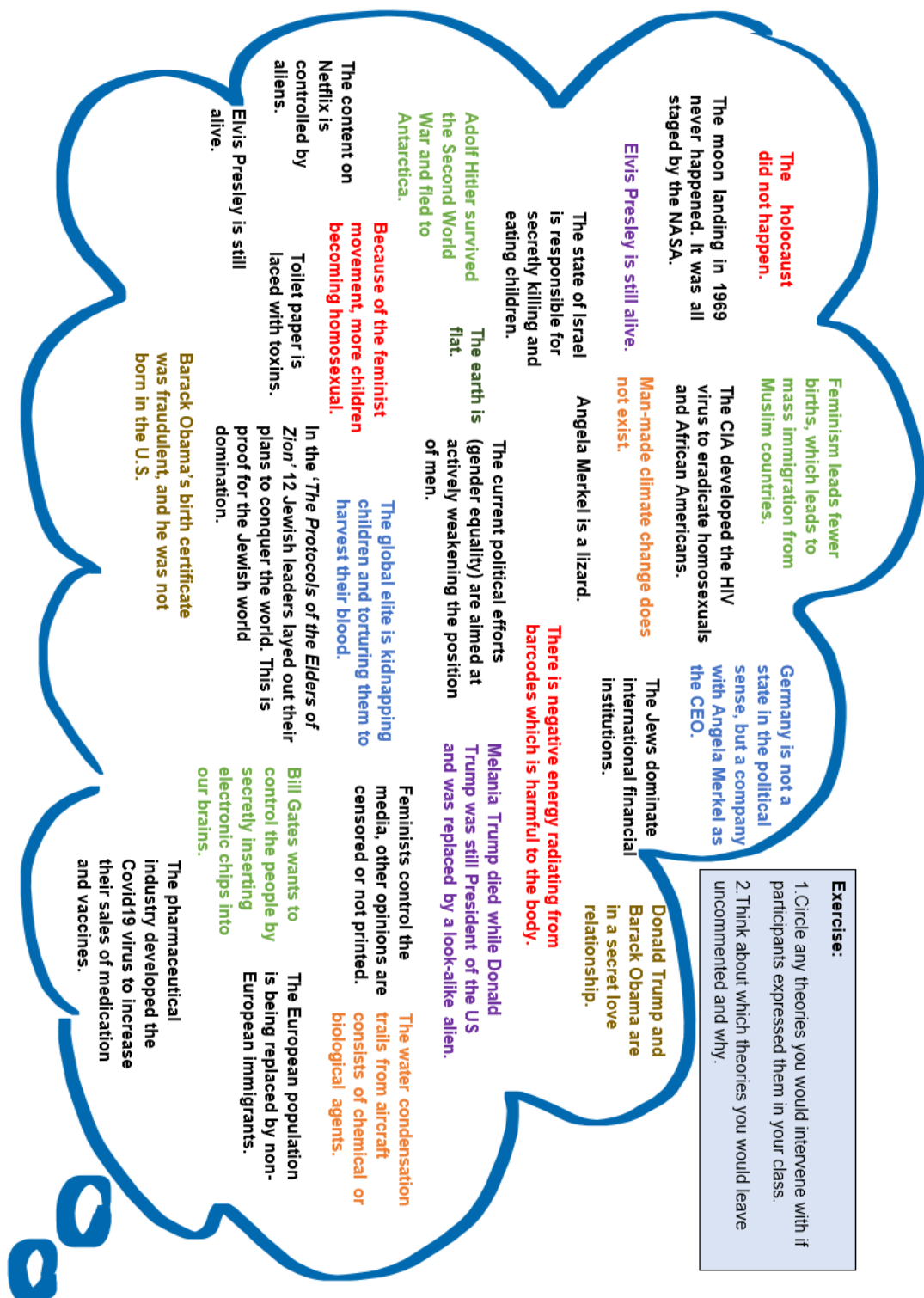
"Public transport is deliberately made as uncomfortable as possible: Either it's too cold, too hot or too stuffy – and the heating or the door is always supposedly broken."

"Reports and sources that claim otherwise are all fabricated to hide the real reasons!"

[Developed by the TEACH team for the project purpose]

Wrap-up: Conspiracy Cloud

Wrap_up_wordcloud



[Developed by the TEACH team for the project purpose]

TARGETING EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES



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