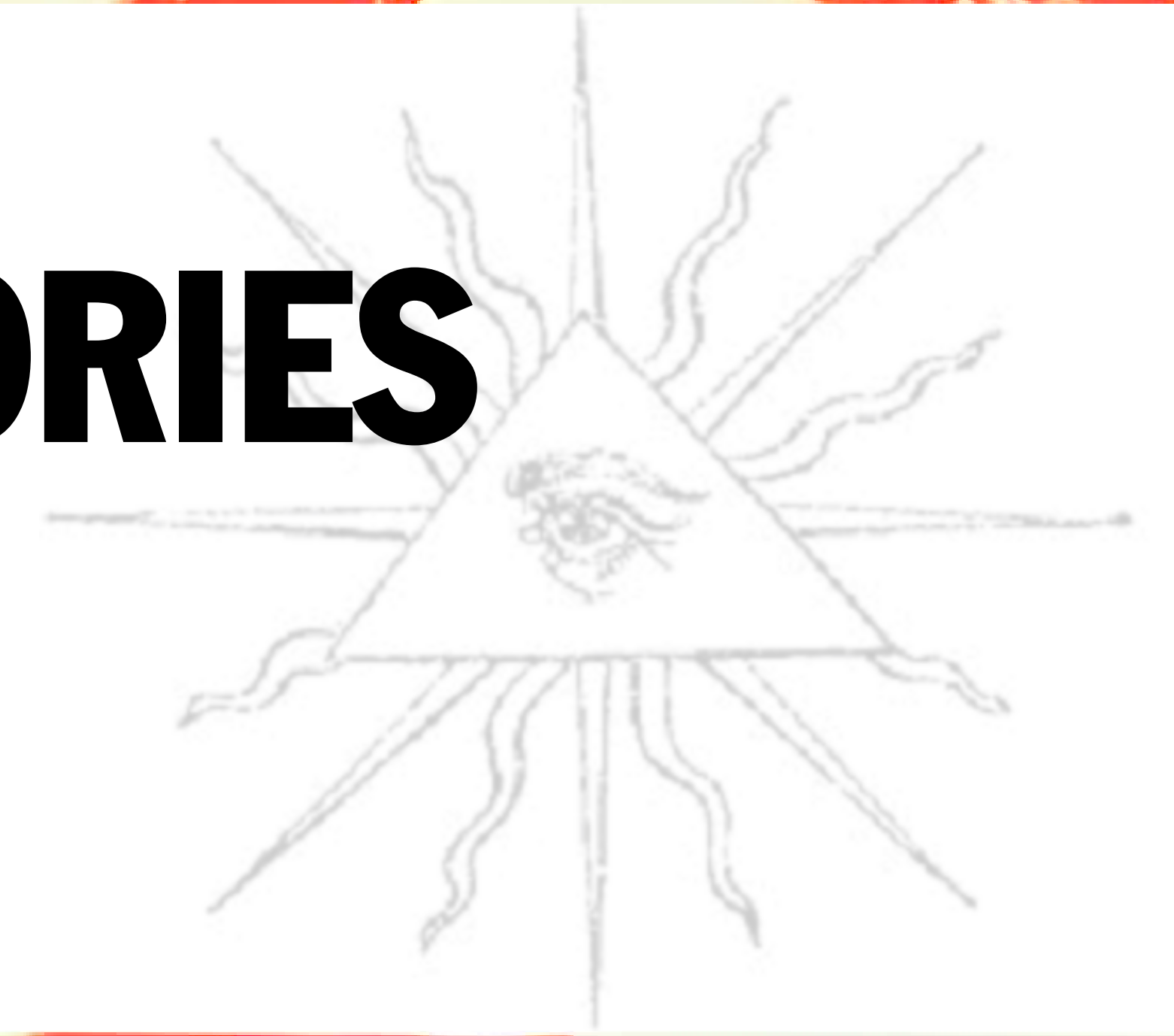


WHY WE LOVE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Sources and References



**THE
FRED PINTO
PODCAST**

APPROXIMATELY 50% OF PEOPLE TODAY BELIEVE AT LEAST ONE CONSPIRACY THEORY

According to this study in the *American Journal of Political Science*, about half (and possibly more) of all Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory.

The study suggests that there is no significant link between intelligence and the likelihood of believing in conspiracies, and that those on the political right and left are equally likely to believe them.

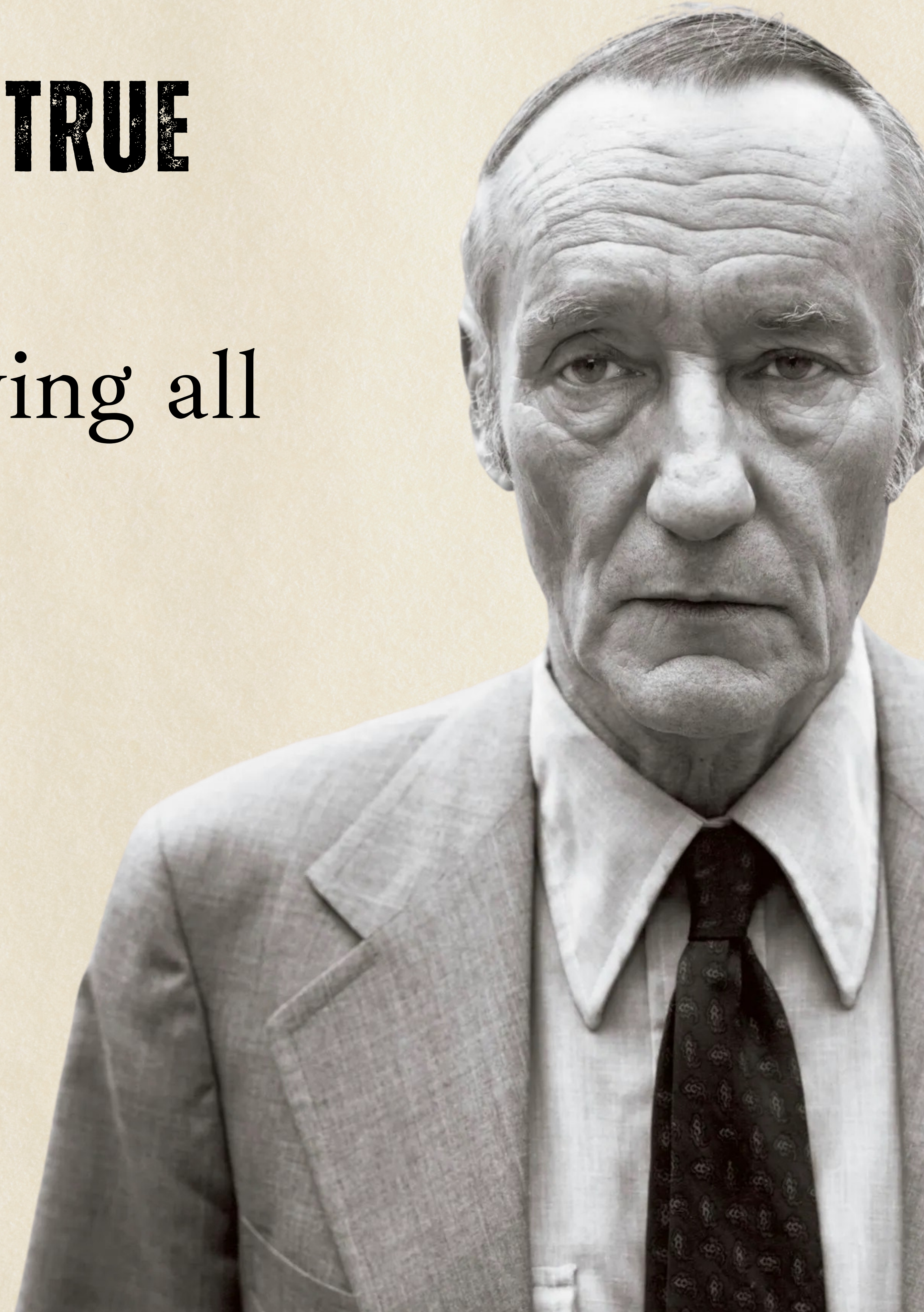
Source: *Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion*
(Oliver, J. E. & Wood, T. J., *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2014.)

**HERE ARE THE SEVEN REASONS
SUGGESTED BY THE EVIDENCE**

1. BECAUSE SOMETIMES, THEY'RE TRUE

“Sometimes, paranoia’s just having all the facts.”

– **William S. Burroughs**





THE POWER ELITE

C. WRIGHT MILLS

“If those who occupy the top grades are not omnipotent, neither are they impotent. There is neither a small group who decides everything, or an absolutely shared exercise of power ... the owner of the roadside fruit stand does not have as much power in any area of social or economic or political decision as the head of a multi-million dollar fruit corporation.”

The Power Elite (C. Wright Mills)

Many theories that were once branded as “conspiracies” eventually proved to be true:

- The US government intentionally poisoned alcohol during Prohibition to stop people from drinking;
- The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 was partly faked to provoke American support for the Vietnam War;
- The NSA’s PRISM Program caused mass surveillance of the US population without a warrant;
- Big Tobacco knowingly hid the cancer risks of smoking for years;
- And many more!

Over 60 years after the fact, about 70% of Americans still believe that JFK was assassinated in some kind of plot – and there is still no strong, direct evidence proving them wrong.

Sources:

12 crazy conspiracy theories that actually turned out to be true (Lauren Cahn, *Australia Reader's Digest*)

The five real conspiracies you need to know about (Jeremy Lent, *Open Democracy*)

John F. Kennedy's Assassination Leaves a Legacy of Suspicion (Gary Langer, *ABC News*)



2. BECAUSE WE'RE ADDICTED TO THE EMOTIONS THEY CREATE

People who were exposed to intense negative events early in their lives may develop an addiction to negative experience as adolescents and adults, and this can become a central organizing feature of their personality.

The addiction to negativity (R.C. Lane, J.W. Hull, L.M. Foehrenbach)

People who have experienced “hedonic extremes” – big ups and big downs, may be more susceptible to emotional addictions.

The dark side of emotion: the addiction perspective (George F. Koob)

3. BECAUSE OUR PERSONALITIES MAKE US LIKELIER TO BELIEVE THEM

People with schizotypy, and people who see the world as a dangerous place, are likelier to embrace conspiracy narratives.

Something's Going on Here: Psychological Predictors of Belief in Conspiracy Theories
(Joshua Hart, Molly Graether)

People who score lower on both agreeableness and conscientiousness in “Big Five” personality tests are likelier to embrace conspiracy theories.

Looking under the tinfoil hat: Clarifying the personological and psychopathological correlates of conspiracy beliefs
(Shauna M. Bowes, Thomas H. Costello, Winkie Ma, Scott O. Lilienfeld)

People who believed Princess Diana was murdered were also likelier to believe that she faked her own death, and was still alive.

Speaking of Psychology: Why people believe in conspiracy theories, with Karen Douglas, PhD (Episode 124).
(Kim Mills, Karen Douglas)



4. BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE A SENSE OF COHERENCE

Human beings have a strong inner need for coherence, and are wired to seek patterns.

Neurocomputational Dynamics of Sequence Learning

(Arkady Kononov, Ian Krajbich)

Patternicity: What It Means When You See Patterns

(Hope Gillette, Jacquelyn Johnson)

Conspiracy narratives can fulfill our need for coherence, for instance, when events seem random, uncertain or unpleasant.

Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology.

(Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, Norbert Schwarz)



The tendency to perceive illusory patterns—to connect stimuli that aren't related - is part of the cognitive machinery behind irrational belief in conspiracy theories.

Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural

(Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Karen M. Douglas, Clara De Inocencio)

People can develop an “explanatory style”, and become likely to interpret and explain all events in terms of it.

The illusion of explanatory depth and endorsement of conspiracy beliefs (Joseph A. Vitriol, Jesseca K. Marsh,
European Journal of Social Psychology, Volume 48, Issue 7, December 2018)

In *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, Norbert Schwarz)

5. THEY MAKE US FEEL SPECIAL

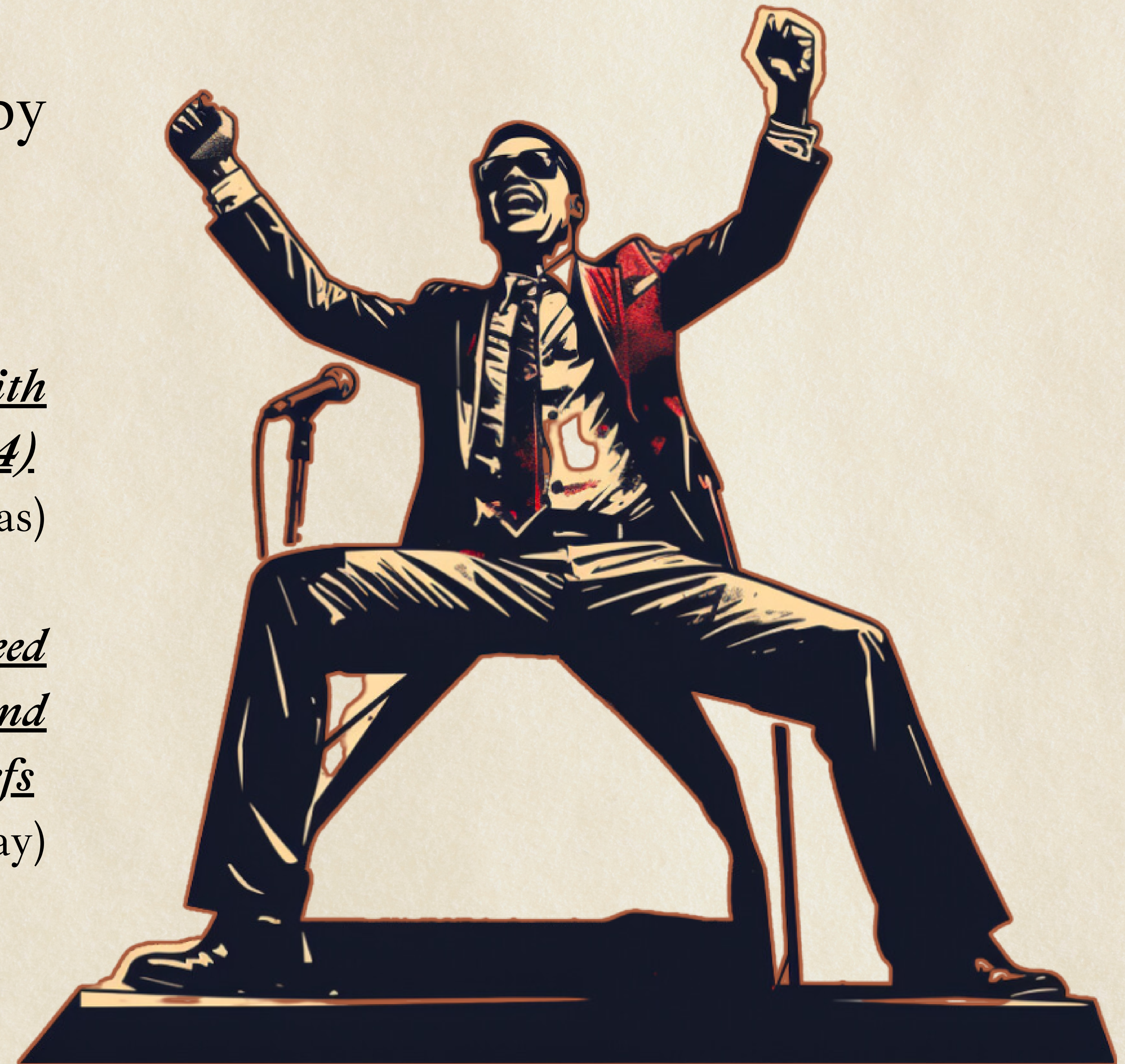
Conspiracy thinking can support narcissism by making believers feel “special” and “in the know”.

Speaking of Psychology: Why people believe in conspiracy theories, with Karen Douglas, PhD (Episode 124)

(Kim Mills, Karen Douglas)

The targets of all treachery: Delusional ideation, paranoia, and the need for uniqueness as mediators between two forms of narcissism and conspiracy beliefs

(Cameron S. Kay)



People who are higher in either form of narcissism (grandiose and vulnerable) are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories: grandiose narcissists believe them because they feel special or unique, vulnerable narcissists because they can be paranoid and interpret world events as personal threats.

The targets of all treachery: Delusional ideation, paranoia, and the need for uniqueness as mediators between two forms of narcissism and conspiracy beliefs

(Cameron S. Kay)

6. THEY HELP US BLAME OTHERS AND AVOID RESPONSIBILITY

An eternal locus of control – the tendency to blame an external agent for the outcomes in one’s life – as well as feelings of powerlessness, can help predict belief in conspiracies.

Beliefs in Conspiracies

(Marina Abalakina-Paap, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, W. Larry Gregory)

The targets of all treachery: Delusional ideation, paranoia, and the need for uniqueness as mediators between two forms of narcissism and conspiracy beliefs

(Cameron S. Kay)



7. THEY HELP CREATE TRIBES IN A LONELY MODERN WORLD

Conspiracy narratives and the communities they form can fill our need for social belonging.

The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

(Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka)



TOWARD HEALTHY SKEPTICISM:

The opposite of healthy skepticism is *confirmation bias* ...

“There’s an age-old adage ‘if the facts don’t fit the theory, change the theory’. But all too often it’s easier to change the facts.”

Source: *Product engineering: Volume 29, Issues 9-12 (1958)*. (Morgan-Grampian Publishing Company)

... also called “*Myside bias*”:

Research by Keith Stanovitch shows that Myside bias occurs when people evaluate evidence, generate evidence, and test hypotheses in a manner biased toward their own prior opinions and attitudes. Research across a wide variety of situations shows that myside bias shows very little relation to intelligence.

Myside bias, rational thinking, and intelligence

(Keith E. Stanovich, Richard F. West, Maggie E. Toplak)

When we add a stereotype to a proposition, we conclude that its odds of being true increase, while in reality, they decrease.

This is referred to as the “*Linda Effect*”, named after a study where respondents felt that the statement “Linda is a feminist bank teller” was likelier to be true than the statement “Linda is a bank teller”, a logical impossibility.

Thinking, Fast and Slow (Daniel Kahneman)

TOWARD HEALTHY SKEPTICISM:

A healthy skeptic's road map:

1. Understanding the difference between hypotheses and conclusions
2. Understanding the difference between intentions and incentives
3. Keeping track of our predictions
4. Developing self-awareness of any internal factor in our psychology
that acts as a bias for conspiracy thinking



Check out the video version of this slideshow
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