CHAPTER 6

SOCIOLOGY OF CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACIES IN TURKEY: WHO BELIEVES AND WHY?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the demographic, political, and religious determinants of the coronavirus related conspiracy beliefs in Turkey. It also measures the relationship between the trust in science, political and religious authorities, and conspiracy endorsement. In a national survey (NTotal = 5538), we asked the participants three conspiracy questions and saw significant differences in all predictors that we identified. We saw that the housewives, youths, females, those living in rural areas and small towns, unemployed or less educated people were more prone to believe in coronavirus conspiracies. We also found that political identities, religious commitments, and trust in science were strongly associated with conspiracy endorsements. In comparison to their counterparts, the rightists, conservatives, and/or religious respondents were seen to endorse more the theory that the virus is a conspiracy. Further, as expected, there was a negative correlation between trust in science and conspiracy thinking. We also saw that people who believe a coronavirus conspiracy mostly believed two other conspiracies too, namely that conspiracy belief is an outcome of a general mindset.

Keywords: COVID-19, Conspiracy Theories, Pandemic, Turkey

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1. Introduction

The roots of the conspiracy theories can probably be traced back to prehistoric times when humans began living in communities. They provide a comfortable, and occasionally very reasonable, ground to explain the past, as well as to make sense of the present and to predict the future; albeit mostly being anachronic for the former and being misdirecting for the latter both. The conspiracy theories (and people who are attracted to them) can, therefore, be encountered in every sphere of life, from politics to sports, science, religion, and health. The pandemic diseases, potentially more dangerous for humanity, are unfortunately no exception to this.

As in Ebola or AIDS experiences in the recent past, in the coronavirus pandemic too, various conspiracy theories have begun to be released across the world, in simultaneous with the emergence of the outbreak (Freeman et al, 2020). In the USA (Mitchell and Oliphent, 2020), the UK (Dearden, 2020), and probably elsewhere too, a considerable amount of people with different ethnicity, religion, education, occupations do not trust scientific evidence or official explanations, but rather prefer to believe that the virus did not come out naturally, but was developed in a laboratory in China, perhaps as a bioweapon (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020).

So, who are the believers of conspiracy theories and what motivates people to believe in conspiracy theories? Though being a cross-cultural reality, conspiracy theories are not endorsed by the greater parts of societies, but rather by people with a certain individual or social characteristic. A vast body of the literature concentrates on the psychological factors and cognitive abilities to explain why people believe in conspiracy theories (see, Douglas et al, 2017; Goreis and Voracek, 2019). However, in addition to personal differences, believing in conspiracy theories reflects a sociological reality since the endorsement of such thinking is more observed in specific parts of societies, such as marginalised groups, minorities, politically and religiously extremists, and most notably people with low education and income levels (see, Uscinski and Parent, 2014;van Prooijen, 2018).

In this chapter, we deal with this question and investigate the sociological predictors of conspiracy theories associated with the recent coronavirus outbreak in Turkey. To provide a meaningful explanation of which layers of society interpret the coronavirus process by associating it with conspiracy theories, we analyse the survey that we conducted with a large group of participants from different cities of the country, and with different occupations, political ideologies, education, age, and welfare levels. Considering the current literature, we would expect that the endorsement of conspiracy theories are more likely to be more common

among individuals with lower levels of education and income, higher anxieties about the pandemics, and radical political ideologies.

2. Contextualising Conspiracy Theories: What, Who and Why

A conspiracy theory can be identified as an attempt to explain an extraordinary social event in a different way from its formal explanation; as if they are actualised by a small group of people with a secret mission. (Keely, 1999). They are generally fed by uncertainties, lack of evidence, or unsatisfactory official information about any sensational event; or more often mistrust to public institutions may be the source of the conspiracy theories (van Prooijen, 2018). In such situations, beyond causing disinformation, conspiracy theories create an alternative reality that replaces the real reasons for the event that they provide an explanation for. What the conspiracy theory provides, the explanation may sometimes be an assassination (McCauley and Jacques, 1979; McHoskey, 1995; Enders and Smallpage, 2018), a terrorist attack (e.g. September 11, Goldberg, 2004; Jamil and Rousseau, 2011), or even a historical development (e.g. Moon landing, Swami et al, 2013).

The belief in conspiracy theories is also often reflected in people's perceptions of environmental changes (e.g. climate change, Douglas and Sutton, 2015; Uscinski et al, 2017), medical issues (e.g. birth control or vaccination, see Featherstone et al, 2019), and global pandemic diseases such as HIV (e.g. Nattrass, 2012) and more recently COVID-19 (Freeman et al, 2020; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). However, in such cases, denial of scientific explanations for the sake of conspiracies may bear more dangerous consequences for the believers as conspiracy beliefs may impact the behaviours and choices about healthcare issues. Indeed, as revealed in the relevant literature, in comparison to non-believers, people endorsing conspiracy theories are more reluctant to get vaccinated (Jolley and Douglas, 2014), treated (Ball et al., 2013), or prevented measures (Bogart and Thorburn, 2005; Grebe and Nattrass, 2012).

Research on believers of conspiracy theories shows that individuals who believe in a conspiracy theory are also prone to believe in other conspiracy theories, with or without there is a compatibility between them (e.g. Goertzel, 1994; Dyrendal, 2020). This implies that there may be specific factors making some individuals be more prone to believe in conspiracy theories. In much research, this tendency is explained with references to psychological and mental factors (Douglas et al, 2017). Although the results may show some differences on local grounds depending on the research scales and the qualification of the data analysed, the widely accepted argument is that conspiracy mentality is closely associated with at least one

of the following drivers; less analytical thinking ability (Swami et al, 2014), being prone to violence/crime (Jolley et al, 2019), narcissism (Cichocka et al, 2016), high level of anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013), psychopathy (March and Springer, 2019), delusional thinking style (Dagnall et al, 2015),

Nevertheless, the psychological conditions of individuals are not the only predictors of conspiracy mentality; their social status and preferences may also cause them to believe in conspiracies (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). Put differently, looking through a sociological lens, people tending to explain events by attributing them to conspiracies are often observed to share some common social, political, economic, and demographic characteristics (Goertzel, 1994; Uscisnksi and Parent, 2014; Drochon, 2018). The education level, for example, is one of the key drivers of believing (or not) conspiracy theories (Georgiou et al, 2019). The current literature has revealed that individuals with lower education more tend to endorse conspiracy theories, but conspiracy thinking shows a decrease as the education level increases (van Prooijen, 2017; Mancosu et al, 2017). Likewise, such kind of misinformation finds more buyers among the people with lower household income (Douglas et al 2015; Freeman and Bentall, 2017), but those who earn higher wages and/or who work in the sectors that need higher educational qualifications are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent, 2014).

Further, the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs is generally more common among minorities, religious groups, and other disadvantaged social groups than those across society. For example, individuals with high religious beliefs or those who identify themselves as conservatives/traditionalists have been observed to have a stronger tendency of conspiracy thinking (e.g. Galliford and Furnham, 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017), but nevertheless, this may vary depending on different factors (Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten, 2019). This endorsement, however, may be generalised for the sub-cultural groups combining their religious identities with a collective group identity (Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 2014), especially for marginal religious groups (e.g. Newheiser et al., 2011). Likewise, ethnic minorities are observed to be more likely to believe the conspiracy theories compared to the dominant cultural groups (e.g. Freeman and Bentall, 2017). The popularity of conspiracy theories among individuals belonging to a minority group, or subculture, generally varies depending on their positions in the society, which is the level of social exclusion, and on their perceptions of whether the matter on which the conspiracy theory is produced is about themselves (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018).

From another aspect, political identities, ideologies, and worldviews are among the factors shaping whether individuals believe in conspiracy theories or not (e.g. Pasek et al, 2015). Existing literature, for example, proposes that there is a connection between partisanship and

belief in conspiracy theories (Miller et al, 2016). Partisan individuals often tend to believe conspiracy theories about political events and to think that the opposite groups (e.g. media, secret organizations, and more often a political party) conspire against themselves (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Smallpage et al, 2017, Karp et al, 2018). This tendency is generally more common among the supporters of the opposition parties (e.g. Edelson, 2017). Further, the conspiracy mindset is much stronger at the extreme sides of the political spectrum (van Prooijen et al, 2015), notably in the far-right (Forchtner, 2019).

In short, conspiracist misinformation can be applied to explain a myriad of events, from politics to scientific facts, to diseases, to terrorist attacks, and individuals can hold these theories with various motivations. The general academic tendency to explain why people endorse such theories is to concentrate on personal differences, which is looking at the psychological and cognitive attributions of individuals. However, a recently flourishing research body underlines that conspiracy mentality is existent in certain strata of society, not the whole. They are seen as less educated, more radical, low-income people, often assumed to be more prone to conspiracy theories.

3. Research Questions

This paper intends to make a sociological analysis of coronavirus related conspiracy beliefs in Turkey. It will examine how demographic factors (gender, age, education, profession, and place of residence), political identities, and religious commitments have an impact on belief in conspiracy theories.

To this end, we asked three following questions exploring the coronavirus conspiracies:

- Q1: Do you think that COVID-19 a conspiracy of the great powers?
- Q2: How do you think COVID-19 has occurred?
- Q3: Do you think the vaccine for the virus has been found and is being knowingly hidden?

4. Data

To find satisfactory answers to our research questions, we employed data gathered from a large national online survey, titled as the Social Impacts of COVID-19, conducted by Prof. Veysel Bozkurt between the 17th and 20th of April, 2020. A total of 5700 individuals agreed to participate in the survey on a voluntary basis. After those who answered less than 10% of the questions were excluded, 5538 questionnaires were assessed in total.

Data, collected by the convenient sample method, does not represent the whole population in Turkey. The vast majority of respondents (92.3%) have a university or higher education (including students) degree, and 93.5 % live in cities, and in income level, the sample is representative in middle and upper-middle classes. However, in terms of the other predictors such as age, gender, political identities, and religious involvement, the sample was balanced.

5. Results

Conspiracy theories find many buyers around the world, especially in times of crisis, and this doubtlessly covers Turkey, too. In simultaneous with the appearance of COVID-19 in China, conspiracy theories have rapidly begun to be circulated in conventional and social media apparatuses in Turkey. Our research has demonstrated that people who are prone to believe in conspiracy theories about coronavirus are not a small, marginal minority that can be tolerated given the entire society. Quite the contrary, what we have seen was that a considerable number of individuals with different age, gender, education, or political backgrounds who participated in our survey gave positive answers to our questions examining coronavirus conspiracies.

For example, as illustrated in Table 1, approximately one-third of all participants (34%) have thought that coronavirus is a conspiracy organised by the great powers (e.g. China, Israel, the USA or Bill Gates) against them. Interestingly, in the other question (Question-2) about the way coronavirus appeared, the rate of believing in conspiracy arguments was significantly higher. About 41 % of the respondents did not believe that coronavirus disease occurred naturally, but rather thought it was made in a laboratory. The difference made us think that although they cannot directly point out the perpetrator, many more people believe that coronavirus was produced for a purpose so that it is associated with a conspiracy.

Table 1. The Conspiracy theories about the origins of the Covid-19 Pandemic

	Do you think that COVID-19 is a conspiracy of great powers?		**How do you think COVID-19 has emerged?**	
	Yes	No	Natural ways	I believe it was produced in a lab
Frequency	1733	3365	3098	2154
Valid Percent (%)	34	66	59	41

Another question addressing coronavirus conspiracies was about whether the virus vaccine was found. The number of people who believed that the vaccine was found, but hiding was significantly lesser than that< of those believing the other two Covid-19 related conspiracies.

As demonstrated in Table 2, 27.8% of the participants stated that they think the vaccine might be knowingly hidden. This difference could be explained with the fact that the survey was conducted in the early days that the pandemic began to appear in Turkey.

It is widely argued in the literature that conspiracy believing is a reflection of a general conspiracy mindset, and people believing a conspiracy theory are most likely to believe in other conspiracy theories (Source). As expected, in this research too, there was a strong correlation between three distinct conspiracy beliefs. The participants who perceived coronavirus as the conspiracy of the great powers also believed that the virus was human-made (r =68, n=5054, p=000), and the vaccine for the virus has been found and is being knowingly hidden (r =42, n=5056, p=000).

Table 2. Do you think the vaccine for the virus has been found and is being knowingly hidden?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	3795	71.1	71.9	71.9
	Yes	1482	27.8	28.1	100.0
	Total	5277	98.9	100.0	

To understand the individual-scale determinants of believing in the coronavirus related conspiracies, we filtered and analysed the data with different indicators. Our results, first of all, revealed the gender, age, education differences were quite significant in believing in the coronavirus conspiracies. Firstly, we saw that the youth, in comparison to the elders, more approve of conspiracy theories. For example, while young people under the age of 24 were the most supportive of the thought that Covid-19 is a conspiracy, the least supporters of this idea were participants above the age of 55 (x^2 [4] 20.869, $p < .000$). For the Question-2, 24-45 age group was significantly higher than the others, but the 55+ individuals were still the least part among those who believe the virus was produced in a lab (x^2 [4] 12.070, $p < .017$). The results for the Question-3 were the same, too (x^2 [4] 20,180, $p < .000$).

At the gender level, females were seen to be more prone to accept conspiracist arguments than males. While 28.3% of the male participants believed that coronavirus is the conspiracy of the Great Powers, this rate increased 10 points in females and raised to 38,3% (x^2 [1] 55,075, $p < .000$). The gender-based differentiation was also valid in the other two conspiracy-related questions (Question-2, x^2 [1] 55,075, $p <.000$; Question-2, x^2 [1] 5,274, $p <.022$). Further, in line with our predictions, there was a meaningful negative correlation between education and conspiracy believing. Whereas almost half of the participants with secondary and lower education degrees stated coronavirus might be a conspiracy, at the graduate and

postgraduate level, this thought fell under 35% (x^2 [1] 13,788, p < .000). Likewise, 50% of high-school graduates and of those having lower education levels believe that the virus did not emerge inherently, but was made in a laboratory. However, among the participants with higher education degrees, the support for this theory fell to 40.3%, which was lower than the previous group, but nevertheless points to a high rate of belief in the overall context (x^2 [1] 14,431, p <.000).

When we analysed the tendency to believe in conspiracies according to the profession, we have observed that housewives and unemployed individuals are more prone to supporting conspiracy theses about coronavirus than the private sector employees and retirees. In our survey, almost half of the housewives (46%) and one-third of the unemployed (37%) agreed to the arguments that coronavirus might be a conspiracy. However, though meaningfully less than this group, coronavirus conspiracies could be said to be considerably approved among private-sector employees (31%) and retired participants (31%), too. From a different aspect, it was seen that the differences in the welfare levels are a significant determinant of conspiracy thinking. Whereas 44% of the participants in the lowest-income level gave the answer to our conspiracy related questions as yes, this rate fell under 30% in the highest-income group (x^2 [4] 25,320, p <.000).

Interestingly, where the participants live was also observed to cause a significant change in conspiracy mentality. Our survey revealed that the participants living in rural areas and towns are more supportive of coronavirus conspiracies than those living in metropolitan cities. For example, while 32% of the participants living in metropolitan cities answered Question-1 as yes, this raised to 44% in those living in villages and towns (x^2 [3] 25,707, p <.000). Similarly, the belief that the vaccine is found, but hiding was significantly higher in the second group participants than the first group (x^2 [3] 25,707, p <.016).

We have also explored whether political and religious belonging makes an impact on supporting conspiracy theories. Our findings were compatible with the relevant literature arguing that there is a positive correlation between political-religious involvement and believing in conspiracies. For example, we saw that there is a higher tendency to explain the pandemic with the conspiracy theories among those who said that their religious commitment (r = 212) and trusts in the state (r = 122) increased after Covid-19. In the opposite way, the statement of those who expressed that their trust in science increased after pandemic (r=-,136) shows a strong tendency to support the scientific theses and to reject conspiracist thinking.

In terms of political ideology, leftists were seen more sceptics of the conspiracies about

coronavirus than the others. Among those who defined themselves as leftists, the thought that coronavirus was a conspiracy was well below the general average with 25%, however, in centrists (35%) and rightists (42%), the support to coronavirus conspiracies were seen to be considerably higher (x^2 [2] 96,989, $p < .000$). A similar difference between right and left sides of the political spectrum was measured in the second question, too. The argument that the coronavirus was produced in a lab was supported by only 32% of the leftists, but 50% of the rightists (x^2 [2] 107,895, $p <.000$).

Based on our findings, we could say that religious involvement is a stronger determinant in believing these sorts of misbeliefs than the political ideology. Whereas those who don't have faith /believe or are sceptics approached the conspiracies with more sceptically (15%), those having faith but not practice it (35%) and those having faith and practice it (41%) were in a more tendency to believe in these theories (x^2 [2] 181,719, $p <.000$). Our data also revealed that so long as the religiousness increases, the support for the theses that coronavirus was produced in a lab (x^2 [2] 193,590, $p < .000$) and that the vaccine was hidden also increased (x^2 [2] 78,836, $p < .000$).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Conspiracy theories never disappear, always exist, but they flourish especially in times of crisis and uncertainties. They easily capture people as they provide a comfortable ground to explain the things of which causes/effects are not known or their explanations cannot persuade the community. In our research, we found that conspiracy believers, unfortunately, were not a minor part of the society. Conversely, we saw that a substantial part of the society endorsed these theories. In our research, the support given to the conspiracy theories showed a change between 30% and 50%.

Among the three conspiracy questions, the highest endorsement rate was on the theory that the virus was produced in a laboratory. Many more people than those who believed coronavirus is a conspiracy of great powers or who thought that the vaccine was found carried in the belief that the virus was generated by humans. As well-known, there has been extensive literature, mostly published by the think-tank institutions and governments, arguing that viruses can be generated by the states as potential bioweapons (e.g. Henderson, 1999; Lam, 2003; Siegel et al. 2007). When the Covid-19 pandemic has emerged, such kinds of reports began to circulate in conventional and notably in social media (Acar, 2020). We suppose that the high support that was given to this theory might be an outcome of this circulation.

The Coronavirus related conspiracy beliefs were associated with a number of determinants. As expected, those with lower welfare levels, unemployed, and housewives, those with lower education levels believed in conspiracy theories more than others. Likewise, there were significant differences in gender and age scales. Female participants believed in conspiracy theories more than males, and those living in towns and villages more believed in conspiracy theories than those living in cities. A result that was surprising to us was that the conspiracies were more approved among the youth than the elders. This can be associated with the fact that the conspiracies about coronavirus were, firstly and intensely, circulated in social media in which the youth participate more actively than the elders.

Political and religious connections had a significant impact on believing or not believing conspiracies. People who identified themselves as rightists or centrist or more religiously conservative people believed more that conspiracies can be facts. Though compatible with the relevant literature, these results partially surprised us. This is because, unlike what Trump did in the USA, Turkey's central government did not attempt to explain the pandemic by associating it with China-based conspiracy , or with another one but nevertheless, the participants whom we can define as pro-government endorsed the conspiracy theories more in comparison to those we thought they supported the opposition.

Another important, but not surprising result was that there was a negative connection between the trust in science and conspiracy endorsement. Another important, but not surprising result was that there was a negative connection between scientific-trust and conspiracy endorsement. In our research, we saw that people who trusted in scientific explanations about coronavirus believed in conspiracy theories less; however, the participants relying on the political or religious authorities more tend to believe in conspiracies of coronavirus. This gives us a chance to make a forecast for the future, or to have a final word, so to say. Unlike conspiracy theories, scientific research is a long and complicated journey, having a particular methodology, needing measurable evidence, and emerging through undergoing peer-reviewed processes. It is very likely that the belief in conspiracy theories around the world will decrease so long as the trust in scientific explanations for diseases, ecological changes, or other popular events increases.

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