

20/10/2022

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN small-scale expert session

14 June, Madrid, Spain

Conspiracy narratives: developing a tool to support families

Needs and considerations

Key outcomes

On 14 June 2022, the RAN Families, Communities & Social Care (FC&S) working group organised a small-scale expert session in Madrid, Spain to lay the groundwork for development of a support tool for families dealing with relatives who believe conspiracy narratives. The participants were mostly practitioners working in family support or social care services, with experience in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and/or tackling conspiracy narratives.

This was a follow-up session to the FC&S working group meeting '[Supporting families in fostering resilience against \(Covid-19-related\) conspiracy narratives](#)' held on 28 and 29 September 2021. This meeting highlighted how families as well as practitioners in family support services are increasingly grappling with the question of how to effectively communicate on conspiracy narratives without compromising the relationship. The 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic have coincided with and fostered the spread of disinformation and conspiracy narratives. Even though an increasing number of countries have ended many pandemic-related measures, conspiracy narratives are still in place – and are now also exploiting new developments such as the war in Ukraine.

This meeting sought to collect the information required for the groundwork for a support tool specifically catering to the needs of families in this situation, i.e. with a relative who believes conspiracy narratives. This paper presents the highlights of this meeting, which also serve as considerations for development of the tool.

Several overarching themes relevant to families with a relative who believes conspiracy narratives will be addressed in this paper:

1. how to analyse your own position and that of the relative who believes conspiracy narratives, before beginning dialogue;
2. guidelines for dialogue and discussion with the relative who believes conspiracy narratives;
3. how to deal with the related emotions, shame and stigmatisation.

Highlights of the small-scale expert session

Context: Why, for whom and how?

As a consequence of the increased spread of disinformation and conspiracy narratives, many people in European countries find themselves struggling to effectively communicate with family members or clients who believe conspiracy narratives. The RAN FC&S conclusion paper 'Supporting families in fostering resilience against (Covid-19-related) conspiracy narratives' outlined several recommendations: practitioners should constantly reflect on their own prejudices, try to identify the need that the narrative fulfils, ensure mutual communication, and create or introduce an alternative group to replace the radical structures.

However, not all families seek contact with a practitioner, for various reasons. They may feel shame about the association with conspiracy narratives or may fear compromising the family relationships. Family members seek straightforward guidance when such situations arise within their own close environment.

In the words of one of the participants, "You can choose your friends to some extent, but you cannot choose your family." Families are often at a loss in this situation and uncertain which approach to adopt towards the relative who believes conspiracy theories. For instance, some children may find themselves torn between their parents' conflicting world views, while others may clash with their parents over vaccinations. Parents may struggle to understand how their children have encountered conspiracy narratives online. Others may be troubled by the discovery that their partners believe conspiracy narratives.

To support these families, participants sought to develop a low-threshold, free-of-charge support tool that could be downloaded online and used by families, and/or distributed in social care/family support service settings. Instead of lengthy written theories, this support tool will present concrete cases and questions that families can relate to, in a practical format: a set of cards that outline considerations in different situations or circumstances ⁽¹⁾.

The target audience of this tool is those family members seeking support to communicate effectively with relatives who believe conspiracy narratives. The tool could subsequently be adapted to suit other target groups (e.g. young people) in digital form.

Needs of families, considerations and guiding questions

Practitioners discussed which family needs the support tool should meet, as well as relevant considerations in addressing these needs. The families' needs and the corresponding considerations are thematically organised below.

NEED: Assistance for families in understanding their own emotions and position

Before entering into a discussion with the relative who believes conspiracy theories, families must be able to identify their own problems, worries, concerns and emotions around a specific situation. This can help them decide whether they are the right person(s) to intervene and if so, what their goal is.

Considerations

To help family members understand their own emotions and positions, cards in the tool can provide guidance on the following pertinent questions.

- What are your worries and emotions? How do you feel about the situation?

⁽¹⁾ RAN FC&S, 2021, [Supporting families in fostering resilience against \(Covid-19-related\) conspiracy narratives](#).

- What is your own position? Did the family member who believes conspiracy theories overstep your boundaries? Do you even want to intervene?
- Could you accept that the family member who believes conspiracy theories might not change?
- What would you like to solve/achieve through dialogue with the family member who believes conspiracy theories?

NEED: Assistance for families in understanding the situation of the relative who believes conspiracy theories

Guidelines could help families better understand several issues: the differences between critical thinking and belief in conspiracy narratives, why one of their relatives believes conspiracy narratives in the first place, what has potentially changed in this person's life, what the conspiracy narrative is about, and what is behind their statements.

Considerations

To help family members understand the situation of the relative who believes conspiracy theories, the tool could include the following considerations and questions.

- Try to assess why someone believes a conspiracy narrative. The following guiding questions may help:
 - o What is behind this person's statements?
 - o Why are they bringing up a specific issue at that particular moment? Has something changed?
- Try to distinguish between critical thinking and belief in conspiracy narratives.

NEED: Guidelines for families on discussing the situation with the relative who believes conspiracy theories, without compromising the relationship

Many families need practical tips and guidance around dialogue. This is interlinked with being able to analyse what they can – and importantly, cannot – expect dialogue to achieve in different kinds of situations.

Considerations

Support for families should take the form of a simple step-by-step tool. The tool could include the following guidelines and considerations.

- Be patient, calm and tactful. This can help to build trust.
- Listen without dismissing the feelings of the relative who believes conspiracy theories.
- Be respectful towards the relative who believes conspiracy theories and do not moralise or preach.
- Recognise that the conversation is not about taking a side or winning an argument.
- Acknowledge the grievances of the relative who believes conspiracy theories.
 - o Questions could include 'What do you believe?', 'How sure are you that this is true?', 'Where does this belief/idea originate?' and 'What are your motives?'
 - o Reframe it: 'I can see that we both feel X is important, but...'
- Ask follow-up questions.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Do not command, instruct or demand: it is important the relative who believes conspiracy theories arrives at realisations on their own. Realise that this may take time.
- In some cases, it is recommended that you avoid talking about the conspiracy itself and related facts; instead, try to focus on the relationship between you and with the relative who believes conspiracy theories, and how you both feel.
- Conversation techniques such as the truth sandwich or the Socratic method could be included in the tool, if pertinent to the situation (mainly applicable for those seeking to debunk a conspiracy) ⁽²⁾.

⁽²⁾ Read more about the Socratic method:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02660830.2018.1526446?src=recsys&journalCode=rsia20>

The recommendations above are only guidelines and are not applicable in every situation. In the tool, these conversation guidelines could be linked to the specific situations in which they are relevant.

NEED: Dealing with shame and stigmatisation

Some family members may feel ashamed to be associated with the relative who believes conspiracy theories, among their friends or extended circle. Others feel reluctant to discuss this subject or seek help, again because they feel ashamed or are stigmatised. They need to know where to find support or contact with other people in a similar situation.

Considerations

The following ideas for helping families deal with shame and stigmatisation could either be included in the support tool or be used as a springboard for follow-up actions in the future.

- Interactive videos showcasing the real-life experiences of others.
- Links to professional help and support, where necessary.
- An platform where people can post their stories anonymously and contact others coming to terms with the same issues.

For all the considerations above, it is recommended that families are able to find resources for professional support, if needed. Having a conversation is often not enough and has a big impact on the family member who initiates the conversation. Therefore, it is recommended by the participants that the tool provides the family member with potential resources for professional help.

Relevant practices

- The [TALK TO ME web app](#): This is a game in which users practice having a constructive dialogue with someone who believes conspiracy narratives. It includes communication techniques and information on how to broach such a dialogue and includes potential real-life situations that users might encounter.
- The [Under Pressure Game](#): Developed by Diversion (the Netherlands), this game aims to strengthen media literacy among young people. It includes a section on disinformation and how to handle disinformation.
- An RAN e-learning course is currently being developed on conspiracy narratives. Check the RAN website for further information and updates.

Read more about the truth sandwich (or fact-fallacy-fact) approach): https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/instead-of-trumps-propaganda-how-about-a-nice-truth-sandwich/2018/06/15/80df8c36-70af-11e8-bf86-a2351b5ece99_story.html

Follow up

As stated before, the tool will be a first prototype that addresses certain needs of families dealing with conspiracy narratives. By the end of 2022, this prototype of the tool will be prepared, with a suitable graphic visual design, including the following overarching themes.

- A general introduction: what is a conspiracy narrative?
- Different family situations: families can select the one(s) resembling theirs, and find various related considerations on the back of the card.
- A quick 'What if?' checklist: this presents several scenarios ('If') and relevant guidance on what to do ('What').
- Q&A cards: this provides answers on difficult questions that families may have.
- Step-by-step cards: these offer recommendations on how to help someone who believes in conspiracy narratives to remain open to different opinions and possibly reconsider their beliefs, and how to hold a conversation on a difficult topic. It also includes important guidance in the form of questions that help users identify whether a conversation could have negative repercussions and how it could affect them in particular. When in doubt, the recommendation is to contact a professional with a counselling background or others who have a trusting relationship with the believer.
- Finally, it includes references that direct the reader to additional information.

Proposed next steps include the following.

- Testing the tool to find out if the target group can highlight any opportunities for improvements.
- Translating the tool into different European languages.
- Adapting the tool, so that different versions can be used for different target groups. For instance, the content could be incorporated into a digital version (such as an app or an e-learning course) or incorporated into educational material (such as in schools).

Further reading

- RAN Ad-hoc paper (2021). [Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE](#).
- RAN C&N (2022). [Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU](#).
- RAN C&N (2020). [The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives](#).
- RAN FC&S (2021). [Supporting families in fostering resilience against \(Covid-19-related\) conspiracy narratives](#).
- RAN Small-scale (2020). [Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures](#).
- RAN YF&C (2017). [Discussing Taboos and Controversial Issues](#).