

Are conspiracy theorists psychotic?

A comparison between conspiracy theories and paranoid delusions

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Background Conspiracy theories are popular during the corona pandemic. Conspiracy thinking is characterized by the strong belief that a certain situation, perceived as unjust, is the result of a deliberate conspiracy by a group of people with bad intentions. Conspiracy thinking seems to have many similarities with paranoid delusions.

Aim To explore the nature, consequences and social-psychological dimensions of conspiracy thinking and to describe similarities and differences with paranoid delusions.

Method Critically review relevant literature on conspiracy thinking and paranoid delusions.

Results Conspiracy thinking meets epistemic, existential and social needs. It provides clarity in uncertain times and connection with a group of like-minded people. Both conspiracy thinking and paranoid delusions involve an incorrect, persistent and sometimes bizarre belief. Unlike conspiracy theorists, however, people with a paranoid delusion are almost always the sole target of the supposed conspiracy and are largely alone in their beliefs. Also, conspiracy ideas are less based on unusual experiences of the self, reality or interpersonal contacts.

Conclusions Conspiracy thinking is common in uncertain circumstances. It gives people something to hold on to, security, morality superiority and social support. Extreme conspiracy thinking seems to fit within the common psychiatric definitions of paranoid delusions, but there are also important differences. In order to distinguish with conspiracy thinking, common definitions of delusions need to be deepened. Instead of the strong focus on the erroneous content of delusions, more attention should be paid to the underlying idiosyncratic, altered form of the experience of reality.

Uncertain and far-reaching times such as the corona pandemic are fertile ground for conspiracy theories. Many people are concerned about the great power of the world's economic and political elite and want to interpret what is happening around them. During the pandemic, governments and large companies have been given and taken leeway over which citizens have little insight and hardly any control. Society was locked down, some civil liberties were temporarily bracketed and government was governed by emergency decrees.

It is therefore not surprising that dissatisfaction among people increased and mistrust sometimes develops into conspiracy thinking.

For example, the *Great Reset* proposal of the World Economic Forum, launched in 2020, to rebuild the global economy after the corona pandemic, has been seen as a deliberate conspiracy of companies and governments to achieve global hegemony.

However, many conspiracy theories are more extreme. For example, a survey by Kieskompas in 2020 showed that 5.6% of the respondents found it (very) credible that a chip is being injected with the corona vaccine to keep following people permanently (Kieskompas 2020). There are also those who are convinced that the 'New World Order' is using the pandemic as a cover to secretly kill children on a large scale.

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to sexually abuse. Conspiracy theories evoke many emotions, in particular fear, indignation, anger and frustration (Douglas et al. 2017).

At first glance, there are many similarities between paranoid delusions and conspiracy theories. In paranoid delusions, people are convinced that someone, an organization, a force or power wants to harm them.

Delusions vary on a large number of dimensions, such as bizarreness, the degree of conviction, the degree of preoccupation and the degree to which the thoughts cause suffering pressure (van der Zwaard 2006; Van Os & Reininghaus, 2016). According to DSM-5, the core of a delusion is that it is an erroneous persistent belief that is not susceptible to change despite evidence to the contrary.

The content of conspiracy theories, like that of delusions, is often improbable, and sometimes even downright bizarre. They are deeply paranoid ideas about high-ranking individuals, international corporations and shadowy elites attacking the security and freedom of ordinary people. Despite lack of evidence or even evidence to the contrary, conspiracy theorists also hold firmly to their beliefs.

All this raises the question of whether conspiracy thinking should be considered delusional. In this article we explore the phenomenon of conspiracy thinking and explore similarities and differences between conspiracy thinking and delusions.

Conspiracy thinking – phenomenon and consequences

Most definitions of conspiracy theories are very devaluing to those who adhere to these theories

gene. A more neutral definition is derived from Birchall: 'constructions that explain an individual or social situation or development perceived as unjust or intolerable by presenting this situation as the deliberate result of a group of people secretly cooperating with evil intentions' (Bir. chall 2006).

The corona crisis has all the elements that encourage plot thinking. A global event with a major impact on human lives and unprecedented consequences for society calls for major statements (Räikkä 2009). The coercive nature of government measures, combined with reduced autonomy for citizens, fuels resistance, mistrust and anti-authoritarian sentiment. At the same time, uncertainty about the nature, course and control of the pandemic makes alternative explanations attractive.

What's the point of conspiracy thinking?

One way to understand conspiracy thinking is to look at the motives of conspiracy theorists. In the literature, epistemic, existential and social motives are distinguished (Douglas et al. 2017). In an increasingly cluttered world, people have an epistemic need for something to hold on to (Harambam 2017).

We long for clear explanations for overwhelming, elusive and uncontrollable events. Conspiracy theorists simplify reality by choosing an unambiguous, definitive explanation for events, selecting information that fits and then leaving no room for alternatives.

native statements. This 'cognitive closure' makes reality known and understandable again (Jameson 1988). A conclusive statement is preferable to uncertainty, even if this statement is logically unprovable, difficult to maintain or internally contradictory.

Existential motives are that conspiracy theories promise safety and greater control in situations where people feel anxious and powerless. When people distrust government agencies and large corporations and are dissatisfied with the sociopolitical reality, conspiracy theories can make sense of a confusing and sometimes hostile reality, rationalize problems and setbacks, and reduce feelings of helplessness (McArthur 1995).

Finally, there are social motives for conspiracy thinking, because conspiracy theories connect with an *in-group*, which gives identity, connectedness and a certain superiority over the ignorant mass (*out-group*) (Douglas et al. 2017). Conspiracy theorists are *rebellious with a cause, in other words* : conspiracy thinking benefits people.

Population studies from before the corona crisis showed that conspiracy theorists are relatively more likely to be male, less educated, single and unemployed and belong to an ethnic minority (Freeman et al. 2020). They more often have physical and psychological complaints, more often a psychiatric disorder, less self-confidence and less connectedness with other people. They experience themselves as lower on the social ladder compared to others.

Recent British population research shows, however, that conspiracy thinking has become more *mainstream* thinking . About half of the respondents believed to some extent that the virus is a bioweapon developed by China to destroy the West, and about a fifth believed to some extent that the Jews created the virus to break the economy for financial gain. to deposit. Distrust has established itself in a large part of the population. Conspiracies cherry at the time of the corona pandemic therefore fit less often into the older characterization (Freeman et al. 2020).

Negative consequences of conspiracy thinking

The consequences of conspiracy thinking are as diverse as the conspiracy constructs themselves and their usefulness to individuals. Conspiracy thinking does not have to have a negative effect on the conspiracy theorists themselves, their environment or society. But there can be negative consequences.

Increasing uncertainty

While the motive is to gain more certainty and control, in practice it appears that the feeling of insecurity and dependence increases, which also increases distrust of social institutions (Douglas et al. 2017). This increases the susceptibility to even more conspiracy theories. Getting caught up in more and more and more disturbing plots can move quickly.

Isolation and demise

Conspiracy theorists let their allies know how isolated and alienated they sometimes feel. "I hear from so many people that they feel isolated and alone during this awakening and this massive paradigm shift that is happening around the world.

Spouses cannot wake partners up to the truth, relatives and close friends think you have become strange' (quoted in Van Buuren 2016).

Reinforce suffering of others

The accusations that conspiracy theorists point at those they see as responsible for injustice and evil border on libel and slander. Recent events in Bodegraven, for example, where conspiracy theorists laid flowers and wreaths at the graves of deceased children who, in their view, were victims of satanistic pedophile networks of the elite, left relatives very hurt.

What is the danger of conspiracy thinking?

Conspiracy thinking can get stuck at the level of passive acquisition; one reads about it, values it and will occasionally show it to someone else (McArthur 1995). This can be followed by an activist level, where the message is actively passed on because it is felt that others should take note of the scandal and be protected, for example against the adverse effects of vaccination. In the extreme – and fortunately rare – case, however, there can also be risk and threat in terms of violence. The outrage at the plot can be so strong that the moral boundary of violence is crossed – activism radicalizes to extremism (Moskalenko & McCauley 2009).

A recent population study conducted in Germany shows that conspiracy thinking is positively correlated with affinity for extremist violence, albeit highly dependent on individual differences (Rottweiler & Gill 2020). The effect is stronger for individuals with lower self-control, decreased trust in the rule of law and a strong belief that they have the capacity to solve problems themselves.

In the Netherlands, there has been no mass aggression (such as at the Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021) so far, but we are seeing an increase in serious intimidation and threats by conspiracy theorists against people who have a key role in fighting the pandemic, but also their family members. This mainly takes place in the online environment, but increasingly also offline, with unwanted visits at home or aggressive advances. The wave of arson attacks at 5G towers is an example of aggression that is likely to be heavily inspired by conspiracy theories. Sometimes conspiracy theorists commit aggression from an organized context that often has associations with extremist groups. According to the

Between March 2020 and March 2021, the Public Prosecution Service received more than four hundred reports of corona-related crimes, many of which were threats and violent incidents aimed at the police, BOAs and healthcare employees (NCTV 2021). Compared to delusions, the collective aspect of conspiracy thinking poses a potentially greater danger (see Figure 1). The collective outrage at the alleged injustice may be enough to cross the moral line of dangerous behavior. Certainly when contact with like-minded people, such as in so-called *echo chambers*, prevails.

A specific risk emanates from people who are more susceptible to conspiracy theories because of an underlying psychological vulnerability and who act accordingly. A survey of 66 supporters of QAnon, a popular conspiracy theorist far-right group, who were arrested in the United States for various crimes, showed that a traumatic event (such as abuse) preceded their radicalization in 44% (Jensen & Kane 2021).

Of the 35 QAnon supporters arrested during the storming of the Capitol, 63% were found to have mental health problems, such as PTSD, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Are conspiracy theories paranoid delusions?

At first glance, there are many similarities between conspiracy thinking and paranoid delusions, but are conspiracy theories delusional as defined in psychiatry? A commonly used (DSM-5) definition of a delusion is 'an erroneous belief, based on erroneous inferences from external reality, held firmly despite the views of almost everyone else and despite unequivocal evidence or indications to the contrary. The idea is not of such a nature as to be accepted by other members of the culture or subculture'. This definition is grounded in the work of Jaspers (1923), who emphasized the incorrect content of the idea, the firm conviction and the lack of openness to counter-arguments. Although this remains the core of the psychiatric definition of a delusion to this day, it has been repeatedly argued that in fact all parts of the definition are problematic (David 1999; van der Zwaard 2006).

The conspiracy theories surrounding the corona pandemic show that this definition may need to be tightened or deepened.

False Ideas

While history has shown that some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true on closer inspection, many conspiracy theories are highly unlikely and often demonstrably false. The content of corona conspiracy theories ranges from paranoid thoughts about powerful corporations to bizarre beliefs about a global elite that systematically and on a large scale sexually abuses and sacrifices children for their blood.

to drink, vaccines containing microchips to monitor us, or the coronavirus unleashed as a military biological weapon to combat overpopulation on Earth. Concerns about the great power of companies and governments are generally accepted, understandable and plausible. However, the bizarre, impossible content of some corona conspiracy theories is very similar to the content of paranoid delusions. In both cases the ideas are wrong on rational and objective grounds. In recent years, the continuum model of psychosis has been widely used, in which paranoid delusions do not differ qualitatively from normal suspicious thoughts, but only gradually differ from them in degree of belief, preoccupation, distress, and irrational content (Van Os & Reininghaus 2016). Com plot thinking could be considered along the same continuum. The question then arises when conspiracy theories are irrational enough to be labeled as delusional and how it can be determined whether the theory in question is an incorrect inference from external reality to a sufficient extent.

Holding on despite evidence to the contrary

An important characteristic of delusions is that they are persistently held, even when there is clear evidence or indications to the contrary. However, many delusions are impossible or difficult to disprove. How can you prove that the Secret Service is not after anyone? And what counts as sufficient evidence? Conceptually, this is also a complicated part of the definition (Bentall et al. 2001). This is no different with conspiracy theories, because they arise precisely in a context of social dissatisfaction, (alleged) abuses and lack of clarity, so that the paranoid views can hardly be refuted.

Conspiracy theorists also stubbornly hold on to their beliefs. They often provide an abundance of 'evidence' for their theories, for example texts from websites, individual quotes or video fragments. Conspiracy theorists also use other epistemic sources of knowledge to support their ideas, such as spiritual, physical or emotional experiences (Harambam 2017). In conversations with conspiracy theorists it often turns out that objectifiable facts and rational arguments are not decisive. As with people with psychotic paranoid delusions, the belief is not amenable to logical proof. If things happen that do not rhyme with the idea, this is ignored or reconsidered, so that it still fits within the belief.

For example, QAnon supporters expected that the day of Joe Biden's inauguration as president of the United States would turn into *The Great Awakening*, when the elite, including Biden himself, would be exposed and arrested. When that didn't happen, that didn't prove them wrong, but on closer inspection, Biden was also on the right side (Roose 2021).

So conspiracy theories are not necessarily about related facts. For example, a study showed that people who believed one conspiracy theory about the death of Princess Diana often believed other, incompatible conspiracy theories about her death to be plausible (Wood et al. 2012). Several incompatible ideas can coexist without any problem. It's about the deeper paranoid paranoia.

Not appropriate in subculture

An additional criterion for a delusion is that the belief is shared by almost no one and is not appropriate to a person's sociocultural background or to a subculture. If you are in an environment where belief in ghosts is the norm, it is not a delusion to attribute setbacks in your life to the evil influence of evil spirits. In a deeply religious environment, it is not a delusion to feel chosen by God.

In corona conspiracy theories, many thousands of people form a subculture of conspiracy theorists. You can join QAnon, but also feel connected to artists, fashion models and other influencers who spread conspiracy theories on social media. As mentioned earlier, extreme corona conspiracy theories have moved towards mainstream thinking (Freeman et al. 2020), and are therefore no longer appropriate within the definitions of a delusion.

There is, however, a caveat to be made here. In a world of the internet and social media, ideas spread like wild fire. Fact and fiction are not easy to distinguish in the mediatized world (Harambam 2017). Very quickly, ideas have an enormous reach, especially when influencers embrace them. There is a subculture online for almost every view, however extreme or bizarre. This criterion for a delusion has thus become more difficult to use than it was for the internet age.

Idiosyncratic Experiences

Several authors have pointed out that the current definitions of delusions are not complete, perhaps not even including the core of the delusion (David 1999; Feyaerts et al. 2021). A delusion is not just an erroneous idea that is stubbornly held in spite of rational counter-arguments. The way in which people experience reality is perhaps at least as important in delusions as the content of the delusion. Jaspers (1923) distinguished between delusions and overvalued ideas, seeing delusions as the result of a radical change in the way meaning is given to events, while overvalued ideas correspond more closely to passionate political or religious beliefs.

It is important to look more closely at the idiosyncratic rather than shared perception of reality. Unlike conspiracy theorists, people with a paranoid delusion are almost always targeted alone (see Figure 1). The Secret Service is after them for some reason, not their roommates.

People on the street specifically follow them and will only harm them, others are not at risk. They are called to save the world, television programs talk about them especially, their thoughts are broadcast. They are not inclined to inquire with others whether they also suffer from it or are also in danger.

Delusional people can fit conspiracy theories into their ideas, but they fit in with their own particular, idiosyncratic experiences of reality.

How do these idiosyncratic experiences come about? A clinical-phenomenological model points to qualitative changes in the experience of reality, to which the content of thought then adapts (Feyaerts et al. 2021). Subtle changes can take place in self-awareness, sensory reality

Figure 1. Differences and Similarities Between Conspiracy Thinking and Delusions



ness and intersubjectivity, making everyday normality uncertain. Delusions are formed because people experience themselves differently than usual, because the reality around them appears somewhat differently or because they experience social interactions differently (Sass & Byrom 2015).

Neuropsychological and cognitive models of delusions describe these processes as perceptual anomalies, excessive sense-making, hyperreflexivity, thinking errors such as selective attention and external attribution style, errors in self-representation and mentalizing (Broyd et al. 2017). The paranoid content of the delusion is naturally colored by events, circumstances and memories.

Conspiracy theorists seem less concerned with idiosyncratic, personal experiences. The starting point lies in significant social, societal or political events that cause uncertainty, loss of control and dissatisfaction. In times of crisis people find each other in paranoid theories that give more grip on what is happening. Conspiracy theorists experience solidarity and meaning in fighting a common enemy. We are threatened instead of just me.

The conspiracy ideas are less based on unusual experiences of the self, reality or interpersonal contacts; there is precisely a hidden reality that must be brought to light together with the in-group.

Conclusions

conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy theories are common. They seem to fit the common psychiatric definitions of paranoid delusions. However, there are also important differences, which make it clear that the current definitions of delusions need to be deepened. During the corona pandemic, conspiracy theories have shifted towards mainstream thinking, due to the uncertainty and uncontrollability of all events, the great power of governments and companies and the impact of measures on society and personal life.

Conspiracy thinking fills a need by providing clarity, certainty, and moral superiority in uncertain circumstances. It connects with others who have gained similar insights and compete to expose conspiracies of the powerful. Ultimately, however, conspiracy theories often lead to more mistrust and discomfort (Douglas et al. 2017). Conspiracy thinking can also cause problems in one's own social network, which often does not share the ideas. Some of the conspiracy thinkers become activists, but only a very small minority turn to violence. The risk of violence appears to be associated with far-right sympathies and existing psychiatric problems.

Differences delusion and conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy theories are similar to paranoid delusions in the incorrect and sometimes bizarre content of the ideas, the strong conviction with which the ideas are held and the lack of openness to counterarguments. One difference is that conspiracy theorists are not alone in their beliefs, but rather find each other in mistrust of powerful people who pull the strings behind the scenes. Where the delusion is lonely, conspiracy theories give access to an in-group.

A second difference is that idiosyncratic experiences of reality often play a role in the development of delusions, which induce the paranoid content of the delusion. The comparison between paranoid delusions and corona conspiracy theories makes it clear that the current definitions of delusions need to be deepened, because with the current definitions conspiracy thinking can also be classified under delusions. Instead of the strong (cognitive) focus on the erroneous content of delusions, there should be more attention must be for the underlying idiosyncratic, altered form of the experience of reality. It is especially this idiosyncratic experience of reality that leads to paranoid delusions as a result of attempts to get a grip on perceptual anomalies (Feyaerts et al. 2021).

Best approach

Finally, it follows from the exploration in this article that the content of the ideas is not the right way to reach conspiracy theorists and people with paranoid delusions. In both cases, rational arguments and an appeal to the logical shared reality are largely ineffective. Conspiracy theorists are concerned with the powerlessness of the citizen, loss of freedom and control. It's about concern and anger about systems and power structures that create victims. People with paranoid delusions have lost their normal experience of reality, of themselves and of others, and try to make sense of it.

For both, reflective listening to these underlying epistemic, existential and experiential questions does more justice to the real problems that people experience, and offers more room for solutions. Methods such as LEAP (*listen, emphasize, agree, partner*), developed for people with schizophrenia without an understanding of the disease, can be useful in dealing with conspiracy thinkers (Amador 2000). It is not about the strength of the arguments, but about the strength of the relationship.

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SUMMARY

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Conclusions Conspiratorial thinking is common in uncertain circumstances. It gives grip, certainty, moral superiority and social support. Extreme conspiratorial thinking seems to fit current psychiatric definitions of paranoid delusions, but there are also important differences. To make a distinction with regard to conspiratorial thinking, deepening of conventional definitions of delusions is required. Instead of the strong focus on the erroneous content of delusions, more attention should be given to the underlying idiosyncratic, changed way of experiencing reality.