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Title: “Paranoia and Conspiracy Theories Relate to Unexpected Uncertainty in Belief Updating and Assumptions about Others”

Abstract: Paranoia is the belief that others intend you harm. It is related to conspiracy theories, wherein those others represent an organized faction, coordinating the harm against self and others, and violating societal norms. Current psychological studies of paranoid conspiracy theorizing focus either on the individual or their broader social network. Likewise, theories of belief formation and updating often contain individual level processes as well as broader interpersonal and organizational factors. Here we examine paranoia and conspiracy theorizing in terms of individual behavioral predictors (performance on a probabilistic reversal learning task which assays belief updating) as well as social sensing: we ask participants to report the features of their social network, including whether their friends and acquaintances share their paranoid conspiratorial beliefs. We find that people who believe paranoid conspiracy theories expect more volatility during the task. They also assume that members of their social network share their paranoid beliefs. Critically, those participants with larger social networks and greater assumed shared belief tend to harbor their conspiratorial beliefs with less emotional distress and expect less volatility in the task. This is evidence that, like political and religious beliefs, conspiracy theories may flourish under a sacred canopy of belief consensus. These data suggest that friends and acquaintances may serve as sources of credulity and moving between them may sustain conspiracy beliefs when there is detracting. This hybrid individual/social account may shed light on clinical paranoia and persecutory delusion, wherein disability is defined normatively, and social supports are fewer.

Back to program