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Avoidant attachment style and conspiracy ideation☆

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ABSTRACT

Believing in conspiracy theories is a common phenomenon that is attracting attention from the scientific community because of its important individual- and social-level implications. Here we examine the association between attachment styles and conspiracy ideation. We anticipated that avoidant attachment style, because of its emphasis on self-reliance, its motivation to suppress psychological distress, and a Manichean view of the world based on a neat distinction between good and bad, would be associated with conspiracy ideation. We found support for this expectation in three studies (total $N = 2666$). Theoretical implications of the results and limitations are discussed.

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are explanations for negative events that are traced back to intentional actions performed by 'actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret' (Swami & Furnham, 2014, p. 220). Many of these conjectures are non-falsifiable, lack reliable evidence, and are demonstrably false; however, they are widespread among the general public (e.g., Oliver & Wood, 2014). Belief in conspiracy theories has been shown to foster negative consequences, fomenting cynicism, civic disengagement, and social distrust (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2015; van der Linden, 2015).

Several psychological functions, personality traits, and attitudes have been connected with endorsement of conspiracy theories, such as openness, low agreeableness (Swami & Furnham, 2014), schizotypy (e.g., van Der Tempel & Alcock, 2015), collective narcissism (e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec De Zavala, & Olechowski, 2016), stress (Swami et al., 2016; Swami, Weis, Lay, Barron, & Furnham, 2016), anomie, distrust, and threatening worldviews (e.g., Moulding et al., 2016). Here, we would elaborate a rationale to establish a link between individual differences in adult attachment styles, focusing particularly on the avoidant attachment style and conspiracy beliefs.

Attachment theory proposes that individuals' interpersonal experiences with their caregivers during childhood shape their perceptions and expectations of others' interpersonal responses throughout their life (e.g., Bowlby, 1980). The notion that differences in adult attachment are related to different beliefs about oneself and others in ways consistent with early attachment experiences is now widely accepted (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Individual differences in attachment may be broadly conceptualised in terms of the basic divide between secure and insecure individuals. With respect to insecure individuals, two patterns of attachment – avoidance and anxiety – are generally distinguished (e.g., Crowell, Fraley, & Roisman, 2016). Individuals high in attachment anxiety perceive others to be emotionally unpredictable and unreliably responding to their affective needs, closely monitor significant others for cues of emotional unavailability, and are excessively preoccupied with closeness (e.g., Campbell & Marshall, 2011). The overarching function served by an anxious attachment style is a constant hyperactivation of the attachment system and inhibition of the exploratory system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), with the aim of gaining a constant and predictable engagement of their attachment figures (Campbell & Marshall, 2011).

Individuals high in avoidance are characterised by a different strategy. In their early experiences they perceived their attachment figures as emotionally insensitive and only minimally able to effectively respond to their emotional distress. As a consequence, the overall function of the avoidant strategy is thought to be the deactivation of the attachment system in order to avoid the chronic frustrating and distressing experiences of parental emotional unavailability (e.g., Campbell & Marshall, 2011). To keep the attachment system deactivated, signals of distress and personal vulnerability must be minimised, while the individual is focused on autonomy and exploration. Consistently, individuals high in avoidant attachment appear to share an oversimplified representation of the interpersonal world tailored to minimise the impact of negative social outcomes on the self, thus preventing activation of the attachment system. The avoidant person's

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simplified representation of the world also features excessive levels of self-reliance, which fosters activation of the exploratory system, coupled with a basic expectation of the others' intentions as unreliable and potentially dangerous (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

1.1. Attachment and conspiracy

Theorists have argued that insecure attachment styles are organized around specific core assumptions and goals (e.g., that others are unresponsive or untrustworthy, and therefore that one has to hyper-activate or deactivate the attachment system), and that, in turn, such assumptions fundamentally shape the interpretation of new social information (e.g., Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). Information framed in conspiratory terms and conspiracy beliefs, we argue, are more likely to be accepted by avoidant individuals because such beliefs conform closely with the avoidant person's core assumptions about the interpersonal world, his/her management of distressful events based upon self-reliance, and his/her preferred attributions to self and other. Also, they can be instrumental to keeping the attachment system deactivated in favor of an overactivation of the exploratory system.

More specifically, conspiracy ideation fits nicely with the avoidant individuals' core assumption that distress and distressful thoughts should be mitigated swiftly. Avoidant individuals consistently downplay the signals of personal distress, while maintaining a basic perception of others' intentions as untrustworthy. Perceiving others as untrustworthy makes avoidant individuals angry, and they express such anger and anxiety in a typical abstract, impersonal, and generalised fashion, rigidly interpreting the interpersonal sources of distress as due instead to a violation of moral abstract principles or rules of behaviour (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Such defensive operations may well foster a proneness to conspiracy beliefs where social sources of distress (negative unsettling social phenomena or events) are traced back to identifiable – yet distant and abstract – intentional perpetrators, maximally dissimilar in terms of power or status from the self and the victimised groups.

Another key goal or assumption for avoidant people is the preference for autonomy and self-reliance, because if one is autonomous there is no need to seek proximity, and to the attachment system can be kept deactivated. Endorsing conspiracy beliefs appears well-suited for maintaining illusory perceptions of control and self-reliance that obliterate the need to activate the attachment system (e.g., Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015). Although conspiracy theories deal with seemingly uncontrollable phenomena and therefore might apparently worsen perceptions of lack of control and unpredictability of the social world, being able to trace negative events back to malevolent plots could serve as a (likely inefficient) means of taking back control (Landau et al., 2015). Consistent with this view, it has been noted (Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Moulding et al., 2016) that conspiracy narratives reflect a motive to create ambiguity and unpredictability ('The world is dangerous and unpredictable') so as to devise an all-encompassing explanation ('Evil cliques are solely responsible for bringing about this awful outcome') that bolsters an illusory enhancement of one's feelings of control and autonomy, as well as allowing the expression of anxiety and rage in a morally righteous, "legitimate" fashion.

Finally, both conspiracy beliefs and avoidant assumptions converge in assuming a clear-cut and rigid view of good and evil. Such a morally absolutist, or Manichean, outlook is in keeping with the avoidant person's preference for rigid accounts of events that conform to unambiguous moral criteria that justify in impersonal terms their feelings of personal inadequacy and expectations of interpersonal refusals (Hesse, 2016). For avoidant individuals, moral rigidity and Manichaeism favor also the adoption of a maximum degree of dissimilarity and distance in terms of worth and morality between self and other, which is a strategy well-serving the overarching need to keep deactivated the attachment system (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Within conspiracy narratives, Manichaeism, moral absolutism, rigidity and maximum self-other dissimilarity are key ingredients (e.g., Leone, Giacomantonio, & Lauriola, 2018; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swami & Furnham, 2014). Hence, a conspiracy narrative construed as a rigid and Manichean moral tale may turn out to be particularly appealing for individuals with an avoidant attachment style.

To recap, we argue that avoidant individuals hold core assumptions and goals that fit with the features characterising conspiracy ideation. Such key common features include Manichaeism, attributing distress and evil to external immoral agents, illusory control, and mistrust of others. Such commonalities between the avoidant person's goals and the function and structure of conspiracy beliefs appear to make conspiracy ideation compatible with the avoidant person's preferences and fit with the avoidant person's main goal of deactivating the attachment system. As a result, we would expect a positive association between individual differences in avoidant style with conspiracy ideation. We tested the tenability of this anticipation in three studies conducted in Italy, where several conspiracy theories are popular (Mancosu, Vassallo, & Vezzoni, 2017). In the first study we relied on a relatively large sample to assess whether an association of avoidant attachment with conspiracy ideation could reliably be found, once the associations with the secure and anxious attachment styles were controlled for. In the second study, we aimed at replicating the finding when controlling for close associates of attachment styles (Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). In the third study, we focused on one of the key common features that in our view link avoidant attachment and conspiracy ideation, namely Manichaeism, and tested whether a measure tapping on Manichaeism mediated some of the association between avoidant style and conspiracy-related measures. In each study, we also tested whether the association of avoidant attachment with conspiracy ideation would be stronger compared with the associations observed for secure and anxious attachment.

Because of the wide conceptual gulf dividing the general attachment constructs and the more specific domain of conspiracy ideation, we expect any association to be small in absolute magnitude. Small associations have been found between similarly general dispositions and conspiracy ideation (e.g., openness, agreeableness – Swami & Furnham, 2014; self-esteem – Swami et al., 2011), and we expect therefore to detect relationships of similar magnitude. Nonetheless, because of the theoretical insights that can be developed from a reliable association between attachment and conspiracy ideation, we believe even small associations may be relevant.

2. Study 1

In Study 1 we aimed at providing a first test of the association between avoidant attachment and conspiracy ideation. We indexed conspiracy ideation aggregating measures aimed at capturing individual differences in conspiracy mentality, which assess a generic proneness to assign plausibility to conspiracies (e.g., Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Wood, 2016), and a measure of specific conspiracy beliefs (Leone et al., 2018; Swami et al., 2011; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). We expected that such an index of conspiracy ideation would relate significantly with avoidant attachment, and that this association would be stronger than those involving secure and anxious attachment. We also anticipated that the avoidant attachment-conspiracy ideation association would remain detectable when controlling for the association of the secure and anxious attachment styles with conspiracy ideation.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Sample and procedure

We asked (in exchange for course credits) psychology and medicine students of a large Italian university to recruit respondents for an online