



Relationships between conspiracy mentality, hyperactive agency detection, and schizotypy: Supernatural forces at work?



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ABSTRACT

We examined whether belief in conspiracy theories is predicted by an overactive tendency to perceive agency in the environment, and hypothesized that this association is especially robust among high-schizotypy individuals. Samples of undergraduates ($n = 209$) and conspiracist website visitors ($n = 37$) completed measures of conspiracy mentality, hyperactive agency detection, and schizotypy. Correlation analysis indicated significant positive relationships between all pairs of variables in both groups. Multiple regression analysis showed that schizotypy is incrementally predicted by conspiracy mentality and hyperactive agency detection, with chi-square analysis revealing a significant tendency for high-schizotypal individuals to score higher on both variables. Heightened uncertainty about causally ambiguous subjective experiences likely predisposes schizotypals to greater hyperactive agency detection, thereby increasing the probability of conspiracy thinking. Findings are linked to ideological and theoretical differences between secular and supernatural conspiracist beliefs, which are readily apparent in conspiracist literature and communities, and bring into question the homogeneity of the conspiracy mentality construct.

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1. Introduction

Our beliefs about the world are sometimes blatantly in error, even where important events are concerned. A particular constellation of beliefs viewed as erroneous by the larger society, known as *conspiracy theory*, involves not only the denial of official, commonly-held explanations about the causes of an event, but also the attribution of the event to a plan devised by a group of agents with hidden, unlawful, and malevolent intent. Belief in conspiracy theories (CTs) appears to be widespread: International polls indicate that up to 50% of respondents question mainstream narratives regarding momentous events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and many such respondents suspect that some form of conspiracy is at play (Allen & O'Callaghan, 2008; Zogby International, 2006).

Conspiracist beliefs can be roughly divided into two categories: Secular and supernatural. For example, author and lecturer David Icke, who manages a discussion forum boasting nearly 100,000 users as well as a YouTube channel with millions of views, claims that the world's political and economic elites are, in actuality, interdimensional shape-shifting reptilians who orchestrate chaos and destruction in order to feed on human fear (Icke, 2013). In

contrast, Alex Jones, who hosts a radio show and popular conspiracist websites, denigrates Icke's reptilian theory and instead emphasizes a grand conspiracist narrative that is human in nature (Jones, 2013). While Jones calls for active resistance against the alleged conspiracy, Icke's calls to action are typically nonviolent and involve New Age spiritual concepts. Such theoretical and ideological differences notwithstanding, the *conspiracy mentality*—in which conspiracy thinking forms an individual's dominant explanatory framework for interpreting reality—has been approached in the research literature as a homogenous construct (Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripannah, & Imhoff, 2013).

Studies have linked conspiracy mentality to a variety of problematic health and social behaviors, including political disengagement (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995), disregard for environmental protection (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a), vaccine refusal (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b; Kata, 2010), and noncompliance with potentially life-saving drug prescriptions (Westergaard, Beach, Saha, & Jacobs, 2014). In order to understand why certain people are more likely to adopt conspiracist beliefs, scholars have studied a large number of social, personality, and cognitive variables which suggest that conspiracy thinking fulfills one or more psychological needs—such as the need to understand complex issues (Barron, Morgan, Towell, Altemeyer, & Swami, 2014; Newheiser, Farias, &

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Tausch, 2011), or to compensate for a perceived lack of certainty (Whitson, Galinsky, & Kay, 2015) or sociopolitical control (Bruder et al., 2013; Wagner-Egger & Bangerter, 2007), or to channel negative emotions like anxiety (Goertzel, 1994; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2007), or simply to explore and express personal values within postmodern secular societies (Aupers, 2012; Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Guthmann, & Carbon, 2013).

Recognizing key parallels between religious and conspiracist belief, Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (2013) formulated a comprehensive model of CTs as a quasi-religious mentality, and suggest that, like religious or supernatural thinking, conspiracy thinking can result from *hyperactive agency detection*. The hyperactive agency detection 'device' (Barret & Johnson, 2003) is a theorized neurocognitive network or module for attributing agency to environmental stimuli which are perceived as purposive and intentional, in order to detect potential threats to the organism (Barnes & Gibson, 2013). Studies have found that hyperactive agency detection is particularly sensitive to ambiguous stimuli—such as the sound of a twig snapping in the woods—as well as negative events (Morewedge, 2009), which may account for the observed increase in conspiracy thinking under anxiety-provoking conditions (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2007; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Although the role of hyperactive agency detection in conspiracist belief has not been empirically examined, it has been linked to supernatural belief (Barnes & Gibson, 2013; Svedholm, Lindeman, & Lipsanen, 2010; Valdesolo & Graham, 2013), which in turn is strongly associated with conspiracy thinking (Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011; Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Parker, 2012; Newheiser et al., 2011). This association has been attributed to a tendency toward anthropomorphism (Bruder et al., 2013), category errors (Lobato, Mendoza, Sims, & Chin, 2014), and blanket rejection of conventional narratives (Swami et al., 2014), but perhaps hyperactive agency detection provides a more functional explanation.

Conspiracist and supernatural beliefs are common in the general population, but are especially prevalent among individuals with schizotypal features. As the strongest traitwise predictor of conspiracy mentality reported to date (Barron et al., 2014; Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Swami et al., 2013), the schizotypal personality dimension comprises a continuum of traits and behaviors, such as paranoia, perceptual anomalies, and social, cognitive, and affective deficits, which are thought to range from normal personality functioning to schizophrenia (Camisa et al., 2005). Clinical and subclinical populations demonstrate a marked predisposition to paranoia and conspiracy thinking (Freeman, 2005), as well as paranormal, magical, and supernatural ideation (Bentall, Claridge, & Slade, 1989), and studies have linked these to potential agency detection abnormalities such as theory of mind deficits and hyperactive pattern detection (Fyfe, Williams, Mason, & Pickup, 2008). According to Millon, Grossman, Millon, Meagher, and Ramnath (2004), schizotypy confers special vulnerability to the normal human tendency to infer external causes when experiencing negative emotions and uncertainty (Alcock, 2010; van Harreveld, Rutjens, Schneider, Nohlen, & Keskinis, 2014; Wood & Douglas, 2013), and CTs capitalize on this vulnerability by (a) introducing a negative emotional stimulus (some instance of human suffering, social injustice, or perceived threat), (b) provoking uncertainty and doubt about conventional explanations, and (c) presenting an alternative (conspiracist) explanation. If, as hypothesized, hyperactive agency detection plays a role in conspiracy mentality, then this relationship should be especially pronounced among high-schizotypy individuals.

We set out to examine links between conspiracy mentality, hyperactive agency detection, and schizotypy, predicting positive linear relationships between all pairs of variables. The present study is the first to our knowledge to investigate the link between

conspiracy mentality and hyperactive agency detection. We further hypothesized that this relationship is stronger among high-schizotypy individuals, and tested this prediction using multiple regression analysis and chi-square tests for association. Ours is also the first study of its kind not to rely on convenience samples alone; as a step towards improved representativeness, a second sample of participants was drawn from conspiracist forums on the Internet, where the bulk of CTs are generated and disseminated (Bessi et al., 2014).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

First, 209 undergraduate students from a Canadian university were self-selected via the institutional recruitment system and received class credit for participation. Median age range in the Undergraduate group was 18 to 24, with 22% males and 77% females (1% unreported gender). Virtually all were first-time post-secondary students, residents of Canada, and unemployed. The second sample consisted of 37 volunteers from six online discussion forums dedicated to CTs, supernatural/paranormal topics, and skepticism of mainstream science. Ages in the Internet group ranged from 18 to 64, with the median age between 45 and 54. Gender distribution was 67.5% male, 27% female, and 5.5% unreported. Nearly all participants (89.9%) had a post-secondary education (including nine graduate degrees). Over half were employed or seeking employment (62.2%), with the remainder unemployed, retired, studying, or unable to work. Most were residents of English-speaking nations (86.5%), and nearly all lived in developed countries. Out of the initial responses, 7.9% ($n = 18$) of Undergraduate submissions and 53.8% ($n = 43$) of Internet submissions were excluded from analysis due to identical responses on all items on one or more scales, missing responses to at least five items on one or more scales, or unreliable data, as judged by unreasonable responses to filler items.

2.2. Materials

Conspiracy mentality was assessed using the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs (GCB) scale (Brotherton et al., 2013). Brotherton and colleagues reviewed existing conspiracist ideation measures and judged these as overly narrow in scope or insufficiently validated. Their factor analysis of 75 items reflecting conspiracy thinking yielded a 15-item questionnaire which measures five factors of conspiracy mentality: Attitudes toward government malfeasance, extraterrestrial cover-up, malevolent global conspiracies, impact on personal well-being, and control of information. Response ratings on a Likert-type scale are averaged to provide a mean score between 1 (*Definitely not true*) and 5 (*Definitely true*). Internal consistency, test-retest reliability, criterion-, convergent-, and discriminant validity were assessed over several large- n studies and judged as mostly good to excellent (Brotherton et al., 2013). In the present study, internal consistency of the GCB scale was judged as excellent, $\alpha = .92$.

Hyperactive agency detection was measured using the *Belief in the Purpose of Random Events* (BPRE) scale (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007a). The BPRE scale contains 18 modified items (plus four filler items) from the Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978) that describe positive, neutral, or negative events, such as "A stone falls from a scaffold and seriously injures you." Participants were asked to imagine each event happening to them, and to rate their attitudes about each event on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*The event had no purpose*) to 5 (*The event clearly had a purpose*). To ensure that responses reflect beliefs about external agency, instructions explicitly defined 'purpose' as indicative of

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