



Bored to fears: Boredom proneness, paranoia, and conspiracy theories



Robert Brotherton*, Silan Eser

Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the relationships between paranoia, conspiracist ideation, and boredom proneness. A sample of the general public ($N = 150$) completed the Paranoia scale, the Boredom Proneness scale, and the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale. Bivariate correlations revealed significant interrelationships between the three traits. Further analysis revealed that the relationship between boredom proneness and conspiracist ideation was fully mediated by paranoia. That is, proneness to experiencing boredom is associated with stronger endorsement of conspiracy theories only in as much as boredom proneness is associated with increased paranoia.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Conspiracist ideation and its personality correlates

While there is no universally agreed upon definition of the label 'conspiracy theory', it typically refers to claims of conspiracy which are less plausible than alternative explanations, contradict the general consensus among epistemic authorities, are predicated on weak evidence, postulate unusually sinister and competent conspirators, and are ultimately unfalsifiable (Brotherton, 2013). Given these characteristics, it is of interest to explore the psychological factors contributing to the widespread acceptance of such theories (e.g. Gardiner & Thompson, 2012; Williams, 2013). Additionally, the potential behavioural consequences of conspiracism, both for believers and for the wider community, make understanding conspiracism an important task; conspiracist beliefs can contribute to reduced civic engagement (Butler, Koopman, & Zimbardo, 1995; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), as well as negative attitudes towards environmentalism (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b), HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention (e.g. Bogart, Galvan, Wagner, & Klein, 2011; Bogart, Kalichman, & Simbayi, 2008; Bogart, Wagner, Galvan, & Banks, 2010), and vaccination (e.g. Eicher et al., 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a).

Fortunately, conspiracy theories have recently become the focus of increasing attention from psychologists. A primary finding is that individuals who believe one conspiracy theory tend to

believe others – even theories that are logically unrelated, mutually contradictory, or entirely fabricated by researchers (e.g. Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011; Goertzel, 1994; Jolley & Douglas, 2014b; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011, 2013; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). This has led to the conceptualisation of generalised belief in conspiracy theories as a stable individual difference variable. This trait has been labelled *conspiracist ideation* (e.g. Swami et al., 2011).

The growing body of research has begun to reveal personality factors associated with conspiracist ideation, suggesting there may be a 'conspiracy-prone' personality type (or types). Conspiracism appears to be associated with other anomalous beliefs and experiences, including belief in the paranormal, superstitions, and New Age beliefs (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Parker, 2012; Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011; Stieger, Gumhalter, Tran, Voracek, & Swami, 2013; Swami et al., 2011, 2013). This suggests that conspiracism is associated with openness to certain types of unusual claims. In addition, conspiracist ideation is associated with low self-efficacy, lack of self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, and anxiety, both as a temporary state, or a stable individual difference (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Newheiser et al., 2011; Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, & Kilburn, 1999; Simmons & Parsons, 2005; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010; Swami et al., 2011; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). This suggests that believers may be drawn to conspiracy theories as a satisfying justification for their perceived lack of power over their own circumstances. Of particular interest to the current research, however, a number of prior

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, SE14 6NW, United Kingdom.

E-mail address: r.brotherton@gold.ac.uk (R. Brotherton).

studies suggest that conspiracist ideation is associated with paranoia.

1.2. Paranoia and conspiracism

Paranoid cognition is characterised by suspicion of others' motives and self-referent interpretation of other people's intentions and behaviour (e.g. Freeman, 2007). Paranoid ideation can be so severe that it presents a clinically diagnosable syndrome; however, it is now widely recognised as being present in milder forms as a personality trait distributed among the nonclinical population (Fenigstein & Venable, 1992; Freeman et al., 2005). Examples of this kind of mild paranoid cognition might be the assumption that an acquaintance who walked by without saying hello was deliberately ignoring you, or that a stranger who laughed when you passed them was mocking you (Fenigstein & Venable, 1992; Freeman et al., 2008).

Darwin et al. (2011) provide evidence that endorsement of conspiracy theories is associated with increased susceptibility to this kind of subclinical paranoid ideation, finding that higher scores on a measure of paranoid ideation were associated with stronger conspiracist ideation within a university undergraduate sample. A number of other studies demonstrate associations between conspiracism and traits related to paranoia, including mistrust, pessimism, hostility, cynicism, defiance of authority, impulsive nonconformity, and low agreeableness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff & Bruder, 2013; Parsons et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011, 2013, 2010). A handful of studies report mixed findings – relationships with the Big-5 trait agreeableness are not entirely consistent (e.g. Imhoff & Bruder, 2013; Swami et al., 2010, 2013), and Wood and Douglas (2013) found that conspiracist comments posted online exhibited less hostility than anti-conspiracist comments. Yet, on the whole, the general pattern of results suggests that conspiracy theories may be a byproduct of mild paranoid ideation which entails some degree of distrust, hostility, and pessimism.

It is perhaps not surprising that belief in conspiracy theories is related to paranoia. People high in paranoid ideation are typically hypervigilant towards signs of hostility directed towards themselves, and are inclined towards misinterpreting innocuous social interactions as aggressive. This maladaptive self-consciousness can lead the individual to erroneously believe that they are the object of others' attention (Fenigstein, 1984; Fenigstein & Venable, 1992; Kramer, 1994; Smari & Sigurjon, 1994; Von Gemmingen, Sullivan, & Pomerantz, 2003). The tendency towards making sinister attribution errors could lead an individual to perceive the existence of a hidden conspiracy with hostile motives towards the individual personally, or towards the individual's ingroup more generally. In addition, people high in paranoia are likely to reject 'official' explanations which appear to be handed down by authorities whom the individual distrusts. Further, as conspiracy theories are predicated on the sinister intentions of hidden conspirators they may seem especially attractive and plausible due to congruence with the individual's existing paranoid worldview.

1.3. Boredom proneness

Boredom proneness – the proclivity to become bored easily – is a stable personality trait which has been reported to be associated with various negative personality traits and aversive feelings, including depression, hopelessness, anxiety, narcissism, emotional distance from others, heightened self-consciousness, hostility, mistrust, and aggression (Ahmed, 1990; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; LePera, 2011; MacDonald & Holland, 2002; Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997; Seib & Vodanovich, 1998; Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000; Tolor, 1989; von Gemmingen et al., 2003; Wink & Donahue,

1997). Of particular interest, people prone to boredom generally appear to be higher in paranoid ideation (von Gemmingen et al., 2003). von Gemmingen et al. (2003) argue that the relationship may be a result of boredom proneness causing an individual to fixate on their aversive internal feelings, which may lead them to project their own hostility on to others, misidentify neutral events as negative, and believe that imagined problems genuinely exist in reality.

Research has yet to examine whether boredom proneness is associated with belief in conspiracy theories. Given the observed association between proneness to boredom and paranoia, it seems reasonable to speculate that boredom proneness may also be linked to conspiracism, possibly mediated by paranoia. There are various plausible ways in which proneness to boredom could lead to stronger endorsement of conspiracy theories via paranoia. The alienation from society felt by boredom prone individuals may arise from incongruence between their own personal values and present societal conditions (von Gemmingen et al., 2003). These feelings may produce the tendency to invent or endorse a conspiracy as a potential explanation and justification for their dissatisfaction with society. Further, the habitual mistrust and hostility towards other people, or the projection of one's own hostile feelings on to others (cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2011), may lead to a tendency to misplace blame for events or situations onto other people or groups. The self-importance associated with boredom proneness (von Gemmingen et al., 2003) may make the idea that the individual has come into possession of privileged knowledge which is being kept from the general public appear subjectively plausible. In addition, conspiracy theories may offer a source of excitement to alleviate the lack of stimulation inherent in the experience of boredom. In contrast to the typically relatively mundane 'official explanations' of events, conspiracy theories represent Manichean narratives about the perpetual struggle between good and evil. One recent study (Oliver & Wood, 2014) found a correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and a Manichean worldview, however the personality correlates and motivations (such as proneness to boredom) underlying such an outlook have not yet been examined.

1.4. Overview of the current study

It was expected, as per previous research (e.g. Darwin et al., 2011; von Gemmingen et al., 2003) that paranoia would predict conspiracist ideation, and that boredom proneness would predict paranoia. Additionally, it was expected that boredom proneness would predict conspiracism. The study further aimed to examine whether boredom proneness is associated with conspiracism directly, or whether the relationship (if any) is mediated by paranoia.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A self-selected sample of 150 adults (86 females; 64 males) was recruited online. A brief advertisement was posted on Twitter and Facebook, asking readers to complete a study in which they would "answer some question about yourself and world events". Respondents were directed to the online interface of the survey. Age ranged from 18 to 70 (median = 24; *SD* = 14.12). The majority of participants were located in the United Kingdom (67.3%). A substantial minority were from Turkey (13.3%); other nationalities accounted for the remaining 19.3%. Participation was voluntary and no reward was offered.

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