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

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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.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, Paranoia, Boredom proneness, Personality, Beliefs

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, Haafke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Parker, 2012; Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011; Stieger, Gbumalter, 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, Shinhost, & 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
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 & Vanable, 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 & Vanable, 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 & Vanable, 1992; Kramer, 1994; Smari & Sigurjon, 1994; Von Gemmingen, Sullivan, & Pomerantz, 2003). The tendency towards paranoid cognition is characterised by suspicion of others’ motives and self-referent interpretation of other people’s intentions and no reward was offered.

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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