

Delusional you

We live in an age of mass delusion and very few of us are immune, finds Dan Jones

THREE Messiahs walk into a psychiatric unit... No, this isn't the set-up to a tasteless joke, but the beginning of a study done in the 1950s by Milton Rokeach at Ypsilanti State Hospital, Michigan. Rokeach brought together three men, each harbouring the delusion that he was Jesus Christ, to see if meeting the others and confronting their mutually contradictory claims would change their minds. Two years and many arguments later, their beliefs had barely budged. For each Jesus, the other two were fakers, while they were the real deal.

As delusions go, the Messiah complex is extreme. Most delusions are far more mundane, such as an unfounded belief that you are exceptionally talented, that people are out to get you or that a celebrity is in love with you. In fact, more than 90 per cent of us hold delusional beliefs. You may find that figure shockingly high – or perhaps you see evidence all around, in the willingness of so many people to swallow fake news, in the antics of politicians and celebrities, and even among your Facebook friends. Either way, what exactly does it mean? Why are some of us more prone to delusions than others? How do false beliefs get a hold in our minds? And can we all learn to tame our delusional tendencies?

First we need to be clear about what a delusion is. “There’s a loose way of talking about delusions – like when we talk about the ‘God delusion’ – which simply means any belief that’s likely to be false and is held despite lack of evidence, or even in spite of the evidence,” says Lisa Bortolotti at the University of Birmingham, UK. The psychological take is more nuanced. Delusions are still seen as irrational, but they are also

idiosyncratic, meaning the belief is not widely shared. That rules out lots of things including most religious beliefs, conspiracy theories and the denial of climate change. Furthermore, the idiosyncratic nature of delusions makes them isolating and alienating in a way that believing, say, a conspiracy theory is not. Delusions also tend to be much more personal than other irrational beliefs, and they usually conform to one of a handful of themes (see “What’s your delusion?”, page 42).

Bizarre beliefs

At any time, around 0.2 per cent of people are being treated for delusional disorders. We now know that this is the tip of an iceberg. In 2010, Rachel Pechey and Peter Halligan, both at Cardiff University, UK, presented 1000 people with 17 delusion-like beliefs, and asked whether they held them strongly, moderately, weakly or not at all. The beliefs were either relatively mundane, such as “Certain people are out to harm me” and “I am an exceptionally gifted person that others do not recognise”, or more bizarre, including “I am dead and/or do not exist” and “People I know disguise themselves as others to manipulate or influence me”. In all, 39 per cent of participants held at least one of these beliefs strongly, and a whopping 91 per cent held one or more at least weakly. What’s more, three-quarters of people subscribed to bizarre beliefs to at least some extent.

“Symptoms of psychosis-like delusions are just the extreme end of a continuum of similar phenomena in the general population,” says Ryan McKay at Royal Holloway, University of London. More

evidence for this comes from the Peters Delusion Inventory, which is frequently used to measure how prone people are to delusional thinking. The inventory asks respondents whether or not they have ever experienced various different beliefs that often crop up in a clinical context, resulting in a delusion-proneness range from 0 to 21 (see “How deluded are you?”, page 43). Among the general population, people score an average of 6.7, with no difference between men and women. People with psychotic delusions score about twice this. So they do have more of these beliefs, but what really sets them apart from others is that they tend to be more preoccupied with their delusional beliefs and more distressed by them. “It’s not what you think, it’s the way that you think about it,” says Emmanuelle Peters of King’s College London, who led the development of the inventory.

That we are all prone to delusions may not be so surprising. A range of cognitive biases makes the human mind fertile soil for growing all kinds of irrational beliefs. Confirmation bias, for example, means we ignore inconvenient facts that go against our beliefs and uncritically accept anything that supports them. Desirability bias leaves us prone to shoring up beliefs we have a vested interest in maintaining because they make us or our group look good. Clustering bias refers to our tendency to see phantom patterns in random events, impairing our ability to draw logical conclusions from the available evidence.

A quick trawl of social media is all it takes to see how these utterly human ways of thinking can contribute to a cornucopia of strange and idiosyncratic beliefs. But the question of why some of us are more delusion prone than



Do you ever feel as if you
have been chosen by God
in some way?

JONAS BEHRENDSEN/PHAGNUM PHOTOS

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