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Rabbit Hole Syndrome: Inadvertent, accelerating, and entrenched commitment to conspiracy beliefs

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Highlights

- People seem to fall into conspiracy ‘rabbit holes’ leading to isolation and violence.
- This phenomenon can be characterized as a syndrome which is at first inadvertent, but accelerates recursively, becoming difficult to escape.
- Our proposal outlines a person-centred, typological, and dynamic perspective on conspiracy beliefs.
- We outline some of its possible implications for research, theory, and practice.

Abstract

There is mounting anecdotal evidence that some individuals fall into conspiracy ‘rabbit holes’ causing harms ranging from social isolation to violence. We propose a hypothetical *Rabbit Hole Syndrome* in which some individuals’ subscription to conspiracy beliefs is initially inadvertent, accelerates recursively, then becomes difficult to escape. This proposal is distinguished by a person-centred and dynamic perspective on conspiracy beliefs. It aims to provide a theoretical foundation for research that (a) illuminates the rabbit hole phenomenon, (b) is pluralistic, spanning diverse subdisciplines (e.g., social and clinical psychology) and methods (e.g., qualitative, longitudinal, and case studies), and (c) informs theory and practice by uncovering discontinuities between committed believers and other populations in the causes, consequences, and ‘remedies’ of conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, conspiracy beliefs, rabbit hole

Rabbit Hole Syndrome: Inadvertent, accelerating, and entrenched commitment to conspiracy beliefs

- It's never been a better time to do your own research. Plus it's more fun to believe :)

Online advertisement for a "Rabbit Hole Junky" t-shirt (Etsy.com)

There is no doubt that for many people, conspiracy theories are entertaining, amusing, and essentially harmless. For a minority of people, however, they are a much more serious matter. There is mounting anecdotal evidence that some people fall into so-called 'rabbit holes' of conspiracy belief, with consequences ranging from estrangement from friends and family through to political extremism and deadly violence (Young, 2022; Zand, 2021). This alleged phenomenon clearly demands serious attention. It also demands scepticism, since to our knowledge, no academic research has examined systematically *why* people go down these rabbit holes, or even *whether* they do. In this article, we try to put this phenomenon on a scientific footing. We propose a hypothetical Rabbit Hole Syndrome, outline why evidence and theory suggests that this syndrome may indeed characterize how some people engage with conspiracy theories, and sketch the implications of this hypothesis for research, theory, and application.

Defining the rabbit hole

The rabbit hole metaphor can be traced back to Lewis Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

> Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. Down went Alice

> after it, never once considering how she would get out again. The rabbithole went straight for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed a very steep well.

This passage highlights some central features of the rabbit hole concept in lay usage. You can be drawn into it incidentally and find it difficult to get out of. It then draws you ever deeper, in a non-linear descent, and you find yourself losing a sense of time, reality, and reason. On the upside, the rabbit hole leads Alice to a revelatory "Wonderland", and is widely invoked as a route to epiphany, for example in Jefferson Airplane's 1967 psychedelic song *White Rabbit*, and the 1999 conspiracy film *The Matrix*. Thus, like the term 'conspiracy theory' itself (Douglas et al., 2021), the rabbit hole metaphor is not necessarily pejorative or used only by those who reject alternative narratives (West, 2020). The use of metaphors is endemic in psychology and, while not without downsides, it helps researchers generate creative insights and communicate them in understandable terms (Fiedler, 2004; Gabriel, 2021; Neisser, 1963). In this article, we use the rabbit hole metaphor to attempt to understand this phenomenon through the lens of psychological theory and research. For our purposes, the metaphor refers not only to a state of intense commitment to conspiracy theories, but an unfolding set of *processes* by which people arrive and remain there. We propose that these processes are *inadvertent*, *accelerating*, eventually leading to *entrenchment* of conspiracy belief.

Inadvertency

People do not enter the process intending or even expecting to develop a deep commitment to conspiracy theories. Their attention, like Alice's, may be captured by something interesting or appealing. Studies indicate that people may first be drawn in by the sheer entertainment value of conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2022), by online

connections with a member of an online conspiracy community (Phadke et al., 2021), or by interest in a conspiracy theory about a particular issue (e.g., about COVID-19), which then serves as a ‘gateway’ to other conspiracy beliefs (e.g., the 2020 US Presidential election) and a more generalized conspiracy worldview (Samayoa et al., 2022). Importantly, people appear unable to detect how exposure to conspiracy theories changes their beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2008), and so may not notice what is happening to them in these early stages of Rabbit Hole Syndrome.

Acceleration

There are sound reasons to suppose that people’s belief in conspiracy theories can initially grow slowly, but then accelerate in a non-linear fashion (Pierre, 2020). Recursive dynamics—interdependencies between conspiracy beliefs and other variables—can give rise to exactly this type of development through time. For example, a recent longitudinal study (Liekefett et al., 2021) provided evidence for the theory that conspiracy beliefs are fueled by the frustration of psychological needs, but rather than satisfying these needs, frustrate them further (Douglas et al., 2017; van Prooijen, 2020). Thus, increased commitment to conspiracy theories can leave people feeling even less certain, valued, and secure than they were before, drawing them still closer to conspiracy theories. The structure of a person’s social networks can also feature in a similar recursive interplay. An observational study of Facebook users showed that as people’s conspiracy beliefs strengthen, they increasingly interact with like-minded internet users, avoid users who challenge their beliefs, and consume an increasing volume of conspiracy content, which strengthens conspiracy beliefs further (Brugnoli et al., 2019).

These changes in social networks (see also Wagner-Egger et al., 2022) are likely to be accompanied by changes in social categorization. Indeed, there is evidence that conspiracy beliefs and social identification are mutually dependent, giving rise also to recursive

dynamics. As conspiracy beliefs increase, people increasingly identify with other believers (Sarathchandra et al., 2022), adopting identities such as ‘truther’ or ‘critical free thinker’ (Harambam & Aupers, 2017) that, in turn, encourage deeper commitment to these beliefs. Conspiracy theories do not only change *who* people identify with, but with the nature of that identification—*how,* in other words, they identify with groups. Longitudinal evidence suggests that this translates to recursive dynamics in which people’s belief in conspiracy theories is both encouraged by, and encourages, insecure, narcissistic forms of group attachment with their country (Gorska et al., 2022; see also Nera et al., 2022).

Conspiracy beliefs may bolster themselves further by inducing qualitative changes in underlying psychological processes. For example, illusory perceptions of pattern and causality (e.g., in coincidences and in art) seem to play a role in conspiracy belief (van der Wal et al., 2018). As conspiracy theories become more salient in people’s representations of the world, they can become the very stimuli between which people ‘connect the dots’ (van Prooijen et al., 2018). This seems evident in the sprawling QAnon conspiracy narrative (Bleakley, 2021), which draws causal connections between alleged conspiracies as diverse as ‘Pizzagate’ (the theory that senior Democrats ran a pedophile ring from a pizza shop in Washington DC), and those surrounding the origins, vaccination, and treatment of COVID-19.

In principle, many of the variables that facilitate conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019) may in turn be strengthened by conspiracy beliefs and thus feature in this simple form of recursion. The effect of these recursive processes on conspiracy belief may be made be still stronger by interactions with third factors. For example, as people increasingly become attached to conspiracy theories, it is likely that they increasingly perceive elites to be immoral (e.g., Samayoa et al., 2021), and find conspiracy theories increasingly salient (rapid and easy to access from memory). Research shows that in turn, both of these factors interact with a

heightened need to attain cognitive closure. Specifically, closed-minded people have been found to be prone to conspiracy theories only when these explanations are more salient or available than official accounts (Marchlewska et al., 2018). Similarly, being in a state of high uncertainty increases belief in conspiracy theories, but only when people already believe the alleged culprits to be immoral (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Thus, recursive dynamics can catalyse third variables, like the need for cognitive closure, that may otherwise have little or no effect on conspiracy belief (Biddlestone et al., 2021).

Entrenchment

In the final stages of Rabbit Hole Syndrome, the increased commitment to conspiracy theories becomes increasingly difficult—though of course not impossible—to reverse. The mechanisms that fuel accelerating commitment to conspiracy theories can in general be expected to make this commitment difficult to break. An important caveat is that we know relatively little about the psychology of people who are strongly committed to conspiracy theories, not least because they are notoriously difficult to recruit as research participants (Franks et al., 2017). Nonlinear dynamics may, in their case, alter or even reverse patterns of causality that hold in student, internet, or representative samples. For example, important psychological needs may be eventually met by inclusion in a strongly identified community with its own norms, social connections, and certainties (Haslam et al., 2022; Wagner-Egger et al., 2022). Thus, conspiracy beliefs may start to satisfy (rather than frustrate) important psychological needs, making their hold even stronger.

Similarly, qualitative research evidence suggests that at this stage, commitment to conspiracy beliefs may be entrenched by the adoption of radically transformed epistemologies. Far beyond beliefs about the causes of specific socio-political events, committed conspiracy thinking can be accompanied by a strong mystical sense of quest, and a radically sceptical orientation to the very nature of reality (Franks et al., 2017). The very

notion of truth in some conspiracist discourse is altered by the co-option of postmodernist ideas, and the valorization of speculative imagination as a legitimate and authoritative route to knowledge (Harambam & Aupers, 2021). These emergent epistemologies may make it difficult to present evidence to people that might challenge their embrace of conspiracy beliefs.

Contribution to theory, research, and application

To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir (1949), “One is not born, but made, a conspiracy theorist”. Nonetheless, with some exceptions (Jolley et al., 2021), research has typically focused on a small set of immediate antecedent variables (Douglas & Sutton, 2022), rather than the dynamic development of conspiracy beliefs. For that matter, with some exceptions (Frenken & Imhoff, 2021), theory and research has focused more on these variables than the people they affect. It has seldom tried to identify ‘types’ of commitment to conspiracy theory, and when it has, has favored techniques like factor analysis that are better suited to distinguishing types of *conspiracy belief* than types of *conspiracy believers*. In the present article, we have synthesized various strands of theory and evidence to propose that some conspiracy believers undergo a cluster of processes over time that, together, comprise Rabbit Hole Syndrome. This proposal takes a person-centred, developmental perspective on conspiracy beliefs (Osborne & Sibley, 2017), providing an important complement to the variable-centred theories and methodologies that have dominated the literature (Douglas et al., 2019). It has much in common with, but complements the analysis by, Wagner-Egger et al. (2022), who present an analysis of how engagement with conspiracist communities develops and can support collective action by those communities. Here, although we acknowledge the importance of engagement with these communities, our focus is on the development and entrenchment of conspiracy beliefs themselves, with much more emphasis on attitudinal and social cognitive processes.

This person-centred approach has the potential to support important advances in psychological theory, research, and practice. It helps understand the important distinction—indeed discontinuity—between the antecedents and consequences of conspiracy belief within populations who tend to have relatively little interest in conspiracy theories (students and internet panels) versus populations who are deeply entrenched in these beliefs. This addresses an acknowledged problem in the literature—theories developed with the latter population in mind have been tested on the former (Franks et al., 2017; Pierre, 2020). Concomitantly, the nonlinear processes of Rabbit Hole Syndrome help to explain why the distribution of conspiracy beliefs is skewed, such that they are rejected by the majority but endorsed with much more enthusiasm by a distinct minority (Imhoff et al., 2022).

This, in turn, provides theoretical motivation for person-centred research methodologies and a framework to integrate their findings with the mainstream research literature. Latent growth profile analyses on longitudinal data can identify whether a distinct cluster of individuals develop conspiracy theories according to the pattern predicted by Rabbit Hole Syndrome (c.f., Osborne & Sibley, 2017). Case studies and rigorous qualitative methods can also assess whether deeply committed believers' temporal journey conforms to the expected pattern. These can be conducted by practitioners in intergroup reconciliation (Kruglanski et al., 2022) and even clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, who have recently taken an interest in conspiracy beliefs (Pierre, 2020) and who through their work may have access to populations that other researchers find difficult to recruit. The complex temporal dynamics of Rabbit Hole Syndrome, together with the difficulty of recruiting deeply committed believers in large-scale quantitative survey studies (though we have seen how researchers have succeeded using other methodologies, e.g., Harambam & Aupers 2017; Phadke et al., 2021), means that converging lines of research are needed.

In this article, we have tried to articulate the social-psychological processes that seem to be at play in anecdotal reports of the conspiracy 'rabbit holes' that some people fall into. Our main objective has been to extract a hypothesis from these reports, and so we have focused on explicating the steps involved in what we have tentatively called Rabbit Hole Syndrome, and considering why of these steps—the inadvertency, acceleration, and eventual entrenchment of conspiracy beliefs through time—are theoretically and empirically plausible. We acknowledge that our initial analysis of this hypothetical syndrome therefore leaves many theoretical as well as empirical questions open. For example, our main focus has been to explain how and why some people progress through the so-called rabbit hole, rather than why most people do not. In other words, we have not articulated the factors that determine whether or not people progress from the initial to the final stages of the syndrome (though there are many cues in the conspiracy literature so far, e.g., Douglas et al., 2019). Our analysis does, however, entail that progress through the rabbit hole may be arrested or reversed if recursive dynamics are prevented or broken, for example if it is possible to prevent emerging conspiracy beliefs from frustrating people's psychological needs, isolating them from non-believers, and causing them to adopt defensive or insecure social identities (see also Kruglanski et al., 2022). Another important point that we have not articulated is how people may exit the final stage of the syndrome, when intense and entrenched commitment to conspiracy theories has developed. There is anecdotal evidence that people can exit, that respectful engagement with them is important, and that debunking techniques can be effective so long as people experience encountering debunks as part of their own autonomous, questioning search for truth (West, 2020; see also Wagner-Egger et a al., 2022).

All of these questions are important to address because it is clear that there is a minority of people for whom conspiracy beliefs cause serious problems, and in extreme cases inspire them to cause problems for others. To fully understand these problems and what to do

about them, we need to understand who this minority of people are, and how their beliefs progress. This requires a person-centred psychology of conspiracy belief within which researchers from basic and applied subdisciplines of psychology, can share insights.

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