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Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract:

Conspiracy theories can form a monological belief system: a self-sustaining worldview comprised of a network of mutually supportive beliefs. The present research shows that even endorsement of mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively correlated. In Study 1 ($n = 137$), the more participants believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered. In Study 2 ($n = 102$), the more participants believed that Osama Bin Laden was already dead when U.S. special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive. Hierarchical regression models showed that mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively associated because both are associated with the view that the authorities are engaged in a cover-up (Study 2). The monological nature of conspiracy belief appears to be driven not by conspiracy theories directly supporting one another, but by broader beliefs supporting conspiracy theories in general.

Article text:

A conspiracy theory is defined as a proposed plot by powerful people or organizations working together in secret to accomplish some (usually sinister) goal (Coady, 2006; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994). Popular contemporary examples include the theory that the 9/11 attacks were planned and carried out by elements within the American government (Kay, 2011) and the belief that evidence of a causal link between autism and childhood vaccination is being suppressed by an unscrupulous medical industry (Goertzel, 2010). Conspiracy theories are not by definition false; indeed, many real conspiracies have come to light over the years. Suspicions of President Nixon's involvement in a burglary at the headquarters of the Democratic National

Committee began as a seemingly outlandish conspiracy theory, but turned out to be true (Bale, 2007). However, conspiracy beliefs, even when wrong, are notoriously resistant to falsification, and can take on the appearance of a “degenerating research program” (Clarke, 2002, p. 136), with new layers of conspiracy being added to rationalize each new piece of disconfirming evidence.

Spurred in part by the growth of new media, conspiracism has become a major subcultural phenomenon. This shift has not gone unnoticed in academia. In recent decades there has been an explosion of research into the psychology of belief in conspiracy theories. Much of this research interest has focussed on the individual correlates of conspiracy belief, but perhaps the most consistent finding in the work on the psychology of conspiracy theories is that belief in a particular theory is strongly predicted by belief in others – even ostensibly unrelated ones (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Goertzel, 1994 ; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011). For instance, someone who believes that the American government was behind the 9/11 attacks is very likely to also believe that Princess Diana was deliberately assassinated. One proposed explanation for this connection is that beliefs in conspiracy theories somehow support one another (Goertzel, 1994). Even though the perpetrators may be different in each case, the fact that one massive, sinister conspiracy could be successfully executed in near-perfect secrecy suggests that many such plots are possible. Over time, the view of the world as a place ruled by conspiracies can lead to conspiracy becoming the default explanation for any given event – a unitary, closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a *monological belief system* (Goertzel, 1994; Clarke, 2002; Swami et al., 2010; Swami et al., 2011).

However, some conspiracy theories emphatically do not support one another; indeed, many provide mutually contradictory explanations for the same event. These contradictions among conspiracy theories are the focus of the present article. For instance, the theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana vary widely; some claim that she was killed by MI6, others allege that she was killed by Mohammed al-Fayed's business enemies, still others that she faked her own death. How does a conspiracy-believing observer reconcile the presence of these competing, mutually contradictory accounts? If beliefs in conspiracy theories are correlated with one another because the theories are in direct agreement, one would not expect reliable correlations between beliefs in theories that are mutually exclusive.

In the present research, we seek to determine whether the coherence of the conspiracist belief system is driven not by direct relationships among individual theories, but by agreement between individual theories and higher-order beliefs about the world. For instance, the idea that authorities are engaged in motivated deception of the public would be a cornerstone of conspiracist thinking due to its centrality in conspiracy theories. Someone who believes in a significant number of conspiracy theories would naturally begin to see authorities as fundamentally deceptive, and new conspiracy theories would seem more plausible in light of that belief (Read, Snow and Simon, 2003; Simon, Snow, & Read, 2004). Indeed, the two conspiracy theories mentioned above – an autism/vaccine connection and 9/11 as an inside job – both revolve around that central proposition. Likewise, whether one believes that Princess Diana was killed by MI6 or Mohammed Al-Fayed's business enemies, belief in a cover-up would support (and be supported by) both theories. In spite of that, the two theories contradict each other. Would it be possible for their contradiction to be overruled by their coherence with a broader conspiracist worldview, such that they display a positive correlation in endorsement?

Some literature on stereotyping suggests that coherence with strongly held worldviews may well be sufficient to overwhelm contradictions between individual beliefs. Adorno (1954) found strong positive correlations in endorsement between contradictory negative stereotypes of Jews, such that highly prejudiced participants found them to be both too isolated from the rest of society and too eager to participate in it. Adorno proposed that this paradoxical perception has its roots in “a relatively blind hostility which is reflected in the stereotypy, self-contradiction, and destructiveness” of anti-Jewish stereotyping (p. 76). In spite of their contradictory nature, both stereotypes drew enough credibility from their one common element – a negative perception of Jewish people – to end up with a strong positive association. The same may well be true of contradictory conspiracy theories; conspiracy advocates’ distrust of official narratives may be so strong that many alternative theories are simultaneously endorsed in spite of any contradictions between them.

The phenomenon of global coherence overruling local contradictions is perhaps best understood in the context of Thagard’s (1988) explanatory coherence model of social inference. Explanatory coherence theory characterizes explanations and pieces of evidence about actors and events as either coherent or incoherent with one another. These elements are represented by nodes in a connectionist network. Activation flows from evidence nodes and higher-order knowledge structures (Read, 1987) to the various explanations, which in turn excite or inhibit one another depending on whether they are mutually coherent or contradictory. This process of excitation and inhibition continues until the system reaches a stable equilibrium, at which point the highly activated explanations are accepted and those with little activation are discarded. Activation has been shown to flow the other way, as well: not only do evidence and higher-order knowledge structures change one’s perception of explanations, emerging conclusions in the

network also change perceptions of evidence and alter broad worldviews (Read & Miller, 1993; Read et al., 2003).

For instance, imagine that someone is heavily invested in conspiracism and strongly believes in a wide variety of different conspiracy theories. A view of authority as fundamentally deceptive is coherent with all of these theories, and as such draws activation from them until it becomes a strongly held belief in itself. When a novel conspiracy theory is presented, it immediately seems more credible because it agrees with this now strongly held view and disagrees with the officially endorsed narrative. Such higher-order beliefs may be so strongly held that any conspiracy theory that stands in opposition to the official narrative will gain some degree of endorsement from someone who holds a conspiracist worldview, even if it directly contradicts other conspiracy theories that they also find credible. In other words, a natural consequence of the explanatory coherence approach to social explanation is an instantiation of the principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Indeed, this is a principle found explicitly in Heider's (1958) theory of psychological balance, which shares a considerable common ground with explanatory coherence. In balance theory, perceptions of an object or social actor are affected by its relationship with other actors about which opinions already exist. For instance, people's evaluations of a novel product endorsed by a known celebrity are more positive if they view the celebrity positively, or more negative if their views of the celebrity are negative. In the case of conspiracy theories, we propose that a similar mechanism is at work: officials are seen as deceptive, perhaps even actively malevolent, so any explanation that they endorse is at a disadvantage, while alternative explanations are more credible from the start. Explanatory coherence has been shown to naturally instantiate many of the Gestalt principles on which balance theory is based (Read et al.,

2003), and others have noted the applicability of balance theory to the study of conspiracy belief, such as Inglehart (1987).

Thus, we predict that for someone with a conspiracist worldview, nearly any theory that assumes deception by officialdom in its explanation for a world event and stands in opposition to the “mainstream” account will garner some agreement. This relationship may hold even to the point that people who believe in a world governed by conspiracy are likely to endorse contradictory conspiracy theories about the same topic. Just as Adorno (1954) found positive correlations in endorsement of contradictory stereotypes, we expect to see positive relationships between endorsement of contradictory conspiracy theories about the same event. For example, the more that participants believe that a person at the centre of a death-related conspiracy theory, such as Princess Diana or Osama Bin Laden, is still alive, the more they also tend to believe that the same person was killed, so long as the alleged manner of death involves deception by officialdom.

Study 1

We first elected to examine the relationship between contradictory conspiracy theories regarding the same event by asking about several rival accounts of Princess Diana’s death.

Method

Participants

One hundred thirty seven undergraduate psychology students (83% female, mean age 20.4) were recruited from a second-year research methods class at a British university. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was given.

Materials and Procedure

For the purposes of the present study, we used the conspiracy theory belief scale used by Douglas & Sutton (2011). The questionnaire was 17 items long and used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree,”), to ascertain participants’ agreement with a variety of different conspiracy theories. These included 9/11 as an inside job, global warming as a hoax by scientists and politicians, and the idea of a fake moon landing. Crucially, there were five items regarding the death of Princess Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2008; 2011; $\alpha = .83$):

1. One or more rogue “cells” in the British secret service constructed and carried out a plot to kill Diana
2. There was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment
3. Diana faked her own death so that she and Dodi could retreat into isolation
4. Business enemies of Dodi and his father Mohammed Al-Fayed assassinated Dodi, with the death of Diana a cover-up for the operation
5. Diana had to be killed because the British government could not accept that the mother of the future king was involved with a Muslim Arab

Not all of these items are mutually contradictory. Diana might conceivably have learned of a plot to kill her and faked her own death in response, so #3 and #2 do not necessarily contradict one another. #1 and #2 differ in the degree to which the operation to kill Diana was officially sanctioned, and not all participants would necessarily pick up on that difference. Likewise, #5 indicates the existence of a plot to kill Diana but does not specify whether it was successful, so it does not explicitly contradict any of the other theories. However, there are some unambiguous contradictions. #1, #3, and #4 all propose different accounts of Diana’s apparent death: either she was killed by a rogue cell of the British secret service (#1) or by business rivals of the

Fayeds (#4), or she faked her own death (#3). These three theories are mutually incompatible, and will be the focus of analysis in the present study.

Results & Discussion

We first performed an exploratory principal components analysis to investigate the factor structure of the scale. Based on a scree plot, we extracted two unrotated factors which together accounted for 46.9% of scale variance. All items had loadings of at least .35 on the first factor in the unrotated solution, suggesting that it represents generic conspiracy belief; the second factor drew loadings only from the five items concerning climate change conspiracy theories, and thus appears to be related to beliefs in these conspiracies in particular.

In line with this factor structure, and with previous findings of high correlations among beliefs in different conspiracy theories, the scale showed reasonable reliability ($\alpha = .78$). Most of the questions were significantly correlated with one another despite covering different topics; for instance, a belief that a rogue cell of MI6 was responsible for Diana's death was correlated with belief in theories that HIV was created in a laboratory ($r = .39$), that the moon landing was a hoax ($r = .34$), and that governments are covering up the existence of aliens ($r = .23$) (all $ps < .01$). In line with this general pattern, there was a network of significant positive relationships among the majority of the Princess Diana conspiracy theories (see Table 1). People who believed that Diana faked her own death were marginally more likely to also believe that she was killed by a rogue cell of British Intelligence ($r = .15, p = .075$) and significantly more likely to also believe that she was killed by business enemies of the Fayeds ($r = .25, p = .003$). Similarly, participants who found it likely that the Fayeds' business rivals were responsible for the death of Diana were highly likely to also blame a rogue cell ($r = .61, p < .001$).

As can be seen in Table 1, the correlations in endorsement with the idea that Diana faked her own death appear much lower than the rest, to the point that the only non-significant correlation involves that theory. We believe this to be due to a floor effect rather than any sort of response to contradiction; endorsement of the faked-own-death theory was extremely low in this sample, with a mean of only 1.52 on a 7-point scale. This level of endorsement was significantly lower than that of the other theories, for which agreement ranged from 2.51 (business rivals) to 2.98 (rogue cell) (all $ps < .001$). As an alternative approach to the relationship between the faked-death theory and the rogue cell theory, we dichotomized responses to the faked-death item, comparing those who gave the lowest possible response with those who responded more positively. In accordance with the general pattern of results, participants who strongly disagreed with the faked-death theory showed a lower level of agreement with the rogue cell theory ($M = 2.75$) than those who responded otherwise ($M = 3.47$; $t(134) = -2.56$, $p = .01$).

In line with our hypothesis, the results show mostly clear positive correlations in endorsement of contradictory conspiracy theories. Intuitively, this does not make sense. One would think that there ought to be a *negative* correlation between beliefs in contradictory accounts of events – the more one believes in a particular theory, the less likely rival theories will seem. One possible alternative explanation for these results is acquiescence bias: participants may have simply replied in the same way to every question, resulting in positive correlations across the scale regardless of the questions' content. However, the scale included a reverse-coded Diana conspiracy item which read, "The death of Princess Diana was an accident." Contrary to the acquiescence hypothesis, this item was consistently negatively correlated with the rest of the scale, most notably $r = -.75$ with the rogue-cell item and $r = -.65$ with the MI6 item (both $ps < .001$).

These results suggest that those who distrust the official story of Diana's death do not tend to settle on a single conspiracist account as the only acceptable explanation; rather, they simultaneously endorse several contradictory accounts. In Study 2, we set out to conceptually replicate these findings in another setting, and also to ask why mutually contradictory conspiracy theories are simultaneously endorsed.

Study 2

On May 2nd, 2011, it was reported in the news media that Osama bin Laden had been killed in an American raid on a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Conspiracy theories alleging that bin Laden had not actually been killed in the raid immediately started to propagate throughout the Internet and traditional media, mostly. Proponents claimed that their suspicions were aroused by several actions of the Obama administration, including a refusal to release pictures of bin Laden's body and the decision to bury him at sea shortly after the raid.

The conspiracy theories surrounding the death of Osama bin Laden can be divided into two major categories: those that propose he was already dead at the time of the raid, and those that propose he is still alive (Kingsley & Jones, 2011). The former seems to have currency among the 9/11 conspiracist Truth Movement; many "Truthers" allege that bin Laden died in 2000 or even earlier, and his video appearances since then were in fact staged productions made with a body double. The latter theory varies; some people believe that he is still at large, while others think that he was captured alive and is being secretly held for interrogation by the CIA. Naturally, these two theories are irreconcilable; bin Laden cannot be both alive and dead at the same time. However, as in Study 1, we predicted that belief in the two conspiracy theories would be positively correlated.

Further, in order to test the idea that perceived deception by authorities underlies the positive correlation between contradictory conspiracy theories, we asked participants to what degree they found the American government's actions surrounding the raid to be suspicious and indicative of a cover-up. This was intended to operationalize the central principle of conspiracism outlined above: the idea that authorities are engaged in motivated deception. If belief in a cover-up is indeed responsible for the positive association between contradictory conspiracy theories, controlling for it should cause the correlation between the contradictory theories to disappear.

Method

Participants

One hundred two undergraduate students (58% female, mean age 21) at a British university were recruited to participate in the study between one and six weeks after the announcement of bin Laden's death. In exchange for their participation they received a randomized prize of either a snack or a small monetary reward of GB£1.00 or 2.00 (~US\$1.50 or 3.00).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were directed to read a brief summary of the official story of Osama bin Laden's death, including the details regarding the refusal to release pictorial evidence and the burial at sea, followed by a short paragraph explaining that some people doubt the official story. They were then asked about their opinion of the official story, followed by three conspiracy items:

1. Osama bin Laden was killed in the American raid.
2. Osama bin Laden is still alive.
3. When the raid took place, Osama bin Laden was already dead.

4. The actions of the Obama administration indicate that they are hiding some important or damaging piece of information about the raid.

Each of these statements was followed by a series of questions based on the composite endorsement measure used by Douglas and Sutton (2011). This asked participants to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”), as well as to what degree they found the statements plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent, again on a scale from 1 (“not at all”) to 6 (“very much”). These ratings were then averaged to obtain a composite measure of endorsement for each statement ($\alpha > .87$ for each statement). While the original measure used by Douglas and Sutton also asked participants to judge the interestingness of each statement, there is no contradiction in finding two rival theories equally interesting, so we excluded interestingness from the present study in order to avoid artificially inflating the relevant correlations.

Results & Discussion

The idea that bin Laden was killed in the raid enjoyed a high level of endorsement ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.19$), indicating a fairly high level of trust in the official story, though participants on average found the Obama administration’s actions to be suspicious ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.41$). Participants seemed less likely to endorse the idea that bin Laden is still alive ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.39$) or was already dead ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.39$). In a replication of our Study 1 result, a correlational analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between composite endorsement ratings of the two contradictory conspiracy theories, $r = .21$, $p = .04$.

We next examined the contribution of belief in a cover-up to the positive relationship between the two contradictory theories using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Endorsement of the cover-up item significantly predicted endorsement of the “bin Laden is still

alive” theory, $\beta = .373$, $t(97) = 4.04$, $p < .001$ (the same was true of the already-dead theory, $\beta = .346$, $t(97) = 3.63$, $p < .001$). Adding endorsement of the contradictory theory “bin Laden was already dead” to the regression equation, however, explained no additional variance ($\Delta R^2 = .006$), and this theory was not itself a significant predictor, $\beta = .086$, $t(96) = 0.86$, $p = .40$. This indicates that the correlation in endorsement of the two contradictory theories is explainable entirely by their connection with belief in a deceptive cover-up by authority (see Figure 1). The degree to which someone believes in a cover-up helps to determine their endorsement of the official story, and of both conspiracy theories as well. This result is in line with our predictions, and supports the idea that conspiracy theories are defined not by adherence to a particular alternative account, but by opposition to the official story and a belief that deception is taking place.

General Discussion

While it has been known for some time that belief in one conspiracy theory appears to be associated with belief in others, only now do we know that this can even apply to conspiracy theories that are mutually contradictory. This finding supports our contention that the monological nature of conspiracism (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010; Swami et al., 2011) is driven not by conspiracy theories directly supporting one another, but by the coherence of each theory with higher-order beliefs that support the idea of conspiracy in general. As demonstrated in Study 2, perceived deception by authority is one such belief, and it is likely that there are many others as well. For those who hold such beliefs, the specifics of a conspiracy theory do not matter as much as the fact that it is a conspiracy theory at all.

There are strong parallels between this conception of a monological belief system and Adorno’s (1954) work on prejudice and authoritarianism. In an attempt to explain the strong

positive correlations between contradictory anti-Semitic beliefs, Adorno suggested that incompatibilities between beliefs at a local level are dwarfed by coherence with broader beliefs about the world - “nuclear ideas” which “tend to ‘pull in’ numerous other opinions and attitudes and thus to form a broad ideological system.” (p. 92). Such a system “provides a rationale for any specific idea within it and a basis for meeting and assimilating new social conditions” (p. 93). Our findings support an equivalent explanation for beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories, with a belief in deceptive officialdom as the nuclear idea in question.

If Adorno’s explanation for contradictory anti-Semitic beliefs can indeed be applied to conspiracy theories, conspiracist beliefs might be most accurately viewed as not only monological, but also ideological in nature. Just as an orthodox Marxist might interpret major world events as arising inevitably from the forces of history, a conspiracist would see the same events as carefully orchestrated steps in a plot for global domination. Conceptualizing conspiracism as a coherent ideology, rather than as a cluster of beliefs in individual theories, may be a fruitful approach in the future when examining its connection to ideologically relevant variables such as social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism.

Although we have demonstrated the importance of a belief in deception by authority as an important antecedent of conspiracy belief and a partial explanation for correlations between contradictory theories, there are certainly other broad beliefs which could make a similar contribution. For instance, conspiracy theories would seem much more plausible to those with a belief in the effectiveness of intimidation and bribery. In a more abstract sense, a belief in the essential malevolence of officialdom - or in the specific malevolence of a certain powerful entity - would make many conspiracies seem more likely. The social element must not be neglected either; many conspiracy theories are associated with specific groups or even organized

movements, such as the 9/11 Truth Movement. Clarke (2007) found a trend of increasing vagueness in these modern conspiracist communities, which he characterised as a reaction to the antagonistic atmosphere of Internet discourse. Our results suggest an alternative possibility: a genuine uncertainty within individuals regarding the true nature of the conspiracy behind a particular event (beyond the fact that there was one), and a willingness to consider and even endorse mutually contradictory accounts as long as they stand in opposition to the officially sanctioned narrative. There may also be an element of self-presentation and conflict avoidance in the vagueness observed by Clarke: if multiple contradictory theories are simultaneously believed by many in a conspiracist community, endorsing one in particular is tantamount to denying the others, and may provoke a backlash. In any event, the development of conspiracy theories almost certainly owes a great deal to social engagement and discussion of alternative narratives, and the dynamics of conspiracist communities may be a fruitful avenue for future investigation with reference to previous work on opinion-based groups (e.g. Musgrove & McGarty, 2008).

Conspiracist belief systems may also be well-captured by connectionist models of social inference such as Thagard's (1989) explanatory coherence model (ECHO). ECHO has been shown to accurately predict the degree to which higher-order beliefs about social actors affect judgements of their actions as sinister or innocent, honest or deceptive (Read & Miller, 1993). However, there has been little or no investigation into the ability of ECHO to model the influence of broad worldviews. Based on the present research, one would expect that when broad beliefs are relevant to the interpretation of a particular situation, they serve as a constraint on the conclusions that are likely to be drawn from it in the same way as specific beliefs about the actors and situations involved. A conspiracist belief system consisting of many such beliefs

would inhibit the acceptance of official narratives, but may not discriminate among several different conspiracy theories. Some might be discarded, but even contradictory theories might be simultaneously accepted. Almost any account of events which accords with the broader beliefs in question is likely to garner some endorsement by adherents of a conspiracist worldview. Modelling such a network might provide an instructive insight into the processes underlying the development of conspiracist beliefs, and of other beliefs influenced by superordinate ideological considerations.

It must be noted that not all conspiracy theories fall under the “deceptive officialdom” umbrella. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are a notable and historically important exception; instead of alleging abuse of power by elites, historical theories of Jewish conspiracy usually detailed supposed attempts by a minority to seize power for themselves (Graumann, 1987). It would be instructive to examine whether beliefs in such conspiracies are correlated with belief in those that fit more closely into the “deceptive officialdom” template, and if such relationships are mediated to the same degree by endorsement of that central belief.

In any case, the evidence we have gathered in the present study supports the idea that conspiracism constitutes a monological belief system, drawing its coherence from central beliefs such as the conviction that authorities and officials engage in massive deception of the public to achieve their malevolent goals. Connectivity with this central idea lends support to any individual conspiracy theory, even to the point that mutually contradictory theories fail to show a negative correlation in belief. Believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years.

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Table 1. Correlations between endorsement of Princess Diana conspiracy theories in Study 1.

	Official MI6 campaign to kill Diana	Dodi and Diana killed by Al- Fayeds' business enemies	Diana had to die prevent her from marrying an Arab	Diana faked her own death
Diana killed by rogue cell of British Intelligence	.749 ***	.614 ***	.670 ***	0.15 †
Official MI6 campaign to kill Diana	1	.660 ***	.622 ***	.206 *
Dodi and Diana killed by Al- Fayeds' business enemies		1	.607 ***	.253 ***
Diana had to die to prevent her from marrying an Arab			1	.242 **

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$. Correlations between mutually contradictory items are bolded. All correlation coefficients are Pearson r .

Figure 1. Illustration of the observed correlations in endorsement of Study 2 items. The two conspiracy theories display a significant zero-order correlation (above), but have no significant direct relationship when belief in a cover-up is taken into account (below).

