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Uncertainty, Attachment, and Narcissism, but most of all Vulnerability: The Perfect Recipe for Conspiracy Therapy

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Abstract: The paper aims to investigate the pervasiveness of conspiracy attitudes from a psychological point of view. Starting from one of the most common and shared definitions of conspiracy theories (a defensive strategy to manage stressful social events), we will first focus on cognitive distortions and then move on to the affective dimension. We will suggest that conspiracy beliefs can be explained by combining affective dynamics that occur on two distinct levels, individual and social. On the first, attachment disorders are predictive of anxious behaviour and existential insecurity. On the second, the need for uniqueness and for recognition/confirmation by the group compensates for narcissistic frustrations and the sense of social exclusion.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; fake news; cognitive biases; motivated reasoning; attachment theory; collective narcissism

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0. Introduction

The vast literature on conspiracy has identified the prototypical conspiracy theorists. To mention only Robert Brotherton, one of the most distinguished and well-known psychologists investigating the phenomenon, conspiracy theory is «an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people» (Brotherton and French 2014: 238; Brotherton 2015; see also Cassam 2019 for an analogous account).

Conspiracy theories must be distinguished from another phenomenon often mentioned today: *fake news*. CTs are not fake news, because «not all fake news claims that a sinister conspiracy is afoot» - Butter and Knight (2020a: 2) argue. Unlike CTs, fake news is an isolated pill of artfully assembled and disseminated disinformation (Jaster and Lanius 2018). It does not have the long breath to become part of an articulated narrative aimed at explaining something. CTs are, on the contrary, choreographies and cartographies that reshape reality while they can certainly feed on individual fakes, they become links in the chain of fallacious argumentation.

Starting from some well-attested reasoning fallacies, we will shift our attention to self-defensive motivations that affect the correctness of reasoning. To elucidate the motivational roots and defensive nature of the conspiratorial attitude, we will delve into the affective dimension in the light of attachment theory. Narcissism, and in particular the category of collective narcissism, seems to be the most adequate interpretative key to account for the truly crucial factor in the conspiratorial phenomenon: the need for social recognition. By looking at conspiracies from this perspective, we are able to provide an explanatory argument for the pervasiveness of conspiracies in Western society, regardless of the social status and educational level of people involved. Conspiracy theories are multifaceted phenomena that, contrary to a widespread view, rarely seem to have anything to do with a pathological dimension of the paranoid type (Hofstadter 1967; Oliver and Wood 2014; Bortolotti 2023). Rather, what most characterises such phenomena from a psychological point of you is the narcissistic need to feel unique and valued; and a particularly important route to the feeling of uniqueness and acceptance is belonging to a community made cohesive by the need to fight a dangerous enemy that threatens it.

1. Disentangling concepts

At first glance, conspiracy theorising is not very different from other forms of theorising, in which hypotheses are formulated to explain the causal factors that triggered an observed event. Indeed, Melley (2000) pointed out that conspiracy theories may have deep explanatory power; and it is precisely such an explanatory power that makes them highly attractive to those who have a strong need to appease a destabilising internal sense of anxiety and uncertainty generated by particularly stressful events.

From this point of view, conspiracy theories are apparently effective tools to simplify and manage the complexity of dramatic events (Swami *et al.* 2013) such as, in recent years, the collapse of the twin towers, the appearance of deadly viruses, and phenomena such as climate change, etc. Regardless of their actual seriousnessness, conspiracy theorists perceive them as particularly dramatic, highly significant and anxiogenic. As recently Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska have clearly put (2020: 157), «CTs help to restore one's sense of agency by reinstating a sense of order, control and predictability (especially after a distressing external threat), thus regulating anxiety and negative emotions» (see also Sullivan *et al.* 2010; Swami *et al.* 2016).

All these reflections unveil the psychological basis from which conspiratorial ideas originate: individual uncertainty and bewilderment in the face of particularly burdensome and stressful social and environmental phenomena and events.

Nevertheless, this individual sphere is only one side of the CTs' problem. Already the seminal research on the conspiracy phenomenon in contemporary Western society – initially carried out by philosophers, historians and social scientists such as Popper (1950), Hofstadter (1964) and Moscovici (1987) – had emphasised another crucial aspect related to group dynamics. Moscovici, in particular, has highlighted how the particular

dynamics of affirmation and circulation of CTs aim to preserve the identity of the group. His insight has been corroborated by recent social psychology studies we will later refer to in more detail. It is evident, in fact, that one cannot conspire alone, just as one does not fight a malevolent conspiracy alone. Rather, a Manichean worldview is held and shared with other people: on the one side stands the 'wicked' who conspire secretly and deceive ordinary people; on the other hand is the *us*, i.e. the virtuous group who unveil the deception, know the truth, and try to spread it. It follows that a comprehensive investigation of CTs should integrate an individual approach and a group psychology approach (Biddlestone *et al.* 2021).

2. Individual approach: cognitive and perceptual distortions

Decades of psychological studies have contributed to a scientific investigation of CTs. Several quantitative questionnaires have been created to detect and scrutinise the creation and the endorsement of CTs, as well as the propensity to their dissemination (Brotherton *et al.* 2013; Douglas and Sutton 2011; Swami *et al.* 2010). The cognitive account of CTs has mainly focused on the relationship between conspiracy beliefs, the perception of illusory patterns, and agency detection (Van Prooijen *et al.* 2018; Van Prooijen and van Vugt 2018). The latter is the inclination to assume the intentional intervention of a sentient or intelligent agent, whereas pattern perception refers to the natural and adaptive tendency to perceive causal connections between different stimuli. Goreis and Voracek (2019) propose a list of reasoning biases that includes the *conjunction fallacy* (overestimating correlation between two co-occurring events), *intentionality bias* (seeing intentionality everywhere even in inanimate objects), *illusion of explanatory depth* (displaying disproportionate self-esteem in explaining complex phenomena), *proportionality bias* (assuming that large causes should correspond to large effects), *need for closure* (referring to «the gathering of minimal data when making overconfident probabilistic judgments» (McKay *et al.* 2006)). Such biases come into play in many epistemic contexts, given also the natural human need to know the world around us and to acquire information from it in order both to be able to navigate it as well as possible, and for the pleasure of knowledge itself, without any particular practical purpose. Credit for a synthesis of the connection between need for knowledge and CTs goes to Albarracín (2021), who explains that although everyone has a natural need for knowledge, not everyone desires to reach great confidence: a moderate desire for confidence can lead to rudimentary reasoning processes, while the aspiration for more accurate knowledge induces an analytical stance, which helps to discern truth from lies, and facts from fiction, engaging individuals in more reflective reasoning. However, in order to find the origins of reasoning fallacies it is necessary to dig deeper into the motivational dimension, in the sense that motivations affect reasoning (Piazza and Croce 2022).

3. From cognitive biases to motivational drives

Despite its crucial role, the cognitive approach examines only the surface of the conspiracy phenomenon. Motivational drives, originating from anxiety and sense of uncertainty, play a defensive role, and cognitive biases emerge from such defensive dynamics (Albarracín 2021). Self-defence is a crucial mechanism that grounds and safeguards personal identity over time (Marraffa and Meini 2024). However, excessive defensive behaviour reflects a conservative attitude of closure toward others and the surrounding environment; it is a symptom of anxiety and insecurity that undermines

individual relationships with the outside world. Insecurity and search for comfort (and confirmation) are two sides of the same coin.
In short, the feeling of uncertainty makes existence precarious and promotes conspiracies, superstitions, and reasoning processes that tend to associate unrelated stimuli in a causal network (Whiston and Galinsky 2008). Identifying specific enemies as responsible for (likely) stressful events is more effective in calming anxiety and worries (Sullivan *et al.* 2010) than admitting - much more realistically - the decisive role of uncontrollable, random, and unpredictable factors.
The relationship between insecurity and conspiracy beliefs has been attested by several studies (Sullivan *et al.* 2010; Green and Douglas 2018). The never-ending need to defend one's personal identity corresponds to the need to recompose a fragile identity. In line with the theoretical perspective that Dan McAdams traces back to William James, we refer to fragile people, and fragile personality, to denote those individuals whose «selfing process» (McAdams 1996) has, for some more or less traumatic reason, come to a standstill. Similarly, the influential clinical literature ranging from Laing (1960, with the notion of basic fault) to Balint (1992, with the notion of ontological insecurity) stresses the intrinsic fragility of individuals whose integration of different self-images has failed in a major way, leaving them with inconsistent and poorly integrated self-representations and self-narratives.
Every personal identity is constitutively fragile (Di Francesco *et al.* 2016), and permanently in need of confirmation; under certain conditions, however, fragility becomes extreme. The search for coherence, pursued even at the expense of correspondence (Conway 2005), becomes nagging with consequences that can potentially tend toward conspiracy ideation.

3.1 The attachment factor

On our way from a socio-cognitive dimension, we have reached the core of the affective dimension where the foundations of personal identity reside. In this new conceptual environment, we need a different compass: John Bowlby's attachment theory will be helpful in shedding light on such internal and emotional space. Attachment theory aims to make sense of the early bonds established from birth between children and their caregivers (Bowlby 1973). In the young human being as in other animal species, these emotional bonds are aimed at seeking and maintaining closeness as a reliable guarantee of safety and comfort (Fonagy *et al.* 2002). In the meanwhile, attachment has the important psychological function of satisfying affective needs.
Based on rigorous long-standing observation of child-caregiver interactions, Bowlby distinguished four attachment styles: secure attachment and three types of insecure attachment (avoidant, resistant-ambivalent, and disorganised). Secure attachment is recurring in dyads in which the caregiver is inclined to pay attention and respond to the child's requests with helpfulness and a reassuring attitude. Avoidant attachment is typical of couples composed by an unavailable and unresponsive adult unable to meet the child's needs for protection and affection. While some degree of emotional and behavioural unpredictability and instability of the caregiver is characteristic of resistant-ambivalent attachment, consistency is completely lacking in disorganised attachment, which is characterised by unpredictable parenting behaviours lacking any stable structure.
Let us focus on avoidant and resistant-ambivalent attachment styles to examine their typical outcomes in adulthood. Children with avoidant caregivers tend to adopt non-intrusive relational strategies, so as not to disturb susceptible adults. In so doing, they

progressively develop an avoidant stance, consisting of distancing behavioural patterns. This reiteration of attachment styles is an extreme form of defence, matured from lack of trust. Children understand that they cannot rely on their caregivers to fulfil their need for affection, acceptance and recognition. Nonetheless, like every human being, even insecurely attached children experience a strong desire for closeness and continue to seek strategies to obtain it. Over the years, they tend to develop an anxious personality that makes them prone to adopt the strategy of exaggerating the severity of the threats they are experiencing (Mikulincer and Shaver 2003 2007).

This leads us directly to consider the literature on conspiracy thoughts. In developing their extensive analysis on the topic, Karen Douglas and colleagues argue that people use (or, better, attempt to use) CTs as a defensive tool to address psychological needs, first and foremost the existential need for safety and control (Douglas *et al.* 2017). Green and Douglas go so far as to argue that «individuals with anxious attachment are preoccupied with their security, tend to hold a negative view of outgroups, are more sensitive to threats, and tend to exaggerate the seriousness of such threats» (Green and Douglas 2018: 31). Given that - they add - secure and avoidant attachment styles are found to be less sensitive to threats directed to the person; it follows that anxious-preoccupied attachment could potentially be a key predictor of conspiratorial belief, compared to secure or insecure-avoidant attachment. Admittedly, the research on this topic still has a long way to go, and the experimental limitations of the few available studies do not allow us to fully elucidate the specificity of anxious attachment (versus avoidant attachment) in relation to conspiracy (Ascone *et al.* 2020; Leone *et al.* 2018). But the potential dimensions of the phenomenon are enormous, as dysfunctional attachment styles are widespread in the young population.

Since the insecure-disorganised attachment is strongly attested as predictive of pathological conditions, such as Borderline Personality Disorders and paranoid delusions (Scott *et al.* 2009; Wickham *et al.* 2015), one could expect unconditional adherence to many kinds of conspiracies. Nonetheless, only in a few dramatic cases the conspiracy mentality manifests a pathological nature. This is not surprising to us, since we are persuaded that a suspicious conspiracy mentality has its roots in dysfunctional relational dynamics, not in pathology *per se*. Thus, while disorganised attachment is a serious risk factor for mental health, its role in the genesis of conspiracy is no different from other forms of dysfunctional attachment.

3.2. From the lack of trust to narcissism: the explicative domains of attachment theory

At this point of our analysis, we can argue that attachment theory represents a good compass to explain the sources of existential anxiety and insecurity that drive conspiracy theorists. Anxiety exacerbates the perception of threat in stressful or calamitous situations; furthermore, the sense of uncertainty undermines the perception of control over situations, and the desire for control over one's surrounding environment is associated with the general need of making sense of the world. This motivational drive is crucial for CTs, as it provides explanations for stressful events, identifies entities to blame (van Prooijen and van Dijk 2014) (i.e., the perfect enemy to hate), and feeds feelings of negativity and mistrust toward official authorities and experts. The scientific literature (Einstein and Glick 2015; Miller *et al.* 2016; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Vitriol and Marsh 2018; Goreis and Voracek 2019) is clear in this regard: people inclined to believe CTs tend at the same time to distrust others, especially when they represent official institutions (government authorities, NASA, etc.). Furthermore, more extreme

conspiracy theorists tend to display greater interpersonal distrust, suspicion and antagonism (Swami *et al.* 2010; Brotherton *et al.* 2013; Lantian *et al.* 2016; Green and Douglas 2018; Imhoff and Lamberty2018).

This combination (adherence to CTs combined with mistrust of authorities and interpersonal distrust) constitutes a vicious circle (Goreis and Voracek 2019; Douglas *et al.* 2017). Not surprising, research on social antagonism has shown that conspiracy attitudes tend to correlate with behaviours such as disengagement from the system, disconnection from society, rejection of social norms, disaffection, hostility, feelings of helplessness, and powerlessness (Lantian *et al.* 2020: 155). Such an exaggerated and distorted lack of trust, and the consequent shift in the need and feeling of trust towards conspiracy hypotheses (and their supporters/theorists) is a mark of dysfunctional forms of adult-child attachment. Moreover, we suggest that the explanatory power of attachment theory should consider another psychological predictor into account: narcissistic personality structure (Meini 2019).

Narcissism, which (in the right measure) consists of highly motivating self-esteem and self-respect, becomes insane when it is an exaggerated manifestation of disproportionate (and, above all, illusory) self-love and self-esteem[1]. In this form, narcissists are prone to support conspiracy theories (Kumareswaran 2014): the generative process can be summarised by observing how conspiracies attract people who lack confidence and manifest excessive levels of self-promotion (Cichocka *et al.* 2016; Galliford and Furnham 2017). According to Cichocka and colleagues (2016), in fact, it is not self-esteem per se, but negatively declined self-esteem in a narcissistic sense that generates conspiracy beliefs. Significantly, several studies confirm that people with conspiracy mindsets score high on the narcissistic trait (Cichocka *et al.* 2016) and on the need for uniqueness (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Lantian *et al.* 2017; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Lantian *et al.* 2020). The identification of the narcissistic trait in conspiracy theorists leads from the individual dimension of personal fragility (expressed through anxiety, insecurity, a sense of threat and self-esteem, which is really lacking and becomes illusorily disproportionate) to the group dimension, which is a necessary component in the processes of conspiracy theories formation and dissemination.

The derivation and influence of the four forms of attachment on the maturation of narcissistic traits deserves further clarification. The four forms of attachment (secure, avoidant, resistant-ambivalent and disorganised attachment) affect the maturation of narcissistic personality traits: a secure attachment contributes to the development of healthy narcissistic traits. Negatively marked narcissism, sometimes potentially pathological, originates in forms of insecure attachment. Kohut (1971), for instance, believes that narcissists typically suffer from a lack of empathic responses from parents during childhood. The identification of conspiracists' narcissistic trait constitutes an important step in our argument: it leads from the individual dimension of personal fragility (expressed through anxiety, insecurity, a sense of threat and disproportionate self-esteem) to the group dimension, which we considered as a necessary component of CTs. The group dynamic - which is already present in the very definition of conspiracy theories (see also Cassam 2019) - seems to take a paradoxical form. Whereas in other contexts narcissistic people with a need for uniqueness would find it difficult to find mutual agreement, support and mutual recognition, in virtual conspiracy groups they manage to keep themselves united and cohesive around a conspiracy plot; and such a

[1] The distinction between healthy and insane narcissism was introduced by Paul Federn (in *The Ego as Subject and Object in Narcissism*), developed by psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1971), and taken up further by Morrison (1989) and Malkin (2016).

'sense of community' (easily supported by social networks) feeds the insane narcissism and satisfies the very need for uniqueness.

4. Collective narcissism

Individuals, driven by insecurity and anxiety, take refuge for self-defence in groups of 'like-minded people', creating a comfortable entrenchment for other future followers. This would seem to be an apparent paradox for narcissists: if narcissism is the triumph of egocentrism, a «collapse of mutual recognition» (Lingiardi 2021: 23), how do we explain such cohesion within conspiracy groups? Self-defensive motivation is what creates and cements the group, and according to Cichocka (2016), it would be associated with narcissistic frustration, which would ground the identity of particular social groups (not only conspiracy societies). For this reason, Cichocka coined the category of 'collective narcissism', a psychological category that can explain certain group dynamics, e.g. the need to proclaim the group's greatness and protect its image. Individual narcissistic frustration would find in this particular bond a satisfying compensation. And it is precisely the compensatory nature of collective narcissism that could be linked to less concern for group members and more concern for the achievements of individuals. This would be a reciprocal nourishment: the positive resilience of the group would derive precisely from the satisfaction of individual needs. And in this sense, the individual serves the group.

To summarise, CTs attract individuals who feel threatened and those with a strong need for uniqueness, as adherence to conspiracy ideas seems to satisfy the social need to maintain positive self-esteem (Green and Douglas 2018; Lantian *et al.* 2017). Most importantly, CTs especially attract individuals who seek patterns and order in their surroundings (van Prooijen *et al.* 2018) and those with lower levels of education, as conspiracy ideation gives the illusion of fulfilling the epistemic need for accuracy and certainty (Douglas *et al.* 2017). If we add anxiety and insecurity originating from insecure attachment, the perfect recipe to create CT mentality is almost ready. Still, an important ingredient is missing. Insofar as it allows one to be recognised and appreciated by others, and thus to find a kind of comfort through the ideological affinity of the group, CTs can compensate for negative feelings of exclusion and social isolation. In this rancorous scenario of loneliness, the vulnerability that exposes individuals to conspiracy is determined not only by a sense of existential insecurity, but also by the need for social integration (Albarracín 2021). This is a crucial point: alongside the sense of existential uncertainty and bewilderment, it is the need for recognition that plays a decisive role in making people fall into the meshes of conspiracy narratives. Falling into a conspiratorial net by no means implies adhering to every dramaturgical thread. One can adhere to a bizarre theory without committing to every single aspect of that theory (Ichino and Raikka 2020). One may think, wish, hope that a specific conspiracy plot is true, at least in part, without one's thoughts, wishes, and hopes implying full doxastic adherence to the entire conspiratorial system. According to Mercier (2020), the spread of bizarre and erroneous beliefs (including conspiracy theories) is explained neither by the charismatic abilities of those who propose them, nor by their gullibility, but by the intuitively attractive content they offer. Resistance to vaccines, for example, would be based on the counterintuitiveness of the very act of vaccination, which involves the injection of a genetic component of the virus to be fought. Conspiracy theorieswould then depend on our fear of powerful enemy coalitions (whether justified or not, likely or unlikely). When combined with the sense of uncertainty that motivates the ongoing, obsessive search for a scapegoat, the need to belong to a strong identity group (which reinforces its identity

precisely because of its negativity charge and elitist nature) prevails over any kind of rational belief.

5. Conclusions

Our navigation through the conspiracy mentality revealed the inescapable psychological aspect of the phenomenon: adherence to conspiracy theories has a defensive function and satisfies the need for certainty in the face of distressing and stressful situations. Some attachment disorders are predictive of an anxious personality that makes people prone to adopt the strategy of exaggerating the severity of the threats they are experiencing, thus creating fertile ground for the creation and maintenance of a conspiracy narrative. This first, individual level, should be complemented with a social-related motivational element: the need for uniqueness and recognition/confirmation by the group, which compensates for narcissistic frustrations and the sense of social exclusion. Cichocka's notion of «collective narcissism» is a useful notion to elucidate groups dynamics of internal protection from external menaces that help fragile, anxious people confirm their identity in a collective narrative. However, the role of the combination of individual fragility and group dynamics in CTs deserves further theorising and empirical investigation, as does the analysis of the alleged role of attachment in the development of a conspirative attitude. It seems to us that it would be particularly interesting to investigate categories of people who might, due to their typical needs, be (or have become) particularly vulnerable, such as adolescents or older people.
Our point is also central to assessing our hypothesis on the origins of CTs in non-pathological conditions: CTs might be much more rooted in psychological and relational attitudes than in mental disorders.

Author contributions

The two authors contributed equally to the original theses of the research work and in outlining the manuscript.

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