A Sociological Critique of Cognitive Deviance: Unconventional Beliefs Reconsidered

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Abstract

Sociologically speaking, pseudoscience and conspiracy theories fit into the category of cognitive deviance. We appear to be in an epoch of "post-truth," where pseudoscience and conspiracy theories have taken root, despite countervailing scientific evidence. Although chapters on cognitive deviance are common in sociology of deviance textbooks, there is a surprising lack of both theory and research on the phenomenon. This paper focuses on neglected conceptual considerations in the study of cognitive deviance. Contemporary examples will be examined within a general understanding of social movements. Suggestions for advancing the sociology of cognitive deviance will be offered.

"Cognitive deviance" refers to holding beliefs that are unconventional and non-normative (Goode, 2017). Those who are defined as cognitive deviants are often marginalized or punished by those who reject extreme ideas but accepted within the marginalized group as normative. Examples of marginalized groups include anti-vaccine advocates, flat-earthers, and those who disagree with evolution. Excluding any unconventional beliefs that may relate to psychosis and other mental disorders, the terms/ phrases 'unconventional beliefs', 'thoughtcrime', and 'cognitive deviance' are all presented as equals. Additionally, this paper defines social movements as "consciously organized attempts outside of established institutions to enhance or resist change through group action" (Ballantine, Roberts, and Korgen, 2020). These movements, according to Melucchi (1996) seek to renounce the status quo by changing the normative codes and dominant values of the society in question, with various forms often expressed in underground new social movements.

Media sources provide many examples of cognitively deviant persons and collectives. The internet in particular is fertile ground for fostering and reinforcing unconventional beliefs. Examples include the following: *Coast to Coast AM* is an AM radio talk show that deals with a variety of topics that are usually of the paranormal or of conspiracy theories (Staff, 2009) - e.g. the existence of Bigfoot, ufology, and that government conspiracy was behind the coronavirus pandemic. Project Camelot is a whistleblower company, primarily based on YouTube. A line in their website's about section reads that the team covers "conspiracies, the secret space program, black projects, ETs, free energy and more" (Cassidy, 2005). Sirius Disclosure is a nonprofit founded in 1993 for research of anything and everything extraterrestrial along with persuading the government to release records of information on ETs as well (Greer, 2019). In addition, the New World Order (NWO) is alleged to be a secret oppressive world government that arose out of

several conspiracy theories. The common thread in all is that an oligarchy is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian government (Camp, 1997).

Many academic historians argue that the History Channel increasingly emphasizes conspiracy theories and reality-based TV shows rather than historical content. Over the years, viewers have seen shows like WWII in HD get sidelined by shows like Ancient Aliens and Ice Road Truckers. When their new motto became "History: Made Every Day," executives meant that anything in the past can technically be called history. Whether intentional or merely a response to market opportunities, the History Channel has provided a wealth of speculative content to fuel conspiracy theorists. Although science rejects conspiracy theories, believers of such theories accept them as revealed truth not to be questioned.

There is some existing sociology of conspiracy theories and pseudoscience, yet sociology as a discipline needs to better organize assertions supported by data and theory regarding how public opinion is shaped by the era of the internet. In 2016, the Oxford dictionary word of the year was 'post-truth,' which refers to how objective facts are excluded in favor of emotion relating to public opinion (OED Staff, 2016). Quite simply, opinion and emotion- not empirical facts- are at the heart of cognitive deviance. Sociology as a discipline would benefit from an analysis of the demographics for those embedded in post-truth conspiracy-related new social movements. What is the race, SES, gender/sex, and education level of the most typical 'post-truther'? How is the internet being used to spread information/ disinformation to true believers?

The early work of Eric Hoffer reflected in *The True Believer: Thoughts On The Nature Of Mass Movements* is suggestive. Hoffer's core assertion, relevant to the contemporary world of post-truth, pertains to how the "New Poor" are involved in social movements. These are people who may have thrived or at least survived before who are now finding themselves in an

uncomfortable place in life. A current example of this is midwestern farmers negatively affected by the US-China trade war who continue to support current tariffs. Hoffer fittingly asserted back then that the New Poor are the most likely source of converts for mass movements (Hoffer, 1951).

Due in part to globalization, human movement, and the era of the internet, there is an evident struggle to preserve national identity. "The comforting and snug local communities that we once knew have been overwhelmed by a splintered and intimidating global community" (Fine and Ellis, 2011). For example, in February 2019, the US had another government shutdown that shattered all existing records of earlier ones because of the exaggerated danger of Hispanic migrants. Unconventional believers seek to simplify a complicated world by organizing the world into clearly defined boxes. It is easy for some to believe that immigrants pose a threat to national identity by diluting it with their own culture and language. When unconventional believers try too hard to simplify the world, this can lead them into accepting post-truths, pseudoscience, joining a cult, or developing intense xenophobia.

It serves to emphasize, however, that the level of deviance associated with a belief is never static and no beliefs are ever objectively or always deviant. What is labelled as cognitively deviant is relativistic. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's thesis may be applicable to this phenomenon as well. Moynihan's concept of defining deviancy down accounts for how extreme behavior and beliefs have been normalized in contemporary society (Moynihan, 1993). These beliefs are only potentially labelled deviant because they violate norms of conduct or the actor is likely to experience negative sanctions by audience members in the society. Extreme beliefs are always relative to the pattern of beliefs in society that shift over time.

The sociological lens of cognitive deviance owes a debt to Max Weber. He rejected the

notion that economic conditions are the sole influencers of beliefs by emphasizing other variables such as religious ideology. Yet Weber also focused on rationality as an organizing principle of modernity. Arguably, sociology has a chronic tendency to over-focus on rationality and under-focus on *irrationality*. If Weber were living today in the digital age, would he have come up with the concept of irrationalization in lieu of rationalization?

Leon Festinger's research on cognitive dissonance provides a useful lens to see cognitive deviance in action. Festinger argues in his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, a person who experiences moral discomfort and conflict that comes out of cognitive dissonance tries to make changes to resolve the stressful behavior, either by adding new parts to the cognition or modifying old parts of the cognition causing the psychological dissonance. This principle can also be applied to groups. For example, for Y2K, the concept that the world would end in 2000, there was reasoning akin to 'Mass chaos over the change of four numbers? The world ending? *Really?*' They may also avoid circumstances that are likely to increase discomfort to the point that one chooses to stop behaving in ways that cause the dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This reinterpretation or dismissal of the facts is reinforced by the rest of the group. In other words, the lack of fit between attitudes and behavior aid in developing a confirmation bias towards information that would tell them— via this extended example— that mass chaos will end the world in 2000. Within this description and analysis, cognitive dissonance and post-truth appear intrinsically linked.

How Pseudoscience and Crackpot Realism Fit the New Social Movements Paradigm

The pseudoscience associated with various expressions of cognitive deviance reflect characteristics of a new social movement. One perspective on social movements asserts that a movement will often be led by a charismatic figure (Schaefer, 2012). An example could be Alex

Jones, a right-wing conspiracy theorist and the chief proprietor of InfoWars. He is a media-savvy charismatic figure who appeals to the biases of those who fear a new world order will deny them their freedoms. Another perspective articulated by Melluchi describes new social movements and how an invisible network takes the place of a charismatic figure in stoking new social change while simultaneously reinforcing extreme beliefs (Melluchi, 1996). This perspective argues that new social movements are group activities that address values, social identities, and improvements in a group's quality of life. Conspiracy theorists often don a unique social identity— one with special knowledge and insights, and which others in the in-group reinforce.

In his classic work *The Power Elite* (Mills, 1956), Mills offers an insightful statement relevant to the understanding of contemporary cognitive deviance. "For the first time in American history, men in authority are talking about an 'emergency' without a foreseeable end... such men as these are crackpot realists: **in the name of realism they have constructed a paranoid reality all their own**" (bold added). In a similar vein, Erich Goode has written a broad working definition for conspiracy theories in the contemporary era. A conspiracy theory can be defined as a belief that "some covert but influential organization is responsible for X phenomenon." (Goode, 2017). Goode asserts that conspiracy theories are four-dimensional and involve treachery, secrecy, organization, and (eventual) discovery. In the age of the internet, organization takes place in cyberspace. Assertions made by bloggers are seldom fact-checked. Goode argues no real experts are present; conspiratorial beliefs are reinforced by like-minded people.

Goode believes that many of these conspiracy theories are harmful and need to be exposed by right-minded persons via science (Goode, 2017). However, some conspiracy theories present notable exceptions to these four dimensions. Reading his first and fourth characteristics

on conspiracy theories, one may think that they are a bit extreme. Superimposing a ufological viewpoint over the four dimensions, describing a belief in aliens/ UFOs/ alien-made crop circles/ as "criminal" or "extremely unethical" constitutes an intense exaggeration of the danger of those beliefs. The belief itself may be harmless. However, calls for action and the allocation around that resource may pose a cost to society and therein lies the danger. It would appear that some conspiracy theories are not as evil or immoral as Goode states, they are merely just 'nutty' or a 'distraction.'

Conspiracy theories and their structure can be paralleled with that of religious dogma. Religion and conspiracy theories both tell one what to believe, what to condemn, and who to demonize, whether these are individuals or collectives. Both embrace the concept of moral panics (Reinarman, 2014). There is a 'kernel of truth' contained within each moral panic— i.e. there is at least an iota of speculative evidence that a conspiracy has taken place. Second, the media, 'politico-moral entrepreneurs,' and interest groups join in magnifying the non-issue contained within this conspiracy theory. Next, conspiracy theories tend to, like Reinarman's example of drug scares, connect to a group of undesirables. The last step in creating a moral panic is that something or someone is scapegoated for a wide array of social ills. With conspiracy theories, there is no room for ambiguity or doubt, as criticism of conspiracy theories is usually met with something along the lines of, "That's what they [the enemy] wants you to believe." Conspiracy theorists also seem to compete for who can come up with the best atrocity tales. Moral panics function to mobilize people into action in the context of a new social movement.

Understanding the Relevance of Pseudoscience

Pseudoscience refers to studying that which is not empirical as a rule, and *not* scientists

who come up with a false theory unable to be empirically tested. Pseudoscientists tend to work in near or total isolation and ignore the traditional canon of empiricism in science. They fend off legitimate scientific critique by suggesting they are onto something that traditional science has ignored or cannot grasp. Experiencing alternating delusions of paranoia and grandeur is common as well. Others look down on them for beliefs that pseudoscientists falsely believe are too far ahead of their time. Pseudoscientists tend to not send their work to recognized scientific journals, be members of scientific collectives, and so on. They are simply not members of the scientific community.

The Double Echo Chamber Postulate

Applying a sociological lens to the study of cognitive deviance in contemporary America suggests several fruitful ideas worthy of empirical analysis. We might refer to the pervasive divisions currently taking place in the United States as the Divided States of America. What appears to reinforce this divide might be called a double echo chamber. An echo chamber is defined here as "an environment in which somebody encounters only opinions and beliefs similar to their own, and does not have to consider alternatives" (OED Staff, 2020). A double echo chamber is defined as two echo chambers that find themselves fundamentally in opposition to the other with members in the two experiencing confirmation bias.

Sensationalization of news and opinion pieces give birth to echo chambers. Echo chambers serve to reinforce feelings of powerlessness, fear, oversimplified solutions, and scapegoating. In the digital age, the connectedness of technology and "social" media counterintuitively mean we become more isolated. Is social media creating socially isolated "tribes" of true believers? Do all the people in these tribes generally have homogenous beliefs systems to which they cling? Does the expansion of partisan news in the media generally drive

consumers of it in one of two directions, or 'biases?' Does systemic confirmation bias coerce media consumers into trying to bend any piece of news into working with their confirmation bias? Will they consciously seek out news/opinion pieces that agree with that bias? Essentially, cognitive deviance in the era of post-truth may be boiled down to a core recipe: sensationalized news, the relative laziness of people regarding fact checking, and social media algorithms that show a media user most of what they have historically 'liked' before. These together lead to more largely partisan and extreme beliefs. More intense and frequent ideological tribalism from news media will render opposing groups mutually deviantized and stigmatized by one another. Societies will increasingly polarize and thus find themselves in vicious ideological civil wars.

Finding Resolution

Looking at the issue of the post-truth era from a micro lens, we need to do whatever we can to challenge ideologically slanted and sensationalized journalism. Empirical facts matter in the shaping of public discourse, but how do we persuade others to accept them? The danger is in allowing propaganda to drive public opinion. Listening to the other side has value. When seeking to persuade someone to *change* their beliefs, find out from where the other person derives their beliefs. If they tend towards self-generated belief, then give them experiential evidence or rational arguments. If they are more external in their beliefs, then present an expert or authority to bring in evidence.

Sociology as a discipline can provide guidance in ways to effectively cope with internet technology being used for social change, positive *and* negative, for regressive *and* progressive social movements. Sociologists could guide social studies teachers in schools to teach civil discourse, technological responsibility, and media literacy. Possible topics in these classes could

be on how to encourage and teach how to fact-check news/ opinion pieces, how to identify ideological bias in news/ opinion pieces, how to avoid fallacious arguments and find logical fallacies, how to make effective generalizations in debates, how to use interpersonal diplomacy skills to smooth over any and all ideological conflicts, and how to de-radicalize one's political ideology if it is labelled by too many in the larger society as inappropriately radical. Perhaps most importantly, students need to be taught how confirmation bias works in their daily lives.

Regarding an effective macro-level response, we should consider how to get stakeholders in social media companies to remove their echo chamber algorithms. Consuming variations in opinion from others would be another effective step against post-truth new social movements. We need to guard against extreme unconventional beliefs and pseudoscience being given equal weight to science. The news media in particular needs to guard against false equivalency. Lastly, before society does any of the above, it needs to find somewhat of a consensus on what propaganda, freedom of speech, and other gray areas are. We then need to convert this into some corresponding legislative language to promote media responsibility.

Finally, it might be a useful analogy to compare cognitive deviance to an addiction. The denial of a problem being present is there for both the addict and the cognitive deviant. Also, the only person that can motivate an addict to quit is the addict; the only person that can drive their cognitive deviance to extinction and not make others confuse their thought suppression for thought extinction is the cognitive deviant. To conclude, Stevie Wonder once sang in his song, "Superstition" that, "when you believe in things that you don't understand, then you suffer." His song critiques how people may blindly believe falsehoods with minimal to no critical thought and/ or education into the matter at hand.

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