

Conspiracy Theories Gone Wild: Belief, Ideology and Intervention

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Bio

Joseph Pierre, MD is a Health Sciences Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UCSF and the Unit Chief of the Langley Porter Psychiatric Hospital Adult Inpatient Unit. He has extensive clinical experience working with individuals with psychotic disorders, substance abuse, and those with “dual diagnosis” as well as research experience participating as a primary investigator and collaborator for clinical trials in schizophrenia and early intervention for young persons at high risk for psychosis. His academic work explores the "grey area" between psychopathology and normality with a focus on delusion-like beliefs including conspiracy theories.

Joseph has authored over 100 papers, abstracts, and book chapters related to schizophrenia, antipsychotic medications, substance-induced psychosis, delusions and delusion-like beliefs, auditory hallucinations and voice-hearing, and a variety of other topics including the neuroscience of free will and culturally sanctioned suicide. He is also the author of *False: How Mistrust, Disinformation, and Motivated Reasoning Make Us Believe Things That Aren't True* as well as the *Psych Unseen* blog at *Psychology Today*. He serves as an expert witness consultant in forensic/legal cases involving schizophrenia, the intersection of psychosis and ideological belief, and delusion-like beliefs.

Narrative

Conspiracy theory belief has been increasingly recognized as a driving force of ideologically-motivated violence and lone actor violence in particular. This presentation begins by defining conspiracy theory beliefs and characterizing them according to the “3M Model of False Belief” as a symptom of a “sick society” plagued by mistrust, misinformation, and motivated reasoning. In doing so, it draws a sharp distinction between conspiracy theory beliefs and delusional beliefs that would be indicative of mental illness. The presentation then discusses the role that conspiracy theory beliefs have as motivations and justifications of ideologically-motivated violence. It concludes with a discussion of interventions based on stages of ideological commitment.

Learning Objectives

- Detail three features that distinguish conspiracy theory beliefs from delusions
- Identify three core features of the “3M Model” of conspiracy theory belief
- Describe two appropriate interventions for conspiracy theory belief based on staging of ideological commitment