Paranoia 201: Understanding the Nature of Excessive Suspiciousness

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Clarification

- Paranoia is a broad term
  - Lycanthropy
  - Parasitosis
  - Fregoli syndrome
  - Capgras Syndrome

- Paranoia = undue, elevated suspiciousness

Paranoia: Essential Features

- Undue suspiciousness
- Belief in mal-intent of others
Problems with the Research Literature

- Under-studied
- Embedded phenomenon

Problems with the Research Literature

- Under-studied
- Embedded phenomenon
- Anosognosia

Epidemiology

- Community surveys:
  - “Are people talking behind your back”
  - “Do you feel someone is out to get you”
  - “Do you feel persecuted in some way”
  - 20-30% admit to this

Epidemiology

- “People are spying on me”
- “People are following me”
- 10%

Epidemiology

- “People are trying to poison me”
- “I am being plotted against”
- 5-10%
Epidemiology

• NYC survey*
  • 11% felt being followed or spied on
  • 7% felt being poisoned or plotted against
  • 5% felt being experimented on


Epidemiology

• Patients admitted to hospital for psychiatric problems:
  • 40% experience paranoia

Epidemiology

• Swiss study*
  • 4-9% had paranoid thoughts
  • Followed for next 20 years
  • Numbers remained the same


Epidemiology

• Medical patients >65 yo:
  • 23-30% develop delirium
  • Almost all develop paranoia


Epidemiology

• Currently 4-6 million suffer from dementia
  • Likely double in next decade
  • 35-50% of demented individuals develop paranoia


Epidemiology

• Conclusions:
  • Between 10-30% of non-patients experience varying levels of paranoia
  • Occurs regularly in 15-20% of general population
  • Similar rates across industrialized countries
Epidemiology

• Conclusions:
  • Among older individuals who develop delirium or dementia: 20-50% will become paranoid
  • Are rates of paranoia increasing?

Paranoid Personality Disorder

• mistrust or suspicion of other’s motives
• Hostility
• Jealousy
• susceptibility to slights (intended or unintended) by others
• bears grudges and seeks revenge*
• constant mobilization and on the lookout for perceived threats
• belief that one is being talked about, referred to, stared at, or watched

Paranoid Personality Disorder

• rigidity
• excessive sense of self-importance
• feeling “wronged” by others
• hypersensitivity
• high levels of anger*
• Hypervigilance
• overly concerned with “evidence”
• everything “means” something; no chance occurrences

Paranoid Personality Disorder

• malevolent others, known or unknown, who abuse, torment, harass, threaten, wrong, vilify, accuse disparage, mistreat, persecute and taunt them
• mountains out of molehills
• an edgy, irritable, quarrelsome, and querulous demeanor
Delusional Disorder

- Delusions are non-bizarre (plausible)
- Stable, logically constructed
- Monomania
- Logical processes and mood preserved
- Delusion is central to person's life

Delusional Disorder

- Paranoia querulans (aka: litigious paranoia)
- 1-3/100,000
- Chronic disorder

Delusional Disorder

- People with delusions:
  - 90% act on them in some way
  - 90% believe the delusions are completely true

Robert Lewis Dear, Jr

- Killed 3 at Planned Parenthood clinic
- Believed he was targeted by federal government for surveillance
- FBI is trying to kill him

Paranoid Schizophrenia

- Bazaar paranoid delusions
- Embedded within schizophrenia syndrome

What is going on?

- Cognitive:
  - Not different from normal
  - Confirmatory bias
  - Limited data gathering
- Quick to form conclusions
- Confidence in their judgment
- Illusory correlations
What is going on?

• Biologically:
• Dopamine
  – Increase environmental salience


Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

GALLUP

Paranoid and Violence

Table 1. Study Design, Sample, and Measures

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Paranoia & Violence: Conclusions

- Between 10-50% of paranoia individuals will become violent
- Most paranoid individuals are not violent
- Paranoid individuals are more violent than other types of mental disorders

Paranoia & Violence

- Anger as key variable

Treatment

- No controlled studies
- Therefore, no empirically supported treatments
- Most research on psychotic levels of paranoia

Treatment: CBT

- Targeting delusions:
- Targeting reasoning:
- Targeting worry***:


Treatment: CBT

- Targeting interpersonal sensitivity (rejection & vulnerability):

Treatment

- Mindfulness:
- Family interventions: ??
- Insomnia:
Medications

• Most studies are done in schizophrenia
• Modest improvements in paranoid delusions
• No studies looking at non-delusional paranoia

Are Rates of Paranoia Increasing?

• General increase in severe mental illnesses over the past 2 centuries

Are Rates Increasing?

• Recent increases
• >50% will have a mental illness of some type

Are Rates Increasing?

- Urbanization
- 2.4 times higher rate of psychosis

Are Rates Increasing?: Threats to Sense of Security/Safety and Privacy

- Computer hacks
- Electronic surveillance

Do we have evidence that social/cultural factors in our environment can influence rates of mental illness?

Cannabis

- 3-fold increased risk for development of psychosis

Significant increases in psychosis

Childhood trauma increases rate of adult paranoid thoughts 2.5 times
Post 9/11

- NY Times poll:
  - October 2001: 74% of New Yorkers “very concerned” about another terrorist attack
  - 2006: 69% were
  - 60% did trust the government to tell them the truth

Today

- Hackers + electronic surveillance + security cameras + NSA + omnipresent cameras + shredders
- Threats to our sense security
- Tells us it is an unsafe world

Do you find it concerning that the U.S. government is collecting and storing your personal information like phone records, emails, bank statements, and other communications?

- 82% of Americans were “somewhat”, “very” or “extremely” concerned

Global Strategy Group poll, May 2015

How personally concerned are you that the government accesses any of your personal communications, information, or records you share with a company without a judge’s permission?

- 83% of Americans were “somewhat”, “very” or “extremely” concerned
How personally concerned are you that the government uses information collected without a warrant for things other than stopping terrorist attacks?

- 83% of Americans were “somewhat”, “very” or “extremely” concerned

How personally concerned are you that the government allows private companies to use public school technology programs to track the online activities of school children?

- 77% of Americans were “somewhat”, “very” or “extremely” concerned

How personally concerned are you that the government performs instant wiretaps on any phone or other telecommunications device located in the U.S.?

- 76% of Americans were “somewhat”, “very” or “extremely” concerned
- 20-33% said “extremely” to each of the above questions

“Can People You Encounter Be Trusted?”

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<td>2013</td>
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Associated Press - GfK Poll, October 2013

“Can People You Encounter Be Trusted?”

- Baby Boomers: 40%
- Gen Xers: 31%

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"Can People You Encounter Be Trusted?"

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Associated Press-GfK Poll, October 2013

- Circumspect ➔ cautious
- Concerned ➔ wary
- Guarded ➔ mistrustful
- Suspicious ➔ paranoid

[Image of book cover: PARANOID by David J. Laforte]