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## Collective delusions: a skeptic's guide

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Collective delusions are an important topic for skeptics to address as they have the potential to influence millions of people.

The word delusion is used by psychiatrists to describe a persistent pathological belief associated with serious mental disturbance, usually psychosis. Sociologists and social psychologists use the term collective delusion, or mass delusion, in a different sense, to describe the spontaneous, temporary spread of false beliefs within a given population. Excluded from this definition are mistaken beliefs that occur in an organized or ritualistic manner. This term is also a common source of confusion since it is often used as a "catchall" category to describe a variety of different behaviors under one convenient heading. There are four common types of collective delusions: immediate community threats, community flight panics, symbolic community scares, and collective wish-fulfillment. Being familiar with the processes involved in each, and recognizing their features, is the first line of defense to counteract their influence.

Mass delusions differ from prominent religious myths and popular folk beliefs in that they occur in an unorganized, spontaneous fashion, although they may become institutionalized. Examples of institutionalization include the incorporation of claims of widespread satanic-cult sacrifices into the teachings of church groups, or the formation of organizations intended to confirm the existence of alien visitors or Bigfoot.

History is replete with examples of group delusions, many of which may seem humorous to those outside the historical or cultural setting. For instance, in 1806 near Leeds, England, residents became terror-stricken, believing that the end of the world was imminent after a hen began laying eggs with the inscription "Christ is Coming." Masses thronged to glimpse the miraculous bird - until it was discovered that the eggs had been inscribed with a corrosive ink and forced back into its body. This is one of many examples from Charles Mackay's classic, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1852). Unfortunately, the outcomes are often more sinister: Nazism, mass suicide, moral "witch-hunts," real witch-hunts, communist infiltration scares, the Crusades, and unfounded fears about the casual transmission of AIDS, to name but a few.

While historical episodes of collective folly are legendary, modern occurrences are remarkably similar. The four broad categories to be surveyed all involve a rapid spread of false, but plausible, exaggerated beliefs that gain credibility within a particular social and cultural context. They can be positive and take the form of wish-fulfillment, but are usually negative and spread by fear. Rumors are an essential ingredient common to each category of delusion. As persons attempt to confirm or dismiss the accuracy of these unsubstantiated stories of perceived importance, everyday objects, events, and circumstances that would ordinarily receive scant attention become the subject of extraordinary scrutiny. Ambiguous agents are soon redefined according to the emerging definition of the situation, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many factors contribute to the spread of episodes: the mass media, low education levels, the fallibility of human perception, cultural superstitions and stereotypes, group conformity, and reinforcing actions by authority figures, such as politicians, or institutions of social control, such as military agencies.

### Immediate Community Threats

These collective delusions involve exaggerated feelings of danger within communities at large, where members

of the affected population are concerned over what is believed to be an immediate personal threat. Episodes usually persist from a few weeks to several months and often recur periodically. Participants may express excitement and concern, but they don't panic and take flight. The underlying causes of fantasy creation and spread are the fallibility of human perception and the tendency for persons sharing similar beliefs in group settings to yield to the majority consensus.

An example of an immediate community threat occurred in Sweden during 1946, when there were mass sightings of imaginary rockets flying across the sky. In conjunction with rare cometary debris entering the atmosphere, rumors were circulating that remote-controlled German V-rockets, confiscated by the Soviets at the close of World War II, were being test-fired as a form of political intimidation or a prelude to an invasion. The historical and political contexts were key factors in rendering the rumors plausible, as the episode occurred amid a long history of mistrust of the Soviets, including invasion fears, border disputes, and spy scandals, which had long preoccupied the Swedes for centuries. Public statements reinforcing the existence of the rockets were made by top Swedish military officials, politicians, scientists, police, and journalists. Convinced of their existence, many citizens began redefining cometary spray that was sporadically streaking across the sky as enemy rockets. Some even claimed to distinguish tail fins or a fuselage. Of 997 reports investigated by the Swedish military, including nearly 100 "crashes" in remote areas, not a single shred of evidence confirming their existence was found, despite the military's extreme measure of draining some lakes to search for evidence (Bartholomew 1993).

Occasionally, the feared agent is a mysterious attacker believed to be terrorizing a community. During a two-week period in 1956, nearly two dozen residents in Taipei, Taiwan, claimed to have been slashed by a man wielding a razor-blade-type object. Police later determined the episode to have been entirely psychological. In the wake of rumors, lacerations from such mundane sources as incidental paper cuts or bumping into an umbrella on a crowded bus were redefined (Jacobs 1965). Sometimes the imaginary threat is from an agent that is believed to cause illness, such as the series of phantom attacks in Mattoon, Illinois, during two weeks in 1944 involving a "mad gasser" (Johnson 1945). In Auckland, New Zealand, in 1973, fifty drums of the compound merphos were being unloaded at a wharf when it was noticed that several barrels were leaking, and a chemical-like smell permeated the air. After immediate requests for information on its toxicity, authorities were wrongly informed that it was extremely toxic, after which at least four hundred dock workers and nearby residents received treatment for a variety of psychosomatic complaints: headache, breathing difficulty, and eye irritation (McLeod 1975).

In non-Western settings, immediate community threats are closely associated with cultural traditions, as in the case of headhunting rumor-panics that have occurred for centuries in remote parts of Malaysia and Indonesia (Forth 1991; Barnes 1993). These episodes represent fears among "primitive" peoples of losing political control to a distant central government. Headhunting scares are characterized by sightings of head-takers and discoveries of their alleged paraphernalia. Just as the vast, ambiguous nighttime sky is an excellent catalyst for spawning UFO sightings, and lakes are conducive to seaserpent reports, the thickly vegetated Southeast Asian jungle is ideal for misperceiving head-takers lurking in the myriad of foliage. Often villages are paralyzed with fear, travel is severely restricted, sentries are posted, and schools are closed for months. Most headhunting scares coincide with the nearby construction of a government bridge or building, during which it is widely believed that one or more human heads are required to produce a strong, enduring foundation. They are a projection of the state of tribal-state relations, reflecting "ideological warfare between the administrators and the administrated" (Drake 1989, 275).

### Community Flight Panics

A second type of collective delusion is the community flight panic, where residents attempt to flee an imaginary threat. Episodes may last from a few hours to several days or weeks, subsiding when it is realized that the harmful agent did not materialize. Perhaps the best-known example is the panic that ensued in the United

States on Halloween eve in 1938 following the realistic radio enactment of H. G. Wells's book *War of the Worlds* by the CBS Mercury Theater. In his book *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Cantril 1940), psychologist Hadley Cantril notes that in general, those panicking failed to exercise critical thinking, such as telephoning the police or checking other media sources. There remains a great potential for similar hoaxes to recur when they are presented with plausibility and a degree of realism for the participants. A similar broadcast in South America nearly a decade later had disastrous consequences. During 1949, in the vicinity of Quito, Ecuador, a radio play based upon the *War of the Worlds* resulted in tens of thousands of frantic residents pouring into the streets and fleeing for their lives, or preparing to defend themselves against Martian gas raids. Broadcast in Spanish, the program was highly realistic, including the name of a local community, Cotacallo, as the Martian landing site. The play included impersonations of politicians and vivid eye-witness descriptions. It was so convincing that police rushed to Cotacallo to repel the invaders. Quito was left with a skeleton police force that was unable to prevent an angry mob from burning down the building housing the radio station that broadcast the drama. Fifteen people were killed, including the event's mastermind.

Spontaneous mass flights from the city of London have occurred over the centuries in response to prophecies of its destruction by: a great flood in 1524, the Day of Judgment in 1736, and an earthquake in 1761 (Mackay 1852). One of many contemporary examples involving apocalyptic prophecies and mass panic occurred in Adelaide, Australia, in the month leading up to January 19, 1976. Many people fled the city and some even sold their homes after "psychic" John Nash predicted that an earthquake and tidal wave would strike at midday. Many of those who sold their homes or just left to the hills for the day were first generation Greeks and Italians - both Greece and Italy have a long history of devastating earthquakes, and belief in clairvoyants in those countries is generally taken very seriously (Bartholomew 1992).

### Symbolic Community Scares

Symbolic community scares typically endure in a waxing and waning fashion for years, encompassing entire countries and geographical regions. They involve less of an immediate concern for safety and welfare, and more of a general, long-term threat. They are primarily symbolic and rumor-driven, consisting of fear over the exaggerated erosion of traditional values. These moral panics are characterized by self-fulfilling stereotypes of ethnic minorities and deviants who are wrongfully indicted for evil deeds, having much in common with the infamous continental European witch persecutions of 1400 to 1650. In *Collective Behavior*, sociologist Erich Goode (1992) aptly summarizes these events, noting that they originated from the disintegration of the Roman Catholic Church during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. The feudal hierarchy was unraveling and peasants were migrating to cities. Scientific rationalism, with its secular philosophy, conflicted with church doctrine, and new religious denominations were being formed beyond the church's control. In an unconscious attempt to counteract secularism and reestablish traditional authority, the church-sponsored persecution of witches attempted to redefine moral boundaries, and church inquisitors focused on eradicating various deviants who were viewed as a threat.

Two prominent moral panics have persisted for the past decade. Scores of Western communities with predominantly Judeo-Christian traditions have experienced ongoing rumors about the existence of a network of satanic cults that kidnap and sacrifice children. These rumors coincide with the widespread perception of declining Western morality and traditional values. Under similar historical circumstances, subversion myths have appeared in which a particular alien group is believed to threaten the moral fabric of society. Common scapegoats include minority ethnic groups, Jews, Africans, communists, heretics, deviants, and the poor. Such myths flourish during periods of economic downturn and social unrest, and are characterized by dramatic, plausible rumors containing meaningful, timely morals or messages reflecting popular fears. During oral transmission, local details are substituted and a credible source is identified. Their function is primarily metaphorical. Victor (1990, 290) notes that the contemporary satanic-cult scare coincides with the disintegration of traditional family structures, which intensifies fears and the desire "to blame someone."

Unlike scares involving imminent danger, subversion myths present a more generalized threat not only to people, but to a way of life (Hicks 1990, 387), as rumors and urban legends of local satanic cults function as cautionary cultural metaphors about the inability of the weakened family to protect children (Bromley 1989; Victor 1989). A similar symbolic process drives child sex-abuse panics that have appeared periodically in certain regions for decades (Cockburn 1990).

### Collective Wish-Fulfillment

Mass wish-fulfillment involves processes similar to those that cause community threats and moral panics, except the object of interest is esteemed and satisfies psychological needs. Cases typically persist for a few weeks or months and recur periodically in clusters. Episodes involve a subconscious wish that is related to human mortality in conjunction with a plausible belief, fostering a collective quest for transcendence. Examples include Virgin Mary "appearances" (Yassa 1980; Persinger and Derr 1989), "moving" religious statues in Ireland (Toibin 1985), waves of claims and public discourse surrounding widespread reports of fairies in England before the twentieth century (Kirk 1812; Evans-Wentz 1909), and flying saucers worldwide since 1947 (Sheaffer 1981). These myths are supported by a spiritual void left by the ascendancy of rationalism and secular humanism. Within this context, and fostered by sensationalized documentaries, movies, and books, contemporary populations have been conditioned to scan the heavens for "UFOs," representing what Carl Jung (1959) termed "technological angels." These sightings serve as a projected Rorschach inkblot test of the collective psyche, underscoring the promise of rapid technological advancement during a period of spiritual decline.

Accounts of UFO occupants and fairies depict godlike beings capable of transcending natural laws and, thus, potentially elevating humans to their immortal realm. They reflect themes similar to those found in religion, mythology, and folklore throughout the world, camouflaged for contemporary acceptance (Bullard 1989). Transcendence and magical or supernatural powers are an underlying theme in most wish-fulfillments. Education builds resistance but does not provide immunity to what philosopher Paul Kurtz (1991) terms "the transcendental temptation." Even observations of imaginary and extinct creatures, such as Bigfoot and the Tasmanian "Tiger," respectively, once considered the sole domains of zoology, have undergone recent transformations with the emergence of a new motif among paranormal researchers that links extraterrestrial or paranormal themes with phantom animals (Clark and Coleman 1978; Healy and Cropper 1994). The existence of such animals can be viewed as an antiscientific symbol undermining secularism. Like claims of contact with UFOs or the Virgin Mary, evidence for the existence of Bigfoot and Tasmanian "Tigers" ultimately rests with eyewitness testimony, which is notoriously unreliable (Loftus 1979; Buckhout 1980; Ross et al. 1994).

### A Note on Non-Western Delusions

Human gullibility is limited only by plausibility. This is especially apparent in non-Western countries where superstitions are often rampant. For example, in some cultures it is widely believed that eating certain foods or having contact with "ghosts" can cause one's sex organs to rapidly shrivel. It is a remarkable example of the power of self-delusion that men in parts of Asia continue to experience "koro" epidemics, convinced that they are the victims of a contagious disease that causes their penises to shrink. Episodes are triggered by rumors and last from a few days to several months and often affect thousands. "Victims" suffer intense anxiety, sweating, palpitations, insomnia, and often take the extreme measure of placing clamps or string onto the organ or having family members hold the penis in relays until treatment is obtained, usually from native healers. Occasionally women are affected, believing that their breasts and vagina are being pulled into their bodies. During a koro episode on the tiny island nation of Singapore in 1967, thousands of citizens were affected, both males and females, forcing the government to declare an emergency (Gwee 1968; Mun 1968). Pandemonium reigned during an outbreak in northeast India in 1982. So widespread was the panic that medical authorities took the drastic measure of touring the region with loudspeakers to reassure anxious residents and measured penises at intervals to demonstrate that no shrinkage was taking place (Chakraborty et al. 1983). Ignorance of

human perceptual fallibility, combined with rumors and traditional beliefs, resulted in frantic citizens intensely scrutinizing their genitalia.

While koro may seem to represent extreme irrationality to outsiders, outbreaks differ from mass delusions in Western countries in only one significant respect - the rumor-related object. In this case, it is the sex organs and their changing size, shape, and firmness. For the mass delusion to occur, the object of scrutiny must be of perceived importance, and the rumor credible. Hence, in theory, the sole factor preventing similar Western epidemics is the absence of koro cultural traditions.

### The Lure of Mass Delusions

Collective delusions possess a powerful seductive lure that continuously changes in a chameleon-like fashion to enable us to confirm our deepest fears or realize our greatest desires. Most Westerners can easily distinguish koro and headhunting scares as the products of myth and superstition. Yet, many of these same people are likely to believe in the reality of flying saucers, ghosts, or psychic phenomena. We must always be prepared to evaluate incredible claims based on the available facts and avoid making emotional judgments. The underlying themes of collective delusions remain constant. Circumstances surrounding the Adelaide earthquake panic of 1976 are virtually identical to those of the London earthquake panic of 1761. Contemporary child-molestation and satanic-cult fears resemble the persecution of various deviants and ethnic groups during the infamous medieval European witch-hunts. Today's wish-fulfillments parallel transcendent elements that have been prominent fixtures in religious movements for millennia. Only the form changes to reflect the social and cultural context.

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