

Conspiracy Theory Vulnerability From a Psychodynamic Perspective: Considering Four Epistemologies Related to Four Developmental Existential- Relational Positions

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories command much attention these days. However, the reasons why people come to believe in them is elusive. An overlooked perspective is the developmental one. We propose the importance of looking at the ways our early relationships to “otherness,” authority, and agency inform the different epistemologies or world views that we adopt and, therein, relate to our vulnerability to conspiratorial belief. We describe four existential-relational developmental positions and discuss how these can be paired with a collapsed, crippled, or delimited epistemology or one of wondering.

Keywords

conspiracy theory, epistemology, existential, developmental positions, QAnon

Resumen

Hoy en día las teorías de conspiración exigen mucha atención. Sin embargo, las razones por las que la gente llega a creer en ellas son elusivas. Una perspectiva que se pasa por alto es la que pasa durante desarrollo. Proponemos lo que es importante es considerar cómo nuestras relaciones durante la infancia con la autoridad, la agencia del ser, y el estado de ser otro establecen las epistemologías diferentes o los “visiones del mundo” que adoptamos y, por lo tanto, afectan nuestra vulnerabilidad a las creencias de la conspiración. Describimos cuatro posiciones existencial y relacional de desarrollo para discutir cómo estas pueden estar asociadas con una epistemología colapsada, lisiada, o delimitada o una de preguntarse.

Palabras Clave

teorías de conspiración, epistemología, agencia, posiciones existencial

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Conspiracy theories and those who believe them have captured national if not global attention. This might be because some of them, such as QAnon, seem so outlandishly ridiculous that they generate passionate questions along the lines of “How can anyone believe this?”

Belief in many of these theories has more than trivial consequences. There is harm in the offing when scientific, legal, and/or historical information are either ignored or fallaciously discredited. Despite efforts at grouping “who” believers are



and what they have in common, what we seem to know about them is mostly what we do not know: they are not simply “crazy” people; they are not lacking in education or intelligence. Indeed, it is fair to say that we are all susceptible to belief in a conspiracy theory.

Additional Perspective Is Needed

We think that understanding and appreciating why we believe in and are susceptible to conspiracy theories and conspiratorial styles of thinking requires a psychological developmental perspective. It depends on which of four existential-relational positions we occupy in a prevailing way.

In this paper we elaborate these positions. They reflect the importance of our early relationships with others. Our history with relating to others while growing up sets the stage for how we relate to “knowing” later in life. All of this then bears importantly, of course, in determining our capacity for doing the critical thinking which is essential to not falling into embrace of a conspiracy theory.

In this paper we discuss how each existential-relational position captures an aspect of the way that we secure a safe sense of our being. Each differently affects how and in whom we position the authority of knowledge and how we register and experience other people’s differences as well as our own sense of otherness. We can also say that our philosophy of how and what we know, our epistemology, is different depending on which of these positions we are functioning in. In the different positions our perspective on how and what we know reflects the following: a collapsed epistemology, an “epistemology of wondering,” or something in between, what we suggest can be called either a crippled or delimited epistemology.

Why Is This Important?

All of the above bears importantly in our capacity to do the critical thinking that is essential to evaluating conspiracy theories. Life’s anxieties affect our thinking and therefore the difficult task of being willing to chase after “truth” with the best facts that we have available to us. When we get “stuck” in one of the developmentally earlier positions, we are susceptible to foreclosing the chase after truth. Getting stuck and falling into foreclosure is something which happens when we trade “truth” for the apparent security offered by membership in a social tribe or political group. Such a trade, unfortunately, is one which can delimit or cripple our acceptance of “otherness,” the otherness of those who are not us and the otherness that we always have even to our own selves.

There is, however, a caveat that is important to emphasize even at the risk of repetition. Each position, while linearly achieved is never securely held by any of us. The challenge of being in the world is always an unfolding one, and the stresses and anxieties inherent to the challenges we face can prompt us to move between the positions, sometimes more fluidly than at other times. Hence, we maintain that we are all susceptible to falling into a position which makes us vulnerable to subscription to a conspiracy theory.

In this paper we discuss these four, existential, developmental positions not only in abstract terms but via the story of “Megan.” Her story highlights aspects of the positions, especially how our epistemology changes in accordance with the one we occupy. It also illustrates the anxieties in life that pertain to immersion in a conspiracy theory and to the process of emerging out of subscription to it. In looking at Megan’s story we illustrate the merit in focusing not so much on “who” believes in conspiracy theories but on “why” someone might come to believe in them.

Introduction: Conspiracy Theories and Misconceptions About Them

Conspiracy theories and those who believe them have captured global attention. Perhaps this is partly so, because some, such as QAnon, seem so outlandishly ridiculous that they stir our incredulously toned: “How can anyone believe this?” Belief in them has more than trivial consequence for our society. Whether the theory addresses vaccination, climate change, sex trafficking, or secretive political power-brokering, there is harm in the offing when scientific, legal, and/or historical information are either ignored or fallaciously discredited. Despite the important consequences for our society, what we know about believers is elusive and somewhat paradoxical.

Joseph Uscinski’s book (2019), *Conspiracy Theories & the People Who Believe Them*, is, for example, a worthy compendium which provides a plethora of studies. However, in the end it seems clear that what we know about who “believers” are cannot be stated in a persuasively encompassing way. Despite efforts at grouping who believers are and

what they have in common, what we seem to know about them is mostly what we do not know. Indeed, there are multiple misconceptions about who believes in conspiracy theories:

1. It is an “incorrect assumption that conspiracy theories are trivial notions believed only by disenfranchised, paranoid, or distrustful people” (Wood & Douglas, 2019, p. 253). From the empirical front, Adam Enders and colleagues (2021) find that “While some conspiracy beliefs....are related to violent orientations and dark personality characteristics, many are more the product of partisan and ideological motivations and perhaps even elite rhetoric” (p. 268). This accords with common sense. There are simply too many persons who function in society adaptively to dismiss them all as “crazy.” To this point Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009) say: “[T]he metaphor of mental illness itself obscures more than it clarifies” (p. 211).
2. Education does not inoculate us against subscription to conspiracy theories. Although Hugo Druchon (2019) writes that “within individual countries those with higher education are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than those with lower educational achievements” (p. 345), this finding challenges our common experience that intelligent and articulate people, many with notable academic credentials, subscribe to outlandish theories and promulgate them. An unflinchingly fair conclusion is what teacher Bart Milar (2015) says in a TED talk, “Formal education is no shield against shoddy thinking” (minute: 0:43).
3. Conspiracy theory believers *do* think rationally, *but* we do well to remember the assertion of Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1739/2020), that reason is “the slave of passions”. We must bear in mind, then, that conspiracy theories arise for a purpose. At the manifest level, we might assert that they arise to explain complex events in our world which destabilize our sense of safety. In this regard, as Bradley Franks and colleagues (2017) say, conspiracy theories offer a “symbolic coping which transmutes the diffuse anxiety arising from such events into specific threats caused by the purportedly malevolent action of powerful actors” (unnumbered). Accordingly, in Uscinski’s (2019) book, in a chapter titled, *The Truth is Around Here Somewhere*, Preston Brost (2019) writes: “The deeper we look, the more difficult it becomes to treat conspiracy thinking as alien to rationality, or even alien to ourselves” (p. 278). We are all passionate beings who are subject to events which stir our deep anxieties, and our anxieties are central to our cognitive processes. Thus, while it may be easy to treat those who believe in conspiracy theories as “other,” “less than,” or simply “crazy,” this belies the research into conspiracy theories that suggests we all can be susceptible to circumstance and a mindset by which we could believe in similar ideas.

Considering Conspiracy Theories From a Developmental Framework

We think Brost (2019) and Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) point us productively towards fruitful ground for exploration. Specifically, Brost emphasizes that we should be looking more at “why” people believe in conspiracy theories rather than trying to identify or categorize “who” believes in them. Sunstein and Vermeule (in accordance with Hardin, 2002) begin to suggest an answer to the question of “why” saying that believers suffer from “crippled epistemologies.” Although we do not endorse their explanation that believers “know very few things, and what they know is wrong” (p. 211), we *do* think that their phrase “crippled epistemology” and Brost’s focus on the “why” rather than “who” points us toward a much overlooked consideration: the developmental perspective. We propose that understanding why people are susceptible to conspiracy theories and conspiratorial styles of thinking requires inclusion of a psychological developmental perspective which has been lacking in contemporary discourse.

We propose that epistemology, our philosophy of how and what we know, fundamentally reflects the existential-relational, developmental position in which we are functioning. In this regard we propose that there are four positions that pertain to how we make meaning out of our relationships with self and others and that each position influences our susceptibility to believing in conspiracy theories. This is so, because each position captures an aspect of the way that we secure a safe sense of our being, how we see ourselves, and how we see others. These appraisals, whether conscious or unconscious, set the conditions by which we can access certain parts of ourselves and come to know the world in adaptive ways. We emphasize here, however, that the way we secure that safe sense evolves in a linear but

never fully secured way; it does not emerge wholistically with each successive position subsuming the previous one with a stable coherence. In other words, the way we secure that safe sense at each position is different, because each position represents a different developmental challenge which is never obviated fully in the unfolding task of *being*. Specifically, we propose that the existential-relational position in which we reside affects:

1. How and in whom we position the authority of knowledge. In other words, our relationship with our own authority and that of authority figures depends very much on the existential position we are holding.
2. How we register and experience other people's differences as well as our own sense of otherness.
3. Our valuation of otherness. This is important because as cognitive psychologist, Philip Fernbach (2017), puts it: "Thinking is a social process. Rather than happening inside your head it emerges from your interactions from those around you" (minute 7:35).
4. Our embrace of the world via a collapsed epistemology, an "epistemology of wondering" (Webb, 1994), or something in between: either a crippled or delimited epistemology.

An Anchoring Story

Before describing these existential-relational positions, we want to introduce the story of "Megan." Her's is one we will return to throughout this paper, because it illustrates how our epistemology changes in accordance with the developmental position that we occupy. Her story illustrates the anxieties that pertain to immersion in a conspiracy theory and to the process of emerging out of subscription to it.

Megan is a self-described liberal and Bernie Sanders supporter. Here, is her description of her immersion into QAnon.

It was after a day of his [husband Dave's] any outbursts when I discovered QAnon. That night, Dave was asleep and I lay awake buzzing with stress. Tired of staring at the ceiling, I decided to watch the *Fall Cabal* YouTube series a friend of mine had told me about. "It's really weird. I'd love to get your opinion on it," she messaged me a few days before along with a link. The 10 episodes wove together a narrative about "The Cabal," supposedly a secret and stance pedophile ring run by member of the liberal elite, and Trump's secret fight to overthrow them. I didn't sleep at all that night. Instead, I found dozens of article and videos confirming my new political views. By the morning, I was a true believer" (Carrier, 2021, unnumbered).

In reflecting on her vulnerability to QAnon, Megan notes that her allegiance to Bernie Sanders served as an entry level drug (referred to as being "red-pilled"). She describes the overlap between QAnon and Bernie in their belief of "corrupt elites that makes it hard for everyone else in the country and the world stay afloat." In other words, even ahead of her exposure to QAnon, Megan had found it hard to trust the government, noting she "didn't find the explanations of 9/11 or the assassination John F. Kennedy to be satisfactory." This distrust blossomed when Bernie was running for President, and she felt that the "Democratic establishment conspired to keep Bernie from the Presidency." In short, she was primed to believe that the system was rigged. The power of *Fall Cabal* was that it "organized all those thoughts under a simple explanation – the world was being run by the Cabal." Megan's comment here seems to echo the sentiments of Jitarth Jadeja, a former believer in QAnon: "[It is] just such a good story, you know, like this insider leaking secret government information," (Rosen, 2021). It provides not only a reason to the way things are but also a promise that if you are in tune with a certain set of beliefs, you will have the key to understanding everything (Thompson, 2020). Conspiracy theories offer answers to events which stir deep anxieties, and we are vulnerable as beings to "[t]he charisma of certainty...which entraps the child who is latent in us all" (Storr, 1996, p. 233).

Existential Positions

The existential-relational positions that we describe are based fundamentally on the clinical theory of the British Object Relations school of psychoanalysis. It initially was written about by Melanie Klein (1975a, 1975b) and D. W. Winnicott (1935/1958a, 1955/1958b), and it has been subsequently elaborated by numerous others, including Thomas Ogden (1986,

1989), and James Grotstein (2007). Our own understanding not only introduces a more interpersonal and relational perspective but has been influenced by the writings of attachment theorists in understanding the mutually regulating and dyadic ways parents and children interact with each other to co-construct different attachment styles (Beebe, 2005; Beebe & Lachmann, 1998, 2003, 2014; Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, & Bahrnick, 2012; Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Buck, Bahrnick, & Chen 2012). Further, though coming from a slightly different theoretical paradigm, we also note an influence of the work on mentalization or the ways that children come to know themselves as a quality of how they are first known by their primary caregivers (Fonagy & Target, 1996, 2006, 2008; Jurist, 2019).

These developmental theories help us understand how infants and children organize and interact with key others in their world in ways that enable them to become attached and then separate subjects. While history, whether social or individual, might not exactly repeat itself, our early relationships set the trajectories for many of our later experiences. Hence, we propose that these positions are relevant to how we “think” not just in our early developmental years but throughout the lifespan. What we describe below, then, is our lens for how we organize, interpret, and experience life in terms of our interactions with and views of ourselves and others. As we note above, the positions especially address our relationship to otherness, agency, and authority.

The four existential-relational positions are the contiguous, paranoid-schizoid, depressive, and transcendent. Full elaboration of each position’s character cannot be given full justice here. However, we will broach the developmental issues that underlie the emergence of each position and the concordant ramifications for conspiracy theory belief.

Position 1: Contiguous, A Collapsed Epistemology

Our earliest experiences as a newborn through the initiation of infancy (around 6 months or so) are described aptly as contiguous; there is a feeling of “oneness” in the connectedness that baby and parent feel together. The baby experiences the type of closeness we imagine when we think of “nesting.” The baby’s needs, while demanding and challenging for sleep-deprived and exhausted parents, are met relatively seamlessly to create a feeling of trust and basic security.

What complicates this position, however, is not only the challenge of meeting the needs of the baby but also the feeling of being responsible for that incumbent care. How parents feel about themselves in response to their child’s dependence and how they navigate the social pressures and expectations (i.e., mom shaming) is arguably as important as the care itself.

How a parent and the child attune themselves to each other becomes part of how the baby begins to navigate their world. This creates an awesome (but also intimidating) dyadic relational cycle where baby and parent(s) look to one another to determine how to think and feel. This pattern of co-regulation leads to normal deviations but also to problematic symptoms that can weave into our interactional opportunities throughout life.

Thus, microgenetic analysis of mother and baby interactions demonstrate the development of disorganized attachment styles in babies under the age of 4 months (Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, & Bahrnick, 2012; Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, Buck, Bahrnick, & Chen 2012). In these situations, babies respond to their parents’ trauma and own disorganized experience with efforts to mitigate being overwhelmed. The baby adapts by trying to draw from their parent more healthy relating but also by withdrawing emotionally. The individualized peculiarities of this adaptation become internalized, and the unreliable responsivity of the parent impacts the child’s conception of self, especially with regards to their sense of agency and ability to influence others.

This is problematic, because even though the scope of the infant’s capacity to relate to the parent in the contiguous position is limited, it exists. Hence, even while highly attuned to the parents’ moods and reactions, the ability to “think” and “understand” is not yet developed. The parent has to be the one who “mentalizes” the feelings of the baby and put descriptive language to them (Fonagy, Gergeley, Jurist, & Target, 2005; Jurist, 2019). Relationally, then, the baby does not yet embody a reflective consciousness, and correspondingly there is no awareness of separateness or of identity, agency, and authority (Fonagy, 1991). There is, in other words, no sense of difference between “me and not-me” or that “I and you” are different.

In the parlance of this paper, we say that the child at this point has no intrinsic epistemology. Their undeveloped state and dependence upon their parent mean that they do not actively know the world but are, instead, dependent

upon others to exist within it. When parents are able to meet successfully the needs of their children, the child develops epistemic trust: a sense that the world is basically “good enough,” that parents and, by extension, other people can meet their needs and be relied upon (Fonagy, Luyten, Allison, & Campbell, 2017). A healthy dependency on adults can develop.

To the extent to which in later life we might return functionally to this position of dependency on either someone else or a belief system, we propose that we fall into a “collapsed epistemology.” Here meaning-making is so highly determined by the need to feel safe and secure that critical thinking is severely limited.

The Allure of Conspiracy Theories

With their all-encompassing descriptions and explanations, conspiracy theories offer us Truth that placates the existential anxiety we have, because we feel so unstably in command of the world around us. They offer us explanation that assuages our sense of being overwhelmed and unsafe. In other words, via subscription to a conspiracy theory we generate again a feeling or, at least, a semblance of epistemic trust. Thus, consider the experience of finding and believing in Q that Megan describes below:

Initially, believing in Q felt amazing, like being in some sort of mystical state or euphoria. For about six weeks, my fears about impending doom because of Covid-19, climate change and what I perceived as the threat of fascism were gone. The world felt safe and I felt energized, confident, creative and brimming with love. I'm not religious, but I kept thinking “Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God.” I heard “Amazing Grace” playing in my mind. I was so relieved to stop hating Trump, whom I used to see as racist, sexist and a Hitler-wannabe (Carrier, 2021, unnumbered).

In the above it is clear that Megan found in Q safety and belief in a higher order of organization. She felt like the problems of the world could be linked together in an all-encompassing and sensible way. Through belief in Q and the QAnon theories we might say she found a sanctuary, a restored contiguity where she felt her needs would be met seamlessly. This was essential to her even if, to an outsider's view, the cost for maintaining this illusion entailed embrace of paranoid distrust of non-believers (Ferreira et al., 2022).

What happens, then, in both development and lived experience when we find ourselves in need of such safety and protection? To understand this, we need to look at the movement from the contiguous position to the next stage.

Position 2: Paranoid-Schizoid, A Crippled Epistemology

We begin to move out of the contiguous position around 6-9 months of age (though some measures of attachment literature may suggest that this happens earlier at 4 months, i.e. Beebe, Lachmann, Markese, & Bahrnick, 2012). This happens normatively as our needs become increasingly complex and harder for our caregivers to meet in a way that maintains the illusory feeling in the baby that it is seamlessly *one* with the parent(s). This precipitates normative crises and resolutions around the tensions that emerge. Much like numerous philosophical traditions that note that thinking emerges from doubting or error, Object Relations proposes that our capacities to begin consideration of ourselves as a separate being emerges from these experiences of discontinuity. Thus, far from being a mark of parental (or child) failure, discontinuities between self and other provide the very basis for the hypothesis of self and other.

The experience of discomfort or anxiety that emerges when a need goes unmet, does not, of course, precipitate a reflective self-consciousness, but it does move us towards a feeling of subjective consciousness. We begin to feel that a discomfort is happening to *me*. And as this sense of *me* emerges so does a growing awareness of difference. However, difference is encapsulated in an ego-centric way, such that parents and caregivers are seen as “not-me.” They are from the child's perspective simply “not-me's” who have little or no individual subjectivity.

The categorization “me” and those who are “not-me” speaks to the concreteness and black/white or either/or style of thinking that is characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position. Our relational attunement at this point elaborates in

a way to enhance our safety, and we elaborate unconsciously to ourselves the emotional states occupied by both them (our caregivers) *and* by us that in either a “good” or “bad” way lead to our needs being met. An either/or mentality is present. “Good” is associated with safety and security and “bad” associated with anxiety and threat.

However, further complicating matters is that children struggle to see “good” and “bad” within the same person; they experience “badness,” whether their own or their parents, as very threatening to their safety. Accordingly, in an effort to keep themselves safe small children unconsciously may split off the “badness” that they think threatens their parents’ ability to love and care for them. This split off part is then projected into their parent who becomes to that child the “bad one.” In turn, the children are the “good one” and so worthy of being loved. Notably, then, how our caregiver responds to these processes of splitting and projection as well as to the aspects of our “badness” that we cannot split off are of crucial importance.

Here developmental thinking has a lot to say both about the nature of our “badness” and the quality of our caregiver’s response, much of which is complicated and at times at the level of conjecture. First and foremost, as we have written about elsewhere (Rosenbaum & Webb, 2021), this is “badness” without “intent.” Our “badness,” expressed sometimes as rage, fear, and destructive attack, must be understood as reactive to our anxieties about our needs not being met. Later in life, while intent can be part of the picture, we clinically understand concerns about destructive attack and “badness” as reflective of this early developmental drama and as an enactment of it.

Secondly, our caregiver ideally does not succumb to the children’s view of themselves as “all bad.” In other words, while the parent may feel angry, sad, or rejected, the caregiver retains a view of themselves and their child as both “good” *and* “bad.” This is accomplished in part by not responding in a retaliatory way, whether by counterattacking the child for their needs or withdrawing in a hurt fashion. They, the caregivers, are, in other words, able to embrace the “badness,” both the projections into them of their badness and their own felt badness. This requires of our caregivers their own emotional maturity. When they themselves struggle with their own inner sense of security and trend towards more avoidant, disorganized, or insecure styles of attachment, they may struggle in an embracing and equanimous way to reciprocate the child’s needs and affirm their sense of self (Beebe & Lachmann, 1998).

Of course, even the most secure parent will have times inevitably when they struggle to hold themselves and their child in nurturing alignment. The demands of small children are at times inarguably overwhelming and perfect attunement to the needs that stir their demands is impossible. When these times happen, our caregivers may react in ways we experience as destructive and aggressive. As a result, we develop an anxiety that can be said to have a paranoid cast. We experience fear that our own badness not only may be destructive of the *other* but also put our own self at risk of destruction. To address this anxiety about our badness we tend to offer quick repair to assuage the other’s wrath and/or we incline towards renouncing being aggressive at all.

In different cases our badness does not call out the other’s badness in a consistent way, and, instead, we come to experience our caregivers inconsistently. They offer a mixture of response, and we lack the ability to predict successfully whether we will get the “bad” or “good” parent. Thus, we fail to develop the learned capacity for knowing which of our own behaviors are bad or good. We then become excellent at keeping the other (the caregiver) calm, or, alternatively or jointly, we may armor ourselves further with an indifference to our caregiver’s emotional response. In doing this we split off not just from our own ability to be aggressive but, more broadly, we distance ourselves from our own inner affective world. We become “schizoid.”

We note that while some of this way of adapting is normal in any developmental situation, the extent to which we rely on this way of remaining in the world varies and affects the way we organize ourselves defensively around real or imagined threat. This has certain psychological consequences as we exchange openness to ourselves and others for defensive closed-ness by which we try and achieve impenetrability (directed from either our inner selves or external others). Our defensiveness is relational, emotional, and cognitive.

Considered later in life, from the paranoid-schizoid position we organize life into those who are “like me” and those who are “not like me.” In other words, our psychic organization is dominated by an “us” versus “them” type of thinking. Here the other’s badness threatens to uproot our “goodness,” because we cannot integrate the two images. This can be incredibly effective for getting things done, but, as a result, we inevitably suffer from a crippled epistemology. Being unable to move from a binary of good and bad and, thereby, to embrace the different “other,” essentially traps us within

a singular truth. Moreover, the anxiety that is generated from difference is seen as existentially threatening, because it threatens to undermine our bedrock of reality.

Holding a *crippled* epistemology not only prevents us from appreciating and tolerating the ways other people are different from ourselves, it also limits our ability to perceive and tolerate our own considerable otherness and strangeness to our sense of self. By this we refer to the ways that our own experience and knowledge of ourselves, our motivations, desires, wishes, dreams, needs, and so forth, are always imperfect and in a process of becoming. In the paranoid-schizoid position we worry that we may discover aspects of ourselves that we do not like, and we act, accordingly, in a defensively identity-encapsulating way.

From an attachment perspective, we postulate that those within the paranoid-schizoid position are less likely to suffer from the disorganized attachment that comes about from parental misattunement at our earliest months and more likely to reflect anxious and avoidant styles of attachment (Beebe & Lachmann, 2003). Thus, there is more of a basis for relating and sense of self than we had when we were younger, but there is still a tremendous sense of insecurity in our ability to relate meaningfully. Our foundational epistemic trust is limited and requires the maneuvers around mollification or distancing described above. While a further retreat into more disorganized styles remain possible, especially under heightened distress, we note that research has consistently found associations between anxious and avoidant styles of attachment and willingness to believe in conspiracy theories (i.e. Leone et al., 2018), which we describe more below.

The Paranoid-Schizoid Position and Conspiracy Theories

When later in life we are stuck in the paranoid-schizoid position, we struggle to hold the nuances that are a part of living. We see this in Megan's reaction to the electoral rejection of her candidate. From her crippled meaning-making position, she felt that her man (and, implicitly, herself via her identification with him) could not have lost for any reason that suggested unworthiness. Protection against this conclusion required her to adopt a paranoid conspiracy theory explanation. In keeping with the idea of a crippled epistemology, research into conspiracy theories has found notable constraints in the flexibility and depth of the thinking of conspiracy theory believers (Freeman & Bentall, 2017).

From our perspective, then, subscription to conspiracy theories is fostered greatly by being in the paranoid-schizoid position, with a persistent longing for the feelings of security that are further associated with the contiguous position. Within the paranoid-schizoid position the grip of the conspiracy theory not only provides a relief from tolerating difficult feelings but it also, we emphasize, offers us a community with which to validate and affirm our sense of the world. Thus, the splitting into good and bad that is evident in early childhood evolves into group affiliations. We find others who share our goodness and so affirm and validate our sense that this is the way things are. This is seductively relieving to us; it fills us with goodness and locates everything bad outside of ourselves and in others. Believing in a conspiracy theory with a community of followers provides belonging but also a sense of feeling special. It buffers the latent feelings of insecure and avoidant attachment so often found in us as believers of conspiracy theories (Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Leone et al., 2018) while offering us an euphoric high that is a tonic against the stressors of living. In the words of Jadeja (2021), "It was absolutely a drug. It just spirals out of control from there because like any drug, you need a bigger and bigger hit to get that high – which is why you need a bigger, more grandiose conspiracy theory."

Furthermore, this "high" and sense of belonging replaces our need and desire for actual agency and self-authority with group-think and community affiliation. Within the group a mob mentality sets in which cast into shadow any sense of our individualized agency and responsibility.

Thus, in the paranoid-schizoid position we ignore or deny evidence that contradicts what we need to believe. For example, consider this interview by CNN report Shimon Prokupecz (2021) with a right-wing rally goer.

After the rally goer mistakenly asserts that none of the "protesters" involved in the January 6th attack of the Capitol Building were charged with anything other than trespassing, the following exchange occurs (minute: 0:39-1:00):

Prokupecz: *There are some [protesters] charged with assaulting officers...*

Rally Goer: *That is a lie.*

Prokupecz: *You haven't seen the video?*

Rally Goer (challengingly): *Please show me if it exists.*

Prokupecz shows the rally goer the well-circulated video of a screaming officer being crushed against a door.

Rally goer responds (1:15): *"He [the officer] could easily have backed up...This is not assault."*

We witness here the threat this individual feels to his sense of self and we see the strength of his affiliation with a group that both affirms and helps create his sense of selfhood. That the threat is existential, one which creates a crisis in his sense of "being-ness," is marked by his resort to the desperation of distortion and denial ("The officer could easily have backed up"). The concreteness of this statement and the next one ("This is not assault") is said so directly and simply as to imply a claim of authoritative truth.

Thus, we might grit our teeth and ask, "What makes it so difficult to consider another perspective?" We return to Megan. She describes how hard her husband worked to hold a more developed position (the depressive position which we will describe next).

Dave decided to give it all he had. He learned to approach my new views with curiosity instead of judgment. But he also had to set boundaries and ground rules: I only shared QAnon-related information with him when he was willing, and he promised to make time for these conversations once a week. We also both acknowledged that neither of us could say for sure what was truly going on and decided we were willing to hold different beliefs — without trying to bring the other over to our side (Carrier, 2021, unnumbered).

By contrast, if such truth statements and their negotiation are experienced as a kind of assault, we devolve into a paranoid-schizoid style or we work extra hard to hold the depressive position to navigate the threat. So, we respond in argumentative fashion by saying, in essence, "You're wrong." This then furthers the defensive posturing of the individual in the paranoid-schizoid position, exemplifying the differences between self and other, "me" and "not-me" ("us" and "not-us").

What is it, then, that works when we respond from the more difficult but developed position?

Position 3: Depressive, A Delimited Epistemology

Perhaps not surprisingly, the ability of Dave (above) to respond from a more open-minded position echoes what clinicians think happens when parents help their children move from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position. Recall the dilemma that our caretakers face in reckoning with how to respond to our badness. While some amount of parental response inevitably contributes to our, as a child, occupying the paranoid-schizoid position, how they respond also contributes centrally to our ability to integrate good and bad into the same person. If they, our caregivers, remain "good-enough" (Winnicott, 1971) at providing us with our necessary nurturance and care, then we become able to recognize that we and they are comprised of good *and* bad parts. The complexity of being a person emerges, and *me and not-me* evolves into *I and you*. We and others around us begin to be realized as both thinking and feeling subjects.

Accordingly, we begin to feel concern for these others. How they experience us becomes a factor and, with this, so does wonder about the impact of our badness on others. As part of this we seek to repair hurts we think we have caused by our self-absorption in "me-ness," and our greater awareness generates "depressive" or guilty feelings. We feel also humiliation and embarrassment, feelings that come to us now that we can engage people as "you's" rather than only as "not-me's."

What enables us to tolerate these difficult feelings and to remain in the depressive position, rather than retreat towards the greater simplicity of the paranoid-schizoid or contiguous positions, hinges greatly on how our caretakers handle our regrets. If they can do so in a way that demonstrates that they, too, struggle with similar concerns, then we can *begin* to appreciate that this is a human issue. In other words, if our caregivers do not respond with arrogance, if

they respond in a way that shows their embrace of having clay feet like any other human, we can begin to relativize their authority. This enables us to appreciate them as secure beings who in the face of our badness show us grace, which we, in turn, can apply inwards to ourselves and outwards to others. This sets the stage for our becoming securely attached, agentic subjects who can act with an authority that acknowledges not only our limitations and responsibilities but our joys as well.

If, however, our caregivers cannot respond with such grace, they only partially allow us escape from seeing them as the capital “A” of authority and the capital “T” of truth. They might allow us sufficient glimpse of their clay feet that we see their humanness, but they do not allow this as a convergent relational event; it is not something which can be embraced and acknowledged between them and us. Hence, our caregivers in this regard demonstrate not only their own insecurities but also that it is not safe for us to acknowledge these depressive level concerns. In the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (Andersen, 1872/2020), we, in essence, become the boy who sees the emperor’s nakedness, but, in a twist of this story, we are limited to *not* yelling this out because of the peril it will bring to our connection to the emperor-caregiver.

One of the many consequences of this restriction in our agency and registration of truth is that we realize a *delimited* epistemology. We realize that they, our caregivers, are not personally the capital T of truth but we feel obligated to sustain them as our authority with a capital A. In other words, we might see that there are competing sources of authority *and* truth, but we also feel deeply constrained from acknowledging this fully. Our awareness of it must remain peripheral to our reflections. Thus, we try to be perfect as a way of not falling from grace in the eyes of our “emperor” and to not be a bad team member who needs to be ostracized.

The Depressive Position and Conspiracy Theories

When our authority figures themselves cannot securely occupy the depressive position, then we cannot learn that *both* truth and authority are relative. In our interaction with our “community of knowing” (which is the evolved extension of our relationship to our caregivers), we, therefore, will be inclined strongly to be the “good soldier” who seeks to avoid disappointing our community and any agreed upon emperor. Being a “bad soldier” risks our affiliative security and being thrust back into an aloneness with the complicated issues that relate to destructiveness and caring. We end up going along with the conspiracy theory of truth.

A notable example of this is the position taken by Trump counselor, Kellyanne Conway. While we appreciate that Conway’s posturing undoubtedly was shaped by her ardent role in promoting Trump, we think her passionate embrace of it exemplifies a positioning with which she is quite familiar. For instance, during an interview on Meet the Press on January 22, 2017, Conway defends White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s statement about attendance at Trump’s inauguration. When journalist, Chuck Todd, asks her why Spicer would “utter a provable falsehood,” Conway responds: He “gave alternative facts” (Todd, 2017, minute: 1:52). I don’t think you can prove those numbers one way or the other. There’s no way to really quantify crowds. We all know that” (3:17 - 3:21).

Conway makes it very clear here, although with some inference required, that she is delimited in her epistemological freedom. She offers us the pseudo but ultimately hollow embrace of the depressive position; one wherein she can acknowledge that truth as a capital T is not held by anyone person (there are “alternative facts”) but cannot betray emperor Trump who she holds as an authority with a capital A. Conway realizes that relativizing his authority will entail expulsion from the group. Ostensibly presenting herself as in the depressive position where there is a multiplicity of perspectives, her concerns echo that of the paranoid-schizoid.

We can compare this to Trump’s reaction to Senator Liz Cheney when she heralded the authority of the Constitution over “embrace of the big lie” (Hurzler, 2021, minute 00:11-00:18) that Trump insistently promulgates about election fraud. Trump, as the emperor who demands capital A authority attacks her as bad. He says, “Liz Cheney is a bitter, horrible human being.... She has no personality or anything good having to do with politics or our country” (O’Connell, 2021, unnumbered).

Relativizing *both* authority and truth requires us then to mourn our own but also, by extension, other’s imperfect knowledge regarding the world, self, and other-ness. That this mourning can give way eventually to a transcendental position of curiosity is not relevant to those who cannot forsake the anxiety of their own and other’s limitations. In this

regard, we suggest that the social ideal that we treat others as we want them to treat us, speaks directly to an awareness of self and other or, at the very least, to the need to encode this concretely.

Thus, we propose that while in the depressive position we go beyond a *crippled* epistemology, we still function with a *delimited* epistemology. We might think of this as the truth of the “golden rule.” While setting our response to others as the same as one that we would seek for ourselves is a solid prescription for society, it falls short in tying us together in an embrace of “we-ness” or the “together-ness” of our condition. Instead, it functions as a transactional shorthand meant to keep civilization civil but not deeply and personally related.

Despite its limitations, being in the depressive position offers some protection from conspiracy theories. If this way of thinking limits our loyalty to a personalized or group authority, we still can recognize with humility that truths amongst good people can be different. At least the door is opening to greater critical thinking where alternative explanations have the potential for exploration. We can see this in the way Dave and Megan navigated their relationship. Megan notes that a key point in her connection to QAnon was when Dave approached her from what we would see as the depressive position. She writes:

“I am open to the possibility that I could be wrong,” Dave said. “Are you willing to meet me there? Would you be willing to consider that while you’re feeling really certain about things, there’s a possibility that there’s things you’re seeing that could be wrong?” I agreed. That was the first crack in my firm belief system — allowing myself to simply consider the possibility that I might be wrong despite feeling as sure as I was (Carrier, 2021, unnumbered).

Before proceeding to our discussion of the last position, we hasten to reemphasize that achievement of the depressive position is itself not a guarantee that we will not in certain circumstances move back towards the paranoid-schizoid position and again be more susceptible to casting personalized authority and truth as absolute. From our perspective, movement between perspectives is normative especially when we are under stress. Times when we might feel guilty or ashamed become moments of challenge which, then, can be times when we long to abandon the complexities inherent to critical reflection and, instead, retreat into the simplicity of the binary worldview that the paranoid-schizoid position exemplifies or devolve into relatively thoughtless safety of the contiguous position.

In this regard, we note the tactics employed rhetorically by politicians, especially those on the extreme wing, that focus on bullying and shaming. Trump illustrates this tactic repeatedly. He addresses the deep fears and anxieties of his followers by describing how immigrants have stolen their jobs or how environmentalists have taken away the coal mining resources and threatened their livelihood. In doing this, he not only induces a paranoid-schizoid split between you and the other (whoever that is), he creates shame by saying that your life is not what it ought to be. This preys on depressive position anxieties by making us feel defensive and bad about ourselves and struggling then in a mass setting to have to deal with these feelings. In offering up the other who can become the object of badness, Trump not only creates a scapegoat but provides a way out of a depressive dilemma through a paranoid-schizoid defense and identification with a group of one’s fellow “victims.” There is, then, a cathartic release of energy and an invigoration of self. The energy bound up in depressive level efforts to make meaning of things is obviated, and the energy that was directed towards that end now can be released as rage toward those who are “not-us.”

In doing this Trump asserts himself as the both the authority with a capital A (since he provides the scapegoat) and simultaneously affirms himself as the one who hold truth with a capital T. He is the self-proclaimed “stable genius” (e.g., 6 January 2019, 12 July 2018). This generates feelings of safety and security that are reminiscent of the contiguous position. From here, we are primed for the possibility of conspiracy theories. Having been moved from depressive to paranoid-schizoid, or simply more firmly enmeshed in the paranoid-schizoid, we defend against ascent to or return to the depressive, because it involves giving up the certainty, energy, and euphoria that come from such identification. So, when confronted with conflicting data or information, we may look towards third party ideas: conspiracy theories that explain things that otherwise feel unbearable.

Position 4: Transcendent, An Epistemology of Wondering

If our authorities can allow for us to know them in a fuller and, thus, more imperfect way, we may become able to move from the depressive position to the transcendent position. Here, we can loosen our anxious grip on our own personalized truths and realize that we are all struggling with possessing truth as best as we can. In other words, we come to realize that truth with a capital T is only truly capitalized when it is acknowledged as not within the possession of one person or group. Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1988), points to this aspect of Truth when he says that it is always a “dark spot” of which we can only gain some illumination through “blindness” (p. 88). By this Bion (1967) means that a semblance of access is gained through a disciplined kind of ignorance marked by a willingness to try and be “without memory or desire” for any particular outcome, for vindication of our own expectation of what it is. In other words, Truth is only something we can hope to glimpse when we realize that it is not proprietary.

It is only when we can embrace a non-competitive perspective and tolerate the limitations of self and other that we truly can be open to chasing after truth. Truth then becomes our desire, and commitment to open inquiry where critical thinking can proceed so that different descriptions (constructions) can be explored and evaluated for how they fit with the information we share as communities of knowledge. In this we might say we have moved from a delimited epistemology to one of *wondering*.

Achievement of this wondering, as with the previous existential-relational positions, is based fundamentally on our early developmental experiences. Our capacity for curiosity and bewilderment, hinges at least in the first pass of our lives, on our caregivers’ ultimate willingness and ability to show that they not only sometimes fail at meeting our fundamental needs for nurturance but also, by extension, have clay feet (like everyone else) when it comes to bearing aloft divine intelligence. True capacity for wondering and critical thinking hinges importantly on caregivers’ embrace of being imperfect travelers who grapple with their own anxieties and insecurities. In this they are relatively free of the arrogance that would make them want from us more than our respect and love and seek, instead, our idealization of them as larger than life.

Returning to Megan and Dave we find some of the emergent transcendent position in their relationship: She says:

QAnon also hurt Dave – he had to quit his job because dealing with me was too distracting. He still has some PTSD when he sees me fixated on my phone. Even now he is worried I might be sucked back in. Otherwise, our relationship has become so much stronger and sweeter. We have learned to respect and appreciate each other more, and to consistently choose love over fear. And we’ve started to joke around a whole lot more about politics and life in general, something we didn’t do so much before. Overcoming the challenges and learning to laugh about them brought us closer (Carrier, 2021, unnumbered).

Having come through the crisis and returning towards the depressive position as well, Megan and Dave found shared experience that brought them together in more of a human and equal way. Notably, we would expect those with the capacity to move towards and hold the transcendent position to reject conspiratorial thinking and be less susceptible to it (though we note again that since we move throughout these positions, we are always susceptible to some extent). This comes not necessarily from achieving greater development but rather a distaste for broad proclamations of “knowing” or of a final arbiter.

Concluding Thoughts: What Do We “Know”?

In this paper we shy away from asking “who” believes in conspiracy theories to explore instead “why” might someone come to believe in them. In this regard, we discuss the importance of our early developmental relationships with others which then sets the stage for how we relate to “knowing” later in life. We describe different epistemological ways we come to know the world depending on our developmental position and way we are relating to self and other.

Notably, while the achievement of curiosity and openness of mind in the transcendent position may seem to lend itself to a popular idea that all truths are relative, we do not think this is the case. Some realities, such as not being able

to fly, oncoming traffic being dangerous, and so forth are not only true but truths about which it is incumbent upon us as caregivers to instruct our children. These are not the truths we have in mind here. Instead, we are more specifically talking about the truths about living, truths which entail a humility of understanding that no matter how hard we may apply ourselves we will never have all the answers. This does not mean that we will be bereft of opinion for which we vociferously argue, but it does mean that we equally strongly can acknowledge our perspective as opinion and make room for other opinions. We note that conspiracy theories allow for neither of these.

While we may acknowledge the elusive aspect of Truth, we think it is essential that we chase after it with the intent of finding shared understanding. This is no easy task because such understanding hinges on our willingness and ability to consider perspectives (“facts”) that either advance or *challenge* our resident expectations and our tribal/community alliances. Our receptivity to such challenge rests importantly on our acceptance of “otherness,” the otherness of those who are not us and the otherness that we always have even to our own selves. It rests on our ultimate tribe being Truth, not a social or political group which is patriotically invested in *a* truth. Here then, we must be able to authorize our agency in ways which build understanding and not destructive ways that create splits.

Holding this position is hard work. It entails our ability and willingness to consider fully the other person’s developmental position and accompanying perspectives. To do this can risk our own hold on what we think we know, because it requires an embrace of how we can be other to ourselves. Despite the risks, it is, as evident in Dave and Meghan’s story, that which is required of us. It requires that we do not mirror the split off paranoid-schizoid positioning that results in seeing believers in conspiracy theories as lesser than us (i.e., less educated or mentally ill). It requires, instead, embrace of the fact that we are all travelers along a path on which we will stumble.

Notably, this perspective can be problematic and at times may be even be quite dangerous. In our writings elsewhere (Webb & Rosenbaum, 2021) we have taken up the question of when we need to respond to the threat that another poses by devolving ourselves into a paranoid-schizoid position. We grant, therefore, that when dealing with conspiracy theories and their believers that there are instances when such a forceful positioning may be warranted. This is especially true when beliefs threaten our ideas of justice, decency and social responsibilities. Navigating these instances and interactions will be, perhaps, some of the most crucial and challenging situations we face in the upcoming months and years as conspiracy theories move more and more into the mainstream. While we do not feel that we have the truth of the matter, we cannot shake the conviction that unless we somehow are to find a way to hold onto the depressive position and find some way of open relatedness to the “other,” no matter how different and threatening, then we may doom ourselves to an ongoing cycle of alienating self and other. Or, perhaps to quote the poets of today:

And? If we win our independence?
Is that a guarantee of freedom for our descendants?
Or will the blood we shed begin an endless cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants?
(Miranda, 2015)

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