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Creation of Paranoia, Part I

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Abstract. This article explores parallels between delusions and paranoia suffered by society and by the mentally ill. Motives behind the creation of paranoia are discussed. Focus is given to creation of paranoia toward the Jewish people, because this social pathology has infected most of the world for a greater period of time than any other. Reaction to rejection of ideology is found to be an important motive for creation of paranoia in society. Other manifestations of social paranoia, such as the creation of false memories, are also discussed. (Note 1: The article is written by Dr. Karl Ericson. Dr. Ericson has published articles on the prevention of mental illness in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology and is available through contacting IBPP.) (Note 2: The article casts attention on a number of Issues covered by IBPP. These Issues include the social construction and politics of mental illness as a construct, the epistemological vulnerabilities of the constructs of paranoia and delusion, the shortfalls of logic, the similarities among behavior termed normal versus pathological, the metaphysical status of mind and of reality, the psychological and social consequences of being labeled with a psychiatric diagnosis, and the strengths and weaknesses of positing collective psychological phenomena that mirror individual ones.) (Note 3: The article is being posted in two installments--half this week and half the week of February 2.)

This article is about paranoia and delusion both in individuals and in groups from the perspective of someone who was hospitalized 27 years ago for paranoid schizophrenia (Ericson K. 1,2). An early psychiatric pioneer, Eugene Bleuler, in 1911 described paranoia as the "construction, from false premises, of a logically developed and in its various parts logically connected, unshakable delusional system without any demonstrable disturbance affecting any of the other mental functions and therefore, also without any symptoms of deterioration if one ignores the paranoiac's complete lack of insight into his own delusional system." One implication of this definition is that just because people in a society have their reasoning intact does not imply that they are not paranoid. According to Robins and Post (3):

"Paranoia is not an obscure mental state afflicting some individuals but a widespread condition of modern societies."

Evidence that the condition of paranoia occurs in groups as well as individuals has been reviewed by Robins and Post(3), by Hofstadter(4) and by Goldhagen(5). In addition, these authors have mentioned the similarity between social paranoia and insanity. For example, Goldhagen wrote (5):

"The corpus of German anti-Semitic literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries-with its wild and hallucinatory accounts of the nature of Jews, their virtually limitless power, and their responsibility for nearly every harm that has befallen the world,--is so divorced from reality that anyone reading it would be hard pressed to conclude that it was anything but the product of the collective scribes of an insane asylum."

Similarly Robins and Post(3) wrote how

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"According to some militia conspiracists, the bar codes on federal highway signs are secret codes for the United Nations army when it moves in to take over the country. They also speak of surveillance conducted via black helicopters and satellites. The surveillance is maintained through signals sent to the orbiting satellites from microchips implanted in militants' buttocks during their military service. McVeigh spoke with conviction of the biochip in his left buttock."

Robins and Post ask

"What shall we make of individuals who read secret meanings into bar codes on highway signs, imagine surveillance helicopters hovering overhead, and believe they have microchips implanted in them? If an individual were to report such ideas in a clinician's office, he would be diagnosed promptly as suffering a severe paranoid disorder."

They write

"When we observe a full-blown instance of political paranoia-in Hitler's Germany or Pol Pot's Cambodia, for example-it appears that masses of people have suddenly been afflicted by a disease. In a sense, they have. We have described political paranoia's vectors: individuals and organizations that create an attractive delusion out of distorted facts and contorted logic, individuals who bring that delusion to others, and individuals who make it even more attractive."

Pastor Walter Hochstadter, who in the summer of 1944 was a hospital chaplain in France, described the anti-Semitism of the time as madness. He wrote (6)

"We live in an age which is raging throughout with mad ideas and demons, no less than the Middle Ages. Our allegedly 'enlightened' age, instead of indulging in an orgy of crazed witch-hunting, feasts itself in an orgy of maniacal Jew-hatred. Today the Jew-hating madness, which had already raged frightfully in the Middle Ages, has entered upon its acute stage."

In this article, I set forth my conclusions regarding paranoia based on my on experiences and observations and include relevant information from psychological literature, as well as from historic and current events. The definition I use of paranoia is unjustified beliefs that others are bad or a threat. This article starts from a discussion of everyday creation of paranoia in personal life and applies conclusions from that discussion toward understanding the creation of paranoia in society.

Creation of Paranoia in Everyday Life

In order to understand creation of paranoia in society, it is helpful to review common mechanisms that most people encounter in their personal interactions in their everyday lives. Creation of paranoia is very common. Every time a person is responsible for a problem but blames someone else for it they are creating paranoia toward that other person. Some of the reasons a person might create paranoia are (1) to protect oneself against a threat as a way to deflect blame, to defend freedom to do what one wants, and to defeat competition; (2) to protect or restore one's self-esteem in response to criticism and to rejection; (3) as a justification of immoral behavior-e.g., of hurting someone else for one's own gain, of rebelling against moral restraints, and to eliminate obstacles to one's ambitions and goals; and to manipulate others in working toward one's goals.

-----Protection Against a Threat

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---------------As a way to deflect blame

Most parents of more than one child often hear the phrase "He did it" when they discover that one of their children has caused trouble. This is a simple and common example of creating paranoia as a way to deflect blame.

---------------As a way to defend freedom

Some spouses experience the frustration of unsuccessfully trying to stop their partner from engaging in an unhealthy behavior, such as overeating. Consider the case where a husband wants to convince his wife to eat less. She may rationalize that her husband's effort to control her eating is just a byproduct of the desire to control her. This is an example of creating paranoia in response to a threat against one's freedom.

---------------As a way to defeat competition

Some of the fouls and ensuing fights that break out at sporting events are probably an example of a result of creation of paranoia by members of one team to the other. Instead of viewing each other as friendly competitors these team members sometimes view members of the other team as enemies to be defeated. One motive to create paranoia towards the opposing team might be to justify fouling the star players of the opposing team in order to win.

-----To Protect Self-Esteem

In 1956 Harry Stack Sullivan (7) wrote that "The paranoid's feeling of worth is protected by the paranoid transfer of blame to other individuals." Since then psychological studies have been done which implicate defenses of self-esteem as a cause of paranoia in paranoid patients (8,9,10). Such defenses occur in the everyday interactions of normal people as discussed below.

---------------Defense against criticism

Most people have had the experience in which they have tried to give helpful constructive criticism to another person, only to be met with paranoia and hostility from that person. Why would a person react in such a hostile way to efforts to be helpful? The reason is that criticism may hurt their self-esteem. They may restore that self-esteem by rationalizing that they are not at fault but rather that the criticism was made because of malicious intentions. Relationships and marriages that start with high mutual positive regard often end with mutual negative regard and hostility. A lot of this is a result of creation of paranoia by partners toward each other. The creation of paranoia that I've observed in relationships is often in response to criticism or complaints by one partner toward the other.

---------------In Response to Rejection

Paranoia toward those who disagree with one's beliefs can be a mechanism for holding on to one's beliefs. If one believes that those who disagree with one's paranoid beliefs about a group are bad, one can explain away the uncomfortable arguments that they are making.

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People often develop paranoia to the opposite sex as a result of rejection by them. Two of my male friends have expressed paranoia of women as a result of rejection by women. They would rather rationalize that the women are bad rather than view themselves as unattractive to those women. A woman friend of mine has told me about paranoid men's bashing sessions of female acquaintances of hers.

-----As a Justification of Immoral Behavior

---------------Justification of hurting someone else for one's own gain

When people take something that isn't rightfully theirs from someone else, they often rationalize justification by creating paranoia to the person they take advantage of. For example, an employee who steals cash from a cash register might rationalize the justification that management hasn't given the raises the employee deserves. By creating paranoia towards management, the employee is protecting self-esteem from feelings of guilt.

---------------Justification of rebellion against moral restraints

When teenagers take drugs despite their parents' orders, they may justify their behavior by creating paranoia toward their parents.

---------------Creation of Paranoia as a byproduct of justification of aggression

An aggressor who infringes on the rights of others for personal gain, but who is convinced that the infringements are justified, may develop paranoia towards those who defend themselves or retaliate against intrusions on their rights. The aggressor will experience being a victim of their unjustified aggression. This can result in a cycle of escalating paranoia as shown in Figure 1. (See hyperlink at the end of this article.)

-----Creation of Paranoia in order to manipulate others into working toward one's goals

If one doesn't like someone and sees that person as a threat, the motive may exist to slander that person to others in order to motivate others to turn against that person and reduce the threat that the person poses.

Creation of Paranoia by the Mentally Ill

The term mental illness covers many conditions ranging from those originating from psychological problems to those originating from biological problems. Frequently the two become intertwined. Biological problems lead to psychological problems and vice versa. Although it has been shown that drugs can induce paranoia, and it is likely that the neurological imbalances similar to those created by such drugs exist in many of the mentally ill, it is also likely that psychological factors contribute in many cases to the creation of paranoia in the mentally ill. My recovering from mental illness in some way reflected these two causes. Medical treatment contributed to my initial recovery, but my long-term recovery began when I realized that the cause of my problems was paranoia, and I started to develop self-help techniques for myself. There are those among the psychiatric community who view disorders such as paranoid schizophrenia as being a product of purely physiological causes. If that were the case,

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then the moment medication was withdrawn from these patients, they would always revert to their mentally ill state. I have been medication free for the last twenty-seven years.

Those diagnosed with mental illness often suffer from low self-esteem. One reason their minds may create paranoia is as a way to boost that self-esteem. If one is a target of evil people that means one is important. During part of my bout with schizophrenia, I remember seeing myself as a heroic victim.

Although self-esteem may have played a role in the development of my paranoia, I didn't want to believe the paranoid beliefs I had. I was convinced my beliefs were true. One reason was my perceptions of events were influenced by my paranoid frame of reference and continually confirmed my beliefs. My unwillingness to believe that my perceptions were wrong was partly for the same reason that no one wants to think their perceptions are wrong: because it's painful to one's self-esteem. Also, in a situation where one is facing a real threat, it's important that one believes the threat exists so that one can defend oneself against it. Because I felt the threat to me was real, I felt a need to believe it.

Creation of Paranoia in Society

The same motivations that exist for creation of paranoia among individuals exist for the creation of paranoia among groups. Because individuals identify with groups, they will react to attacks on their group the way they would react to an attack on themselves. One of the causes for individuals creating paranoia is in response to a threat. The same mechanism exists among groups. Let's say our group has in the past exploited another group, and an individual in our group makes a speech and points that out to us. Those of us who identify with our group may find that speech threatening, and we may create the paranoid belief that the person giving that speech has bad intentions. In this way, we can keep our minds comfortably closed to unpleasant facts. A likely uncomfortable consequence of our closed minds is conflict between our group and the other group.

During election campaigns, the left and right wing parties try and create as much paranoia as possible towards their opponents among the general population. This is an example of creating paranoia to defeat competition.

One motive to create paranoia is to motivate others to remove obstacles that stand in the way of one's ambitions. Before invading the Sudetenland, the Nazi SS created paranoia toward Czechoslovakia by denouncing the supposed torture and physical abuse of Sudeten Germans at the hands of the Czechs. Before Germany invaded Poland, the SS staged a phony invasion by the Poles of a German broadcasting station. A Polish-speaking SS agent broadcast to Germany from the station that Germany was in the hands of the Polish Army and that it was time for the Poles to attack Germany. The broadcast ended with revolver shots and a loud cry of "long live Poland." Less than ten hours later, the most terrible war the world has ever known would begin.

Hitler used the widespread anti-Semitism in Germany as a way of motivating his people to fight the rest of the world. According to Hitler,

"Behind England stands Israel and behind France and behind the United States….It is impossible to exaggerate the formidable quality of the Jew as an enemy."

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The great Jewish leader Vladimir Jabotinsky understood this motive of Hitler's. In his book, The Jewish War Front (11), Jabotinsky contends that Nazi Germany's drive toward world dominion would have been a nonstarter had it not for anti-Semitism. He wrote

"Had the Nazi propaganda been confined from the beginning to preaching rebellion against the Versailles peace terms and the wickedness of the English or the French or the Americans, its theoretical appeal might have been still powerful, but its actual progress among the masses would have been so gradual that it is doubtful whether it would have gathered enough energy for an explosion."

"All these aims could have been preached every whit as forcibly had their authors never thought of Israel and Judah. But they evidently felt, from the very beginning, that none of these aims would 'go down' properly with the masses unless they were duly seasoned. So not a single spoonful of this witches' brew was offered without the spice of anti-Semitism."

Another motivation for creating paranoia that I mentioned before was as a way to protect and restore self-esteem in response to rejection. This particular motive created perhaps the most tragic and longest lasting example of paranoia in history: paranoia toward the Jewish people. We can learn a lot about the creation of paranoia in society by considering this tragic example.

A Brief History of the Creation of Paranoia Toward the Jewish People

Christianity and Islam create paranoia toward the Jews for rejecting the faith. In the Koran An-Nisa 4:46 it is written about the Jews: "If only they had said: 'What hear and we obey'; and 'Do hear'; and 'Do look at us'; it would have been better for them, and more proper; but Allah hath cursed them for their Unbelief; and but few of them will believe."

Further paranoia is created in Al-Ma'idah 5:64;

"But the revelation that cometh to thee from Allah increaseth in most of them (the Jews) their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. Amongst them we have placed enmity and hatred till the Day of Judgment."

and in At-Tauba 9:30

"The Jews call 'Uzair a son of Allah, and the Christians call Christ the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth!"

Islam commands punishment of the nonbeliever. For example in the Qur'an 9:12-14 it is written

"Fight these specimens of faithlessness…Fight them so that God may punish them at your hands.

In addition in the Quran (2:190-193) Moslems are commanded to:

"Slay them wherever you catch them....Such is the reward of those who suppress the faith."

In Sura 2:61, the Prophet Mohammed decrees that Jews be forever "consigned to humiliation and wretchedness," an injunction that Muslim rulers have often cited to justify anti-Semitism. "Our hatred

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for the Jews," proclaimed King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, "dates from God's condemnation of them for their... rejection of his chosen Prophet."

In order to understand why Christianity creates paranoia toward the Jews, it is helpful to consider why Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, became anti-Jewish. Initially Martin Luther had positive feelings towards the Jews. In 1523, Martin Luther distributed his essay "That Jesus Was Born a Jew. " He hoped that large numbers of Jews would convert to Christianity. They didn't, and his attitude toward the Jews changed. In 1543. Martin Luther, wrote in "On the Jews and their lies, On Shem Hamphoras"

"What then shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire....Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed....They ought to be put under one roof or in a stable, like Gypsies. Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more....Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews.... Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury. All their cash and valuables of silver and gold ought to be taken from them and put aside for safe keeping....Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the axe, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses as is enjoined upon Adam's children....

To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden - the Jews."

How different were Luther's paranoid beliefs from those of the mentally ill? Is it not a paranoid delusion to believe that an entire people are "devilish" and "damned"? Why did Luther's attitude change? Why did a man who started out with positive feelings towards the Jews become paranoid of them and encourage others to punish them? Unfortunately, the creation of paranoia boosts self-esteem. A likely reason that Luther became paranoid of the Jews was that they rejected his teachings. It is likely that such a rejection was a blow to his pride. He may have responded with anger at such an attack on his pride. He may have explained the rejection by the Jews of his teachings as a result of their being evil in order to restore his self-esteem and to avenge himself upon them.

The view that Jews were evil because they rejected Christian doctrine was voices by many Christian theologians.

John Chrysostom (12), a pivotal Church Father, whose theology and teachings had lasting import, preached about Jews in terms that would become the stock-in-trade of Christian anti-Jewish teachings and rhetoric, which would condemn the Jews to live in a Christian Europe that despised and feared them:

"Where Christ-killers gather, the cross is ridiculed, God blasphemed, the father unacknowledged, the son insulted, the grace of the Spirit rejected....If the Jewish rites are holy and venerable, our way of life must be false. But if our way is true, as indeed it is, theirs is fraudulent."

"Really I doubt," declared Peter the Venerable of Cluny(13), "whether a Jew can be human for he will neither yield to human reasoning, nor find satisfaction in authoritative utterances, alike divine and Jewish."

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The origin of Christian paranoia to the Jews is in the New Testament where it is written that Pontius Pilate, the 5th Roman governor of Judea wanted to kill Barnabus, a murderer, instead of Jesus but the Jews insisted that Barnabus go free and Jesus be killed and so a reluctant Pilate acquiesced.

Did this actually happen? The Gospel has different accounts. According to the gospel of John instead of a trial there were a couple of private meetings held by the high Jewish priestly leaders, without the Sanhedrin, in which there is no formal charge or verdict but a political decision was taken to hand Jesus over to the Roman authorities. In that case, the priestly leaders would have been acting in accordance with their normal role. The Romans chose to administer Judaea indirectly, through the Sadducean aristocracy. It was part of their function to maintain order. From Pilate's point of view, it would certainly be their duty to inform him of any subversive whose activities were dangerous to public order. John's account is essentially in agreement with the version of Josephus and has been considered probable by a number of both Jewish and Christian scholars. William Nichols writes that (14)

"On critical examination, the gospel story turns out to involve massive historical improbabilities at crucial points.... "

William Nichol's writes how in Matthew,

"Pontius Pilate, the brutal administrator we know from other sources, who did not shrink from massacres, is thoroughly whitewashed."

In the account, the Jews blame themselves. Pilate washes his hands before them, declaring his innocence of Jesus's blood while the Jewish crowd cries out that Jesus's bloods on their own heads and those of their children. When would any crowd cry out that someone's blood is on their own heads and on the heads of their children? It is much more likely that this story is a fiction invented to create paranoia toward the Jewish People.

This story is likely to have never happened, but the ensuing torture and persecution of Jews by Christians did happen (15). It is likely that the author of this story was angry at the Jews for not accepting Christian doctrine and like Luther, decided they were evil.

Christian doctrine led to widespread anti-Semitism in Europe. According to Goldhagen(5)

"European anti-Semitism is a corollary of Christianity. From the earliest days of Christianity's consolidation of its hold over the Roman Empire, its leaders preached against Jews, employing explicit, powerfully worded, emotionally charged condemnations. The psychological and theological need impelling Christians to differentiate themselves from the bearers of the religion from which their own had broken off was born anew with each generation, because as long as Jews rejected the revelation of Jesus, they unwittingly challenged the Christians' certitude in that revelation. If the Jews, the people of God, shunned the messiah that God had promised them, then something was awry. Either the Messiah was false, or the people had gone profoundly astray, perhaps tempted by the Devil himself. Christians could not countenance contemplation of the former, so they opted with heart and soul for the latter:"

The European anti-Semitism Goldhagen was referring to in particular was that of Germany toward the Jews. Goldhagen (5) writes that

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"By the end of the nineteenth century, the view that Jews posed extreme danger to Germany and that the source of their perniciousness was immutable, namely their race, and the consequential belief that the Jews had to be eliminated from Germany were extremely widespread in German society. The tendency to consider and propose the most radical form of elimination that is extermination was already strong and had been given much voice."

The theory that the Jews were an evil race existed before Hitler and undoubtedly was a major cause in his own anti-Semitism. The defeat of Germany in World War I may have been a blow to Hitler's self-esteem and motivated him to find a scapegoat, the Jews. In chapter 15, Volume 2 of Mein Kampf (16) Hitler wrote

"At the beginning of the War, or even during the War, if twelve or fifteen thousand of these Jews who were corrupting the nation had been forced to submit to poison-gas, just as hundreds of thousands of our best German workers from every social stratum and from every trade and calling had to face it in the field, then the millions of sacrifices made at the front would not have been in vain."

Perhaps the most important source of Hitler's paranoia can be gleaned from a few paragraphs in Chapter 2 of Mein Kampf about his struggle to convince the Jews of his views of Marxism. One reason Hitler may have disliked Marxism was that Marxists promoted the ideal of human equality, while Hitler's ideal was that the German Aryan race was superior and should remain racially pure. The paragraphs about Hitler's struggle to convince the Jews of his views of Marxism are given below:

"Thus I finally discovered who were the evil spirits leading our people astray. The sojourn in Vienna for one year had proved long enough to convince me that no worker is so rooted in his preconceived notions that he will not surrender them in face of better and clearer arguments and explanations. Gradually I became an expert in the doctrine of the Marxists and used this knowledge as an instrument to drive home my own firm convictions. I was successful in nearly every case. The great masses can be rescued, but a lot of time and a large share of human patience must be devoted to such work. But a Jew can never be rescued from his fixed notions. It was then simple enough to attempt to show them the absurdity of their teaching. Within my small circle, I talked to them until my throat ached and my voice grew hoarse. I believed that I could finally convince them of the danger inherent in the Marxist follies. But I only achieved the contrary result. It seemed to me that immediately the disastrous effects of the Marxist Theory and its application in practice became evident, the stronger became their obstinacy...I gradually came to hate them."

Part of Hitler's hatred of the Jews came from their unwillingness to accept his teachings! The paranoia of the Nazis, of the Christians and of the Moslems toward the Jews all have this cause in common.

Why did they have such a hostile reaction to rejection of their ideas? Possible reasons are that their self-esteem was tied to their beliefs and they reacted to rejection of their beliefs as an attack on their self-esteem. They may have all considered their own teachings as very important and good and so believed that if a group did not accept their beliefs that group was evil. Finally, nonbelievers were an obstacle to their ambitions. These reasons correspond to two reasons described above-viz., to protect or restore his self-esteem in response to criticism and in response to rejection.

(To be concluded in the February 2nd Issue of IBPP.)(Keywords: (References: (1) Ericson, K. (1986). Preventing mental illness: Some personal discoveries. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 26, 61-71; (2) Ericson, K. (1990). Further thoughts on preventing mental illness. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 30,

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