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“How does personality relate to homework and grades?”

Timothy A. Pychyl, Ph.D.

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## One Among Many

The self in social context  
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



**Joachim Krueger** is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

## Conspiracy theory: Nachschlag

Nachschlag means 'refill' in German.  
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In a comment on my recent post on "[Conspiracy theories: Epistemology and entertainment](#)" a certain "Dr. T." suggested that science is replete with conspiracy theories. As an example, she suggested that "Evolution, as absurd as it is, can also be considered apart [sic] of the 'conspiracy group'." I could not detect any specific argument in her comment as to how and why the theory of evolution is a matter of conspiracy. So I see no need to respond to this claim. Nonetheless, Dr. T. raises the issue of demarcation. How do conspiracy theories differ from theories that can claim scientific status? In my post, I suggested three criteria. Theories are scientific to the extent that they can make testable predictions regarding future events, specify lawful mechanisms connecting observed data, and favor probable explanations over improbable ones. Grand conspiracy theories (to wit, presumed schemes of world domination by a hidden elite) fail with regard to these explicit criteria.

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None of this implies that real conspiracies do not exist. It does not take much to imagine that the smaller and more circumscribed a presumed conspiracy is, the greater is the probability that it actually exists. Likewise, small and circumscribed conspiracies are most accessible to empirical testing. There are historical examples of conspiracy. Cassius and Brutus conspired to kill Caesar, Stauffenberg and von Tresckow conspired to kill Hitler, and some religious fanatics conspired to blow up American installations on September 11, 2001. The common denominator is that there is a relatively small group of individuals that needs to prepare a coordinated effort against an unsuspecting target. The conspiracy has a timeline. At some point, the strike must occur and the conspiracy be revealed. Grand conspiracies of the type I explored in my previous post lack this feature of mundane conspiracies. In its most extreme form, the grand theory holds that a secret elite has conspired to enslave humankind for thousands of years. This begs the question of why they haven't succeeded yet [or have they?] if they are so powerful and have been at it for so long.

Science acknowledges that some things cannot be proven to exist or not to exist. There is little point in trying to prove that the grand theory is bogus. But it is rational to say that it is not bloody likely.

The theory of evolution offers some pointers as to why some people are susceptible to conspiracy theorizing. As I noted above, conspiracies do exist. They are, I believe, an integral part of the human ability to form coalitions with group members against outsiders and to reason strategically about how to deceive others. In other words, a successful conspirator should score high on social intelligence. As people know that conspiracies against them are possible, they need to be wary and monitor their social environment for signals of such threats. This sort of vigilance can also be an evolved feature of social intelligence. Some tyrants died because they relaxed their vigilance.

It has been difficult for evolution (and I suspect it would be an impossible task for "intelligent design") to come up with an organism that engages in just the right amount of conspiracy making and conspiracy detecting. Indeed, evolution cannot optimize both faculties simultaneously because one is contingent on the other.

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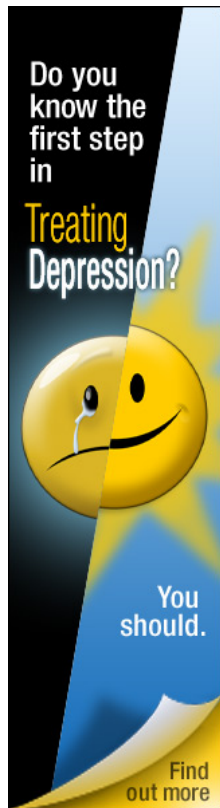
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The tendency to give credence to a grand conspiracy theory may then be understood in terms of 'error management.' Believing that there is a grand conspiracy when there isn't, is a false positive. The believer is **biased** to detect conspiracy because he or she finds it far scarier to disbelieve and then be proven wrong (i.e., to score a false negative).

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