

COVID-19 and the Rise of the Conspiracy: An Examination of COVID Related Conspiracies Using Durkheimian Concepts

Madison Wesenberg

Department of Sociology, MacEwan University

Abstract

This paper examines the rise of COVID-19 related conspiracy theories through a Durkheimian lens. Specifically, Durkheim's concepts of anomie, collective consciousness, and religion can be useful in interpreting the increased participation in conspiracy theory groups. It examines how social distancing measures and government restrictions have led to increased anomie, and how conspiracy theory groups have been used to mitigate this anomic state by introducing shared beliefs and norms. These groups have also created opportunities for people to come together physically and virtually, sharing common beliefs and goals creating a distinct collective consciousness. This paper also focuses on social media's role in perpetuating conspiracy theories and how online communities create an environment where it becomes difficult to decipher fact from fiction. It also focuses on how online communities foster group cohesion in a virtual environment. In addition, the paper also likens conspiracy groups to religious ones using Émile Durkheim's definition.

Introduction

The year 2020 was one of profound loss. People have lost their jobs, people have lost a sense of normalcy, and most tragically, people have lost their lives. Individuals have found different methods of coping with such a strange set of circumstances. Some have picked up new hobbies or renewed old ones. People have found creative ways to spend time with loved ones remotely or from a safe distance. Others have used this time to finish half-done tasks that were pushed aside in the busy pre-COVID times. While there are many ways that people have coped positively with these difficult times, others have not. One deeply concerning trend has been the increased adherence to conspiracy theories. As people flock to the internet to find community and fill their need for social contact, many have fallen prey to dubious claims pushed by conspiracy theorists. These claims have led many to

downplay or outright deny the COVID-19 virus, which has led to protests against mask restrictions and violence.

This phenomenon can be explained using some classical concepts from Émile Durkheim; specifically, his views surrounding anomie, religion, and the collective consciousness. His ideas help explain how the political climate surrounding COVID has led to a sharp increase in conspiracy theory participation and produced or changed the theories themselves.

The Connection between Anomie and Conspiracy Theories

Almost all aspects of people's lives have been severely disrupted. With the shutdown of many vital institutions, people's homes are playing the role of schools, workplaces, places of worship, and entertainment

facilities. As the home affords little opportunity for interaction with the outside world, it creates the perfect environment for an increase in anomie. According to Durkheim, anomie “means to be without norms or laws.” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 130). Although our behaviours have become regulated in an unprecedented way, they do not allow for any interaction with other groups. Instead of regulating how we interact with others and thus encouraging cooperation and the formation of collective norms, these regulations are doing away with in-person interaction altogether. The pandemic has brought upon fast-paced and far-reaching changes. Social bonds are loosened, connections are lost, and people feel alienated and alone. As our culture struggles to adapt to the rapid societal changes, anomie is the inevitable and unfortunate result (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 130).

Anomie is largely undesirable for the individual. To live without norms and values is to live a life devoid of meaning, so it is only natural to try and relieve this negative feeling. Conspiracy theories are able to do this in two important ways. Firstly, they offer justification for going against the measures that have led to this anomic state. COVID deniers and QAnon supporters are largely anti-establishment and are opposed to the strict government regulations that have been imposed during this time of crisis. For those who have been hard hit by these regulations, whether financially or emotionally, there is a strong desire to get back to their pre-COVID conditions. Believing that the virus is a hoax or that the government is using the virus to control the masses allows people to rationalize behaving in ways that put others at risk and that go against government regulations. The second way that anomie leads people to conspiracy theories is that they themselves offer new sets of norms and values. Conspiracy theory groups offer a community of like-minded individuals who feel disadvantaged by society in its current state. They fill the pandemic-induced social void that has led to the anomic state many have been thrust into. In the pandemics of the past, conspiracy theories had to travel through word of mouth or through less personalized forms of media such as newspapers and television. Now, due to the emergence of the internet and specifically social media, these extreme views are more powerful.

Social Media’s Link to COVID Related Conspiracies

Social media has played an important role during the pandemic. Not only has it kept people updated regarding COVID 19 numbers and new restrictions in their area, it has also provided a vital connection to friends and loved ones in a time of isolation and loneliness. But with the good, also comes the bad. As more and more people go online to fill their basic human need for social interaction, they are increasingly finding themselves bombarded with dubious pseudoscientific claims and extremist political views. What is even more concerning, is many of these videos and news articles are very compelling with high production value and somewhat believable premises. The “Plandemic” video is an excellent example, with millions of views and countless shares across many social media platforms (Cook, Van Der Linden, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2020). One video was able to sow seeds of doubt in millions of people almost overnight, and many who may have had inklings that the reaction to COVID was excessive now felt they had proof. There are countless videos, articles, and online communities encouraging conspirative thinking, and the more the consumer interacts with these types of sources the more of them they see in their newsfeeds.

Because social media effectively pigeonholes its users based on what they interact with the most, it creates a distinct collective consciousness. Collective consciousness “refers to the collective representations (cognitive elements) and the sentiments (emotional elements) that guide and bind together any social group” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 106). Whereas before individuals would encounter different people with different viewpoints throughout their normal day-to-day lives, forced isolation and an increase in the use of social media creates a homogeneous social environment. Because they are only seeing posts from people with similar beliefs and sentiments, it becomes difficult for people to assert fact from fiction as certain narratives appear universally supported. This only deepens the collective consciousness. The collective consciousness has four variable elements described by Allan and Daynes (2017): how shared the culture is, the cultures ability to guide the individuals’ actions and sentiments, how clear the culture is, and its level of religious or secular content (p. 107). As stated

previously, the increased use of social media deceives the user and makes them believe that these views are widely accepted. COVID has created a heightened state of emotional reactivity due to uncertainty, separation, and grief. Conspiracy theories use this to their advantage to increase followers and gain additional control. This control is showcased by the increased visibility of conspiracy groups like QAnon, whose supporters have been seen protesting in a number of countries, and active members have even been elected into the United States congress (Rogers, 2020). What is even more worrisome is that their members have encouraged, attempted, and succeeded at committing violent acts across the globe prompting the FBI to label them a “potential domestic terrorist threat” (Burke, 2020). The message of these groups is also quite clear, albeit at times absurd. They are fundamentally encouraging people to go against their ‘oppressive’ governments, to stand up for their individual rights, and to seek the ‘truth’ instead of accepting the word of experts and those in authority. The last variable, religious versus secular content, is an interesting one. Although people do not necessarily associate conspiracy theory groups with religion, Durkheim would likely see it differently.

The Conspiracy Theory as a Religion

Émile Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, ... beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community..., [and] all those who adhere to them” (as cited in Allan & Daynes, p. 114). In short, for something to constitute a religion, it must have three things: “sacred things, beliefs and practices, and a moral community” (Allan & Daynes, p.114). All these conditions are met within the context of COVID related conspiracy theories.

Durkheim asserts that when people gather, they create high levels of emotional energy which he calls collective effervescence (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 116). The intensity of these interactions is governed by three factors: “copresence, common emotional mood, and common focus of attention” (Allan & Daynes, p. 117). Copresence refers to the physical closeness between individuals. Although this closeness is apparent when various groups attend protests and political rallies, online interactions can create a high

degree of copresence as well. People in different cities, countries, and even continents can interact in real time and are more connected than Durkheim could have ever thought possible. Although people are not truly physically close, they feel physically close. COVID has also stolen the attention of the globe and created a common emotional mood felt by those who subscribe to conspiracy theories as well as those who do not. As people come together under these conditions their “emotions become focused and specified behaviors, symbols, and morals emerge.” (Allan & Daynes, 2017, p. 117).

Items that were previously seen as secular, such as facemasks, vaccines, and the letter Q, have taken on new meanings and become sacred for these groups. Facemasks are now sacred symbols of ignorance, vaccines of oppression, and Q of the secretive leader of the QAnon movement (Burke, 2020). As people come together physically at protests and through online avenues like chatrooms, repeated behaviours emerge. Distinct terminology is used, sayings are repeated, and chants are sung, all creating a ritualistic atmosphere. These symbols and behaviours also create firm and moral boundaries and thus increase the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ As they are pushed farther from the mainstream, these communities no longer serve as an innocent pastime. It is now a way of life, a part of their identity, and is followed religiously.

Conclusion

The increased faith in conspiracy theories is not unique to COVID-19. Yellow-fever sparked fears of the Illuminati, and the Spanish flu was blamed on German-produced aspirin (Kaufman, Schwartz, & Greenblatt, 2020; Cohut, 2020). Durkheim’s theories offer a compelling explanation for this recurring phenomenon. Pandemics create an environment where social contact is hindered, which in turn limits people’s opportunities to come together under a collective consciousness and to participate in activities that create a collective effervescence. This creates a state of anomie for many, and its unpleasantness motivates them to find ways to return to their pre-anomic state. The overall lack of positive opportunities to coalesce forces people to become more strongly attached to the remaining vessels that offer these opportunities—namely conspiracy theory groups. As these attachments become stronger, it

creates the ideal conditions for behaviours to become ritualized and objects and symbols to become sacred. These groups emerge from the shadows and begin to look and feel like religious groups. There is no arguing that conspiracy theories are damaging. They have been shown to encourage people to behave in ways that put others in danger, and they are arguably contributing to the prolongment of social distancing measures and the pandemic overall. That being said, we cannot deny that they provide opportunities for social cohesion in an environment that is starved of such opportunities. Given what his theories tell us, part of society's response to such extreme changes should also be to offer opportunities to come together in order to prevent people from falling prey to these dangerous groups.

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