

Conspiracy theory, altered states and alternative community. Conspiracy beliefs in a sample of Nordic yoga-practitioners.

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Abstract

Belief in hidden, intentional agency behind events is fundamentally human. This tends to be masked in some cases by the cultural discourse on ‘conspiracy theory’, which has relegated such belief to the category of stigmatized knowledge-claims of the extreme margins. Egalitarian, alternative religion therefore has seemed to some a surprising location for conspiracy beliefs. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal have argued to the contrary that conspiracy beliefs should be expected in such religious environments. Their argument was made on the strength of three kinds of sources: Contemporary, qualitative studies of the “conspiritual” scene; historical data on conspiracist tropes in discourses of the esoteric milieu; and quantitative data from psychology linking personality traits predicting paranormal beliefs to conspiracy beliefs. They thus argued that there were reasons to believe that group selection over time might work to make immersion in the alternative scene to be connected to increased conspiracism.

In this study of highly educated yoga practitioners, we looked at several dimensions of immersion in and self-identity relating to the alternative scene, and found some support for their argument. Paranormal and spiritual experiences and beliefs predict identification with the alternative milieu and use of its practices. All predicted conspiracy beliefs, but only paranormal beliefs and experiences contributed uniquely.

Introduction

In early March of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading around the globe and Norway was entering phase 2 of its regional epidemic, ex-soap star and yoga teacher

Henriette Lien weighed in.¹ Citing David Icke as an authority, and referring to other alternative sources, she promoted claims-makers who have claimed that e.g. the SARS-COV-2 virus was not, in fact the problem. That was a cover for other threats, prominently 5G technology and vaccines. She was, in other words, promoting conspiracy theories that were ascending at the time. She was not alone in the Norwegian alternative spirituality scene. The hitherto tiny anti-5G groups were rapidly increasing in size and presented the world as marinated in conspiracy, and many new members explicitly identified as part of the alternative scene – more than a few were also, according to their self-presentation, yoga teachers.

Conspiracy beliefs are a common form of folk knowledge in all known societies. Such beliefs are generally part and parcel of explanations of evil. They are part of and thus shaped to fit local cultures and social formations and their concerns. This also goes for religious groups and worldviews. Fundamentalist and apocalyptic beliefs are often associated with conspiracy beliefs in both vernacular and academic discourse.² It has also long been established that there is a culturally interesting intersection between alternative spiritualities and conspiracy beliefs,³ through the “cultic milieu”⁴ and the culture of rejected knowledge in both establishment and more underground form of esoteric groups.⁵

In 2011, Charlotte Ward and David Voas presented the term ‘conspirituality’ for what they saw as a recent intersection of conspiracy culture and New Age.⁶ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn

¹ See Øvrebekk, Hilde. Corona, vitaminløgner og konspirasjoner. *Aftenbladet*, April 2nd, 2020.

<https://www.aftenbladet.no/meninger/kommentar/i/pLe6w6/korona-vitaminløgner-og-konspirasjoner>

² E.g. Coale, Samuel. *Paradigms of Paranoia. The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005); Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion.” *American Journal of Political Science* 58 no.4 (2014): 952–966.

³ e.g. Partridge, Christopher. *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. (London: T&T Clark, 2004)

⁴ Campbell, Colin. “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization.” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119-136.

⁵ See Webb, James. *The Flight from Reason*. London: Macdonald, 1971; Webb, James. *The Occult Establishment*. London: Macdonald, 1976.

⁶ Ward, Charlotte, and David Voas. “The Emergence of Conspirituality.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 no.1 (2011): 103-121.

Dyrendal, while criticizing some of their historical and systemic assumptions, adapted the concept to cover a broader historical period.⁷ They still focused on the religious side, but showed deeper, systematic ties to political movements. Ward and Voas focused more narrowly on a field where common practices of the alternative milieu broadly and more apocalyptic beliefs were combined into something close to the field covered by political scientist Michael Barkun⁸ as “improvised millennialism”. In their 2015 paper, Asprem and Dyrendal’s historical examples mostly followed suit, with right-wing, antisemitic examples taking up a lot of the space. While this political focus was part of the response to some of the assertions of Ward and Voas, it was a minor issue in laying out some of the historical and social dynamics. In a follow-up article, they sketch out in more detail some of the general mechanisms whereby even the everyday elements of the alternative milieu combine with possibilities and proclivities for developing conspiracist ideation.⁹

This chapter gives a partial test of two of their proposed elements: First, they argued that degrees of immersion in the alternative scene should be related to personality traits, so that not merely social and socio-cognitive dynamics would be involved, but that over time, the milieu selects for personality traits that increase tendencies towards conspiracy thinking. Most specifically, they saw the proclivity to have unusual experiences as something that could draw people into deeper participation and identification with the milieu, and tied such proclivities to known predictors of conspiracy belief.¹⁰

Second, they argued that this should be tied to a social identity dimension, arguing that the mainstream rejection of cultic milieu beliefs and efficacy of their practices should give rise to conspiracy theories as motivated rejection of science.¹¹ The rationale for these predictions

⁷ Asprem, Egil, and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Conspirituality Reconsidered: How surprising and how new is the confluence of spirituality and conspiracy theory?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30 no.3 (2015): 367–382.

⁸ Barkun, Michael. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

⁹ Asprem, Egil, and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories.” In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem. 207-233. (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹⁰ E.g. Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, and Joni Holmes. “Belief in Conspiracy Theories. The Role of Paranormal Belief, Paranoid Ideation and Schizotypy.” *Personality and Individual Difference* 50, no.8 (2011):1289–1293

¹¹ Cf. Lewandowsky, Stephan, and Klaus Oberauer. “Motivated Rejection of Science.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 25 no.4 (2016): 217-222

relate to some building blocks that conspiracy beliefs and paranormal beliefs – and possibly paranormal experiences – seem to have in common.

Basic building blocks of conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy beliefs, religious ideation, and much of everyday life obviously share a lot of common basic elements. Most particularly, they share in our innate capacity for detecting patterns and agency in the way our surrounding works. As humans we are overly sensitive to seeing both, finding them even where they are not. Clouds seem to have faces, and shadows transform into the possible movement of threatening predators. This sensitivity to pattern and agency generally serves us well enough that a reasonable rate of false positives are discounted by the positive effects.

Religious belief and conspiracy belief both predict extra sensitivity to cues of hidden patterns and hidden agency. Conspiracists show more hyper-sensitive agency detection than non-believers, as do the religious, and they are also overly sensitive to pattern recognition.¹² Related to agency detection, both are also more prone to think teleologically, to explain events with reference to some perceived intention. They are accordingly also more prone to anthropomorphize, seeing human or human-like intention as causes behind events.¹³ The hyper-sensitive pattern recognition is partially related to a preference for intuitive, holistic thought style, where the larger pattern takes precedent over analyzing components and perceived relations. Overall, analytical thinking predicts less conspiracy beliefs, whereas higher reliance on intuition predicts more.¹⁴

Conspiracy believers belong to what Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood call “intuitionists”.¹⁵ They are more prone to apprehension, magical thinking, and to stress their feelings over calculated reason in making judgments. In choosing between symbolic, costly activity (e.g. cursing themselves) and real-life discomfort and/or danger, they are more likely to choose the

¹² Wood, Michael J. and Karen M. Douglas. “Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate for God?” In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* edited by Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem. 87-105. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

¹³ See Wood & Douglas, «Are Conspiracy Theories a Surrogate».

¹⁴ E.g. Swami, Viren, Martin Voracek, Stefan Stieger, Ulrich S. Tran, and Adrian Furnham. “Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories.” *Cognition* 133 (2014): 572–585.

¹⁵ Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas J. Wood. *Enchanted America. How Intuition and Reason Divide Our Politics*. (London: University of Chicago Press, 2018)

latter.¹⁶ Intuitionists are also more likely to hold paranormal beliefs. In the American samples investigated by Oliver and Wood, they are also more likely to be “fundamentalists”, broadly understood. Of specific interest to us here, they not only hold more of the type of beliefs consonant with general research findings on conspiracy belief; “intuitionists” are also more prone to have “supernatural experiences”.¹⁷

Schizotypy, thin boundaries, religious experiences and conspiracy beliefs

In the American samples, the type of unusual experiences reported is likely influenced by the “fundamentalist” dimension of respondents. Belonging to a subculture with strong emphasis on collective participation in ritual and on personal spiritual experience should result in increased reports of having such experiences. At the very least we would expect that the “type” of experiences and their interpretations are likely to be influenced by collective identity. There are however, also more general individual difference predictors that seem to indicate that we might find conspiracy believers more prone to have religious or “paranormal” experiences. Viren Swami et al.¹⁸ report that the Oxford-Liverpool Inventory of Feelings and Experiences (O-LIFE) scores for unusual experiences predict conspiracy beliefs. The inventory measures dimensions of schizotypy, and there is a robust correlation between scores on schizotypal personality and both conspiracy beliefs¹⁹ and religious beliefs.²⁰

While many of the experiences mentioned in O-LIFE are more related to anhedonia, several of the items tie into magical thinking and paranormal ideation. These elements of “positive

¹⁶ Oliver and Wood, *Enchanted America*: 44-48.

¹⁷ Oliver and Wood, *Enchanted America*: 56.

¹⁸ Swami, Viren, Jakob Pietschnig, Ulrich S. Tran, Ingo W. Nader, Stefan Stieger, and Martin Voracek. “Lunar Lies: The Impact of Informational Framing and Individual Differences in Shaping Conspiracist Beliefs About the Moon Landings.” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 27 (2013): 71-80.

¹⁹ E.g. Barron, David, Kevin D. Morgan, Tony Towell, Boris Altemeyer, and Viren Swami, “Associations between schizotypy and conspiracist ideation.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 70 (2014): 156–159.; Barron, David, Adrian Furnham, Laura Weis, Kevin D. Morgan, Tony Towell, and Viren Swami. “The relationship between schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs via cognitive processes.” *Psychiatry Research* 259 (2018): 15–20.; Dagnall, Neil, Kenneth Drinkwater, Andrew Parker, Andrew Denovan, and Megan Parton. “Conspiracy theory and cognitive style: a worldview.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015):206
doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00206/full

²⁰ E.g. Day, Samantha, Emanulle Peters. “The incidence of schizotypy in new religious movements.” *Personality and Individual Differences*, 27 no.1 (1999): 55–67; Hanel, Paul H.P., Sarah Demmrich, and Uwe Wolfradt. “Centrality of Religiosity, Schizotypy, and Human Values: The Impact of Religious Affiliation.” *Religions* 10, no.5 (2019): 297.

schizotypy” are also tied to proclivity for religious experience²¹ and fantasy proneness.²² Barron et al.²³ found that the “unusual experiences” dimension of schizotypy correlated positively with conspiracist ideation, but it did not contribute separately when other dimensions were taken into account. This may be because the unusual experiences dimension is dominated by the anhedonic, negative dimensions of schizotypy, not positive meanings related to e.g. spiritual experiences. Dagnall et al.²⁴ moreover ties “evaluation of paranormal experiences” not to the unusual experiences-dimension, but to cognitive disorganization. Barron et al.²⁵ correspondingly found that it was the “Odd Beliefs and Magical Thinking” dimension that was the central factor in explaining conspiracy beliefs. Van der Tempel and Alcock²⁶ speculate that having more ambiguous experiences relate to conspiracy beliefs by heightening agency detection.

Another central element to conspiracist ideation is (illusory) pattern detection. Cognitive-perceptual scores on schizotypy are associated with “New Age” ideas.²⁷ Farias et al.²⁸ also found loose, magical thinking of positive, non-pathological schizotypy strongly tied to New Age beliefs. Their main theoretical interest is not in schizotypy, however, but in *boundaries*.²⁹ More specifically, their interest is in *thin* boundaries. They define a person with thin boundaries as “someone who tends to blend thoughts and feelings, to make fluid associations between events, to be hypersensitive in terms of affect, particularly susceptible to daydreaming and fantasy, and to report experiencing unusual experiences such as clairvoyance” (Farias et al. 2005: 981).³⁰ Thin boundaries increases the feeling that

²¹ Jackson, Michael. “Benign schizotypy? The case of spiritual experience.” In *Schizotypy: Implications for illness and health*, edited by Gordon Claridge. 227–250. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

²² Lynn, Steven Jay, Victor Neufeld, Joseph P. Green, David Sandberg, and Judith W. Rhue. “Daydreaming, fantasy and psychopathology.” In *Hypnosis and Imagination* edited by Robert Kunzendorf, Nicholas P. Spanos, and Benjamin Wallace, 67-98. (New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1996)

²³ Barron et al. Associations between schizotypy and conspiracist ideation.

²⁴ Dagnall et al. Conspiracy theory and cognitive style”: 1.

²⁵ Barron et al. “Associations”; Barron et al. “schizotypal facets and conspiracist beliefs”.

²⁶ Van der Tempel, Jan, and James E. Alcock. “Relationships between conspiracy mentality, hyperactive agency detection, and schizotypy: Supernatural forces at work?” *Personality and Individual Differences* 82 (2015):136-141.

²⁷ Dagnall et al. “Conspiracy theory and cognitive style”.

²⁸ Farias, Miguel, Gordon Claridge, and Mansur Lalljee. “Personality and Cognitive Predictors of New Age Practices and Beliefs.” *Personality and Individual Differences* 39 (2005): 979-989.

²⁹ Hartmann, Ernest. *Boundaries in the mind: a new psychology of personality*. New York: BasicBooks, 1991.

³⁰ Farias et al. “Personality and Cognitive Predictors”: 981.

“everything is connected”.³¹ This overidentification of patterns is a basic element of conspiracist thinking.

Collective motivated cognition and wounded collective narcissism

We have seen above that the same dimensions of schizotypy are tied to not merely to paranormal beliefs but directly to both conspiracy beliefs and to alternative spirituality. Farias et al. also mention a dimension of thin boundaries that is “hypersensitivity” in terms of affect. Hypersensitive affect could strengthen the tie to conspiracism through motivated cognition. This is most interesting here as collective motivated cognition, or forms of “hot” cognition that are identity protective of a social group; their content is “self-assuring, self-serving, and self-justifying in a collective sense” while also expressing prejudice and hostility (Kreko 2015: 64).³² They reaffirm the worldview of believers and give vent to and legitimize emotions and motivations.

These emotions are important, also on a collective level, as conspiracy beliefs are strengthened by wounded collective narcissism.³³ Collective narcissism is a form of defensive in-group identification, “exaggerated belief in greatness of the in-group contingent on its external validation”.³⁴ The mechanism is known from other types of religious ideology.³⁵ When external validation is not forthcoming, as when central claims are denied or the group feels underappreciated, out-group hostility and conspiracy beliefs increase. Such wounded collective narcissism could influence the relation to (other) alternative beliefs; “emotional hypersensitivity” would make the feeling of being unfairly slighted and diminished more likely.

³¹ Farias et al. “Personality and Cognitive Predictors”: 987.

³² Kreko, Peter. “Conspiracy Theory as Collective Motivated Cognition.” In *The Psychology of Conspiracy* edited by Michal Bilewicz, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Wiktor Soral. 62-75. (London: Routledge, 2015)

³³ Cichocka, Aleksandra, Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Marta Marchlewska, and Mateusz Olechowski. “Grandiose delusions: Collective Narcissism, secure in-group identification and belief in conspiracies.” In *The Psychology of Conspiracy* edited by Michal Bilewicz, Aleksandra Cichocka, and Wiktor Soral. 42-61, London: Routledge, 2015; Cichocka, Aleksandra, Marta Marchlewska, Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, and Mateusz Olechowski. “‘They will not control us’: In-group positivity and belief in intergroup conspiracies.” *British Journal of Psychology* 107 (2015): 556-576

³⁴ Cichock et al. «Grandiose Delusions»: 45.

³⁵ Marchlewska, Marta, Aleksandra Cichocka, Filip Łozowski, Paulina Górska, and Mikołaj Winiewski, M. “In Search of an Imaginary Enemy: Catholic Collective Narcissism and the Endorsement of Gender Conspiracy Beliefs.” *Journal of Social Psychology* 159 (2019): 766-779.

As mentioned by Aspren and Dyrendal,³⁶ emotional hypersensitivity to critique and negative information becomes important because all fringe beliefs and practices based on pseudoscience and magical thinking are more likely to put people in a position where they feel their identity threatened, thus motivating cognition in the form of conspiracy theories. The situation can be exacerbated by the “market position” of many alternative practitioners. While many of the western customers on the alternative market are on the affluent end of the spectrum, with relatively high levels of education, professional training and social standing, many practitioners are vulnerable socially and economically. Given the argument above, those deeply embedded within these kinds of collective beliefs and practices should be more prone to conspiracy beliefs than those outside or only peripherally attached to them. Practitioners of Modern Postural Yoga belong to a continuum of such attachments.

Modern Postural Yoga

Modern postural yoga reflects its mixed background in religious and political modernization processes. Based partly on reinvented tradition that mixed in gymnastic elements from a variety of European fads – like Swedish and Danish line training programs, or British soldiers’ exercises – it is for many practitioners mainly a form of exercise program. It has developed from a countercultural and elite phenomenon to becoming mainstream, pop-cultural, and feminine-connoted activity.³⁷ In its current “religious” contexts, MPY thus tends clearly towards being part of the subjective, material turn, and has a health and fitness orientation.³⁸ However, its background and reception in neo-Hindu, elite western esoteric, and New Age culture ascertains that its “de-religionization” is not complete. All of these are still present in the yoga scene and constitute possible venues for practitioners to seek out.

MPY practitioners are typically female, middle-class, with relatively high levels of education. The age range is typically college age to early middle age. Practice of MPY is related to ideas about health and body; it seems to be a way to deal with psychological and other health

³⁶ Aspren and Dyrendal, «Close Companions».

³⁷ Jain, Andrea R. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

³⁸ Singleton, Mark. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Physical Practice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

issues.³⁹ The practice can in these contexts be a road to looking deeper into some of its related philosophies, and it can be part of the practices employed by practitioners involved in a variety of religious scenes. For different practitioners, or the same at different times, MPY can be a completely secular exercise, an arena for seeking, or a religious venue of activity. Since it encompasses so many positions with regard to religion and the alternative scene associated with “conspirituality”, it is a good testing ground for our hypotheses: practitioners are, as they are in alternative spirituality, overwhelmingly female. This increases the chance of them being interested in ideas about the paranormal,⁴⁰ more politically liberal, and in combination with higher education less prone towards inter-group conspiracy theories. The questions we ask here however, about conspiracies “from above” generally correlate higher with paranormal beliefs, and so should be pertinent to the population.

Aims and Predictions

Major predictions

Our central aim here is to use the existence of this data set to give a first empirical test of the argument Aspren and Dyrendal⁴¹ made about possible psychological “sorting mechanisms” for the alternative milieu – involving personal predispositions – that increases the level of conspiracy beliefs. As conspiracy beliefs are social and political phenomena, these individual differences-factors should work along with other social and cultural mechanisms, and will not be expected to explain the larger part of the variance.

The survey asks about a range of paranormal and spiritual experiences as well as about the respondents’ own assessment of their ties to alternative spirituality. Aspren and Dyrendal expected that susceptibility to having such experiences would be a funnel for adopting beliefs and a social identity. Our primary prediction here is thus that the reports of having had

³⁹ Tøllefsen, Inga B. (in progress). *Moral Performers: Perspectives on yoga practitioners and yoga teachers in the Nordic countries*. (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Tromsø)

⁴⁰ Aarnio, Kia, and Marjaana Lindeman. “Paranormal beliefs, education, and thinking styles.” *Personality and Individual Differences*, 39, no.7 (2005): 1227-1236; Vyse, Stuart. *Believing in Magic. The Psychology of Superstition*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

⁴¹ Aspren and Dyrendal, «Close Companions».

paranormal and spiritual experiences will be positively associated with a) level of alternative identity, and b) higher scores on conspiracy beliefs.

Collective identity and deeper participation in the alternative scene should correlate positively with relevant beliefs, including conspiracy beliefs. We expect levels of conspiracy beliefs to be associated with both level of alternative identity and with propensity to report special experiences. Alternative identity should contribute to increased levels of conspiracy beliefs when the other factors are taken into account.

The predictions about paranormal and spiritual experiences above are based on an interpretation of the literatures on schizotypy, boundaries and New Age. Since we a) see both “paranormal” and “spiritual” items here primarily as “anomalous experiences” that are separated by ideological interpretation, and b) our measures do not differentiate precisely between categories, the scales should be highly correlated.

Paranormal beliefs are central to alternative identities. They have also shown themselves as robust predictors of conspiracy beliefs. As ideation is active both in framing interpretations of mind-body sensations and shape behavior to create the possibility of these sensations, such paranormal beliefs should be (again) *partially* explained by interrelations with experiences. There is to our knowledge no relevant investigation into how much these overlap. With regard to special religious experiences, we know that relatively few believers claim them. Asprem and Dyrendal’s argument depends on the association between paranormal/spiritual experiences and paranormal beliefs being around medium-sized in order to influence conspiracy beliefs sufficiently.

Minor predictions

One of the basic assumptions we start from here is that these respondents will not fit into the kind of authoritarian intuitionists investigated by Oliver and Wood.⁴² Although there certainly are authoritarian, and even extremist strains of yoga, we assume respondents belong to a milieu that politically leans towards egalitarian attitudes. This is essential, as the range of conspiracy beliefs included should appeal more to egalitarians than anti-egalitarians. We therefore assume that the level of anti-egalitarian part of social dominance orientation (SDO-

⁴² Oliver and Wood, «Enchanted America».

6)⁴³ will be low, and that this score will predict little to nothing with regard to conspiracy beliefs.⁴⁴

Of less relevance, there are continuous discussions on the effect of gender on conspiracy beliefs.⁴⁵ Our reading of the research literature is that there is no reason to expect gender difference for conspiracy beliefs that are unrelated to SDO-scores. We thus expect no significant difference to appear.

We do however, expect there to be a gender difference with regard to paranormal beliefs, since this *is* robustly reported. Although we expect a fairly high level of correlation between beliefs and experiences, research seems to show that it is more doubtful that there are differences in levels of paranormal/spiritual experiences.⁴⁶ We therefore expect no gender difference along these lines.

Table 1 provides a list of our predictions.

Table 1. <i>Key and minor predictions</i>
Key predictions
1. Paranormal and spiritual experiences predict level of identification with the alternative milieu
2. Level of identification with the alternative milieu will predict conspiracy beliefs
3. Paranormal experiences will predict paranormal beliefs.
4. Paranormal and spiritual experiences will predict conspiracy beliefs
Minor predictions
5. High egalitarianism and no relation between SDO-E and conspiracy beliefs
6. High correlation between spiritual and paranormal experiences

⁴³ Sidanius, Jim, and Felicia Pratto. *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴⁴ Cf. Dyrendal, Asbjørn, Leif E. O. Kennair, and James R. Lewis, J. R. “The Role of Conspiracy Mentality and Paranormal Beliefs in Predicting Conspiracy Beliefs Among Neopagans.” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 8, no.1 (2017): 73-97

⁴⁵ Thiem, Annika. “Conspiracy theories and gender and sexuality.” In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter, and Peter Knight, 292-303. (London: Routledge, 2020)

⁴⁶ Cf. Reid-Arndt, Stephanie A., Marian L. Smith, Dong Pil Yoon, and Brick Johnstone. “Gender Differences in Spiritual Experiences, Religious Practices, and Congregational Support for Individuals with Significant Health Conditions”. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 15 no. 2 (2011): 175-196, DOI: [10.1080/15228967.2011.566792](https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2011.566792)

7. No sex differences in conspiracy beliefs
8. Sex differences in paranormal beliefs
7. No sex differences in paranormal experiences

Method

Procedure

The questionnaire was designed as part of Tøllefsen's doctoral project to complement interview sessions and published on SurveyMonkey. She sent out invitations to the email addresses of every visible yoga studio in Norway, those that were easily found in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, and a smaller selection of yoga studios in France and Germany. In addition to the email dissemination method, the authors separately snowballed the survey to friends and acquaintances in the academic world on Twitter and on Facebook.

Basic information about the research project followed the link to the questionnaire. The questionnaire is long (63 questions) and detailed, with a mix of forced option and open-ended questions. Many of the forced-option items come with a comments box. The questionnaire language is English, and it builds on studies of other spiritual milieus and smaller New Religious Movements (NRMs). Other items are drawn, in somewhat modified versions, from the General Social Survey and from the Baylor University Survey. The items specifically addressing yoga are made for this questionnaire.

All analyses were run through basic packages of IBM SPSS 25.

Respondents

The data were downloaded in early January 2018. At the time, the questionnaire had reached 161 respondents. It was heavily female dominated, with 140 women and 21 men. Most were Norwegian. Respondents varied in age from 75 to 24. Mean age was 45 and median age was 44. Most had a spouse or partner, and slightly more than half had at least one child.

Respondents were highly educated. Less than 5% had a high school diploma or less, while more than 80% had at least a bachelor's degree. More than half of the respondents had a

master's degree and 8% had a doctoral degree. Thirteen percent were still studying for a higher degree (master's degree or phd).

Measures

The questionnaire included eight conspiracy theory items. These are based on the set used in Pagan III⁴⁷ and adapted slightly to expectations for this population. There were, for instance, no items about religious minorities. The questions are a mix of more abstract suspicions about ongoing conspiracy and more specific conspiracy beliefs. The first category includes items such as “Many important secrets are being kept from the general public”, and “Certain diseases, drugs and new technologies have secretly been tried out on the general public (or on certain specific sub-populations)”. The second includes “Evidence of extraterrestrials is being covered up”, and “Knowledge of – and/or progress toward – a cure for cancer, AIDS, and other profitable diseases is deliberately being hindered by Big Pharma”. For each of the eight, respondents were asked to declare how strongly they agreed (1) or disagreed (5) with each of the propositions.

Principal component analysis revealed that only one factor was involved, and all items were thus included in a single scale of conspiracy belief. Internal correlation was high and internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = 0.9$).

Social Dominance – Egalitarianism

As in Pagan III (Dyrendal et al. 2017), the survey used the eight con-trait items from the anti-egalitarianism scale (SDO-E) of SDO-6.⁴⁸ The items loaded on one factor and showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Paranormal Beliefs

The Yoga Questionnaire used the same 23 items of paranormal beliefs as Pagan III, again using a five-point Likert scale of agreement/disagreement with specific assertions. These include belief in ancient aliens and Atlantis, clairvoyance, telepathy, astrology, healing power of crystals, karma and reincarnation etc. The items are partly derived from general

⁴⁷ See Dyrendal et al. «The Role of Conspiracy Mentality».

⁴⁸ Sidanius and Pratto. *Social Dominance*; cf. Ho, Arnold K., Jim Sidanius, Felicia Pratto, Shana Levin, Lotte Thomsen, Nour S. Kteily, and Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington. “Social Dominance Orientation: Revisiting the Structure and Function of a Variable Predicting Social and Political Attitudes.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38 no.5 (2012): 583–606.

questionnaires about paranormal beliefs, partly from experience with the wider ‘cultic milieu’. Some were drawn from earlier Pagan surveys, others from the 2005 Baylor university survey.⁴⁹

Principal component analysis showed four groups of components. Since we were not specifically interested in the subscales, we used the full group of items to construct a scale. Internal consistency for 23 items was excellent ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Paranormal and Spiritual Experiences

In addition to many of the regular questions about paranormal beliefs, the questionnaire asks about a range of paranormal or spiritual *experiences*. These labels point to questions that ask about a variety of “anomalous experiences” that may point to explanations deemed to be on the one hand “paranormal” (“How often” [have you] “seen events that happened at a great distance as they were happening”) or are explicitly framed as spiritual/religious (“How often” [have you] “received prophecy, visions, or messages from the spirit world”). The labels were applied pragmatically, post hoc and theoretically; the experiences were not labelled as paranormal or spiritual in the survey, and there are some items with clear reference to the religious/spiritual domain in the paranormal scale and vice versa.

There are two sets of experience-oriented relevant items: Eleven items ask how often respondents have had an experience fitting the description from never (1) to often (4). Ten of these items showed positive intercorrelations. One item (near death experience) was not significantly correlated to the others and was dropped from the scale. The option “impossible to answer” (5) was calculated as missing and all items together make up the “paranormal experiences” scale. The scale loaded on one factor. Internal reliability was good ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Eleven items ask yes-no questions about whether respondents have had the experience described. The experiences *mostly* ask for experiences explicitly given a spiritual/religious explanation, but they range from “being filled with the spirit” and “being called by God/spirit” to an out-of-body experience. We recalculated the yes/no responses into a “spiritual experiences scale” where respondents were scored according to the sum of experiences they claim. As the experience descriptions include items that are meant to gather labels from a variety of religious narratives from partially exclusive traditions, it was expected

⁴⁹ See Dyrendal et al. «Role of Conspiracy Mentality».

that intercorrelations would vary widely. This they did. Nevertheless, the scale showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Alternative Spirituality Scene Participation

We were specifically interested in whether there were differences between those who are and see themselves as part of the alternative scene and those with more or less distance from it. The survey has two relevant sets of question: one set asks explicitly about whether respondent see themselves as part of the scene. The discrete response choice (from “minimal or casual” to “I provide alternative service”) was first recalculated into the graded sense of belonging expressed in the question.

Originally, there were thus four choices. We questioned whether there were good reasons that being “deeply involved” with the alternative scene should, for our questions, be different from being professionals. The numbers in these two groups were also small, with professionals only constituting ten respondents. We ran ad hoc independent samples t-tests to check whether there were large enough differences to defend keeping them as two. We found no significant differences, therefore we combined deeply involved and professionals into one group, deeply involved. There are thus only three groups, in the “scale” we below call “alternative scene”, which runs from casually involved (1) to deeply involved (3).

The other relevant set of question asks about use of treatment modalities and group activities, most of them considered to be part of the alternative scene. The questions were formulated as a scale of use or participation from never to frequent. Some of the therapies are in moderately popular use (acupuncture; homeopathy), others are for the very specifically interested (flower essences; Reiki). Use of alternative medicine is a low-end type of investment in part of the alternative spirituality scene, but as wide-spread use of a range of modalities shows an immersion in the alternative milieu we selected a range of 11 treatments from acupuncture to Reiki⁵⁰ and calculated a scale based on mean scores. The scale had good internal consistency

⁵⁰ Acupressure, acupuncture, aromatherapy, cranio-sacral therapy, flower essences, healing, homeopathy, kinesiology, naturopathy, reflexology, and Reiki.

($\alpha = 0.82$). Principal component analysis showed three factors, structured around the most physical and the most “spiritual” therapies. We ran the analyses with the selected 11 items.⁵¹

Results

Egalitarianism

As expected, respondents were highly egalitarian ($M = 1.88$; $SD = .82$). The most frequent response was full agreement on all eight con-traits, which, since it is a scale on anti-egalitarianism, then measures egalitarianism. There was no significant correlation between scores on SDO-E and the eight conspiracy beliefs.

Sex Differences

Independent samples t-test showed that there were no significant differences concerning any of our issues with regard to the biological sex of respondents.

Men and women did not report significantly different degrees of agreement on conspiracy beliefs. Nor were there differences in levels of paranormal experiences, spiritual experiences or degree of participation in the alternative scene. Contrary to expectation, neither was there difference in degree of paranormal beliefs.

Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and the Paranormal

Levels of conspiracy beliefs and paranormal beliefs have shown a robust correlation in previous research. Most of the studies find correlation between medium to strong. In this study, the correlation just reaches the general criterium for high ($r = 0.5$; $p < .001$, $N = 158$).

Respondents to the Yoga questionnaire group around “undecided” with regard to conspiracy beliefs. Seven percent of respondents had a mean score of 2.0 or below, arguably constituting a group of “true believers”. The mean value for the scale was 3.18 ($SD = .85$), leaning slightly towards disbelief. This response pattern was typical for all but one of the items – that of extraterrestrial cover-up, where the mean value was 3.75 ($SD = 1.02$). Very few agreed strongly, and it had the highest frequency of “strongly disagree”. This is what we would

⁵¹ We also ran the analysis using a full scale with all activities and therapies. The correlations were only slightly weaker, but since there were better theoretical arguments for using the select 11 items – that also had higher intercorrelations – we used those.

expect from a group of highly educated respondents, and we also see it reflected in the item receiving the second highest number of “strong disagree”. With a mean score of 3.41 (SD = 1.12), respondents were leaning towards clear disbelief in “big pharma” keeping a cure for AIDS or cancer secret. The items that respondents were leaning more towards agreement with were typically those that expressed belief in media and technological businesses keeping things secret.

With regard to paranormal beliefs, we see that results are more mixed. The mean score at 2.95 (SD = .88) is again around “undecided”. That it is lower than midpoint, and thus points more towards agreement, is mainly the results on alternative milieu *values* (belief in karma, the divine within etc.) and items relating to alternative milieu *practices* – specifically healing and general trust in alternative treatment modalities.

Paranormal and Spiritual Experience

The mean response on paranormal experience was 1.97 (SD = .66; n = 161), just shy of respondents on average reporting at least one of each type of experience. Fewest reported having had experiences with remote viewing (M = 1.45); sacred experiences with nature were reported by the most and was the type of experience reported to have happened most often (M = 2.71). Slightly less than half reported having had at least one experience they thought of as precognition, more than one-third reported at least one instance of prophecy, and sixty percent reported at least one episode of extra-sensory perception.

Spiritual experiences were scored on a yes/no basis. On average, respondents reported four such experiences, (M = 4.01; SD = 2.86, N = 155), but as we see, the standard deviation is high. Eight percent reported none, while slightly more than half reported three or less. The mean scores are highly influenced by scores on dreams being prophetic (45.6%) or holding spiritual significance (51.2%). However, between 30-60% also report experiences of spiritual ecstasy, oneness with the universe, or being filled with the spirit. Only the items about witnessing miraculous healing (14.5%) and hearing the voice of God (11.4%) was reported by less than 25% of respondents.

While the construct of “paranormal” experiences here includes little in the shape of explicitly religious items, the “spiritual” experiences scale includes several items that could equally have been placed within the paranormal category. As there were also reasons grounded in

psychological sciences that these should be correlated, we expected them to be closely related. This is also what we found ($r = 0.68$; $p < .001$).

Participation in the Alternative Scene

Most (151) of the respondents self-classified, with or without caveat in written response, as one of four levels of involvement with alternative spirituality. There were some challenges with these, as comments showed that not all saw their arguably relevant practice/profession as part of “alternative spirituality”. Since they did not identify their practice explicitly with the scene, we let their chosen response stand, but with groups recalculated as stated above, we have three levels: minimally involved ($N = 85$), regularly involved ($N = 40$), and deeply involved/professional ($N = 26$).⁵²

Respondents were not frequent users of alternative treatments. With a mean score of 1.63 ($N = 159$), they report a frequency of use that is only slightly closer to “rarely” than “never”. All modalities were used rarely if at all, and among those most used, only acupuncture, aromatherapy, and homeopathy were used by more than half of those who responded. Our intention was however, to use this as another indicator of alternative scene participation. On that count, there was a clear, bordering on strong, relationship between self-identity and use of these alternative therapies ($r = .47$; $p < .001$).

As we have seen, there are positive correlations ranging from relatively weak to strong between all the relevant variables. These results are summed up in Table 2.

⁵² Deeply involved = 16; professionals = 10.

Table 2. *Pearson Correlations Between Conspiracy Theory Beliefs, Paranormal Beliefs, Paranormal Experiences, Spiritual Experiences, Alternative Therapy Use, and Alternative Scene Affiliation. N= 146-159*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conspiracy beliefs	-					
2. Paranormal beliefs	.50***	-				
3. Paranormal exp	.39***	.63***	-			
4. Spiritual exp	.21**	.53***	.68***	-		
5. Alt therapy use	.27**	.55***	.50***	.47***	-	
6. Alt scene affiliation	.26***	.55***	.57***	.59***	.48***	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Conspiracy Beliefs, Experiences and Alternative Identity

All the variables contribute positively to scores on each other. We see that conspiracy beliefs are predicted least by spiritual experiences and most by paranormal beliefs. Our main interest with regard to conspiracy beliefs directly, was how it is influenced by degree of absorption in the alternative spirituality milieu. Similarly, we were specifically interested in the difference in levels of experiences reported, as these may (also) work as “funnels” into the alternative scene. For these purposes, we conducted independent samples t-tests of the relevant groups.

Our specific interest was in the difference between those who identified as only slightly in contact with the alternative spirituality scene and those at the highest levels of absorption. For conspiracy beliefs, we see a medium sized group difference ($d = 0.66$) between marginal ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .93$) and deep involvement (3.2 , $SD = .75$; $t(106) = 2.7$, $p < .01$) in the alternative scene.

The other specific interest was the difference between how the same groups reported paranormal and spiritual experiences. As one might glean from the correlation table, the effect

sizes here are large. The smallest one is that on paranormal experience, where the difference between marginal ($M = 1.65$, $SD = .47$) and deep involvement ($M = 2.56$, $SD = .50$, $t(109) = 8.48$; $p < .001$) in the alternative scene is still very large ($d = 1.88$).

There is, as we have seen, often a large correlation size between these different variables. However, we also want to know which of these factors contribute *uniquely* to the variance in conspiracy beliefs and alternative identity and how much. When we take the other factors into account, multiple regression showed that only two factors contributed uniquely to conspiracy beliefs: paranormal beliefs and paranormal experiences. Spiritual experiences, use of alternative therapies and level of participation in the alternative scene did not reach significance (see table 3). Considered together, these factors alone contributed enough to explain 25% of increase in conspiracy beliefs, which is just shy of what is considered a large effect.⁵³

For level of identification with the alternative spirituality milieu, spiritual experience and paranormal beliefs were the factors contributing uniquely, with only level of use of alternative therapies even approaching significance. Considered together, these variables explained 43% of the variance on levels of identification.

Table 3. *Predictors of conspiracy beliefs* (n= 158)

Predictor	<i>B</i> (<i>S.E</i>)	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
Paranormal beliefs	.44 (.098)	.46	4.56***
Paranormal exp	.299 (.141)	.233	2.112*
Spiritual exp	-.056 (.031)	-.189	-1.804
Alt therapy Use	-.009 (.135)	-.006	0.064
Alternative Spir. Identity	-.013 (.108)	-.011	-.118

Note. Adjusted $R^2 = .25$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

⁵³ Ellis, Paul D. *The Essential Guide to Effect Sizes. Statistical Power, Meta-Analysis, and the Interpretation of Research Results*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 41.

Table 4. *Predictors of Alternative Spirituality Identity* (n= 151)

Predictor	<i>B</i> (<i>S.E</i>)	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
Spiritual exp	.083 (.024)	.308	3.470***
Paranormal beliefs	.183 (.081)	.212	2.267*
Paranormal exp	.180 (.112)	.156	1.608
Alt therapy Use	.189 (.105)	.141	1.795
Conspiracy Beliefs	-.008 (.066)	-.009	-.118

Note. Adjusted $R^2 = .43$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Among the important, minor predictions we started out with, was that we would encounter an egalitarian set of respondents. This was important to our type of conspiracy questions. This condition was satisfied. Our yoga practitioners were mostly female and highly egalitarian-minded. This is what we would expect to find in a Nordic alternative milieu more broadly, but the female dominance was even larger than is typical. They were also *very* highly educated, more so than is typical of the alternative milieu. This may be a combined effect of the recruitment strategy and a long, demanding questionnaire that emphasized questions related to spirituality.

Another minor prediction was that gender would play no role in levels of belief in the conspiracy items. This also held up. The reported levels of paranormal and spiritual experiences also showed no gender differences. More surprisingly, neither was there any difference in the levels of paranormal beliefs. This is likely due to a small, highly select sample, and the questionnaire's focus on alternative spirituality.

Our major predictions also held up. Paranormal and spiritual experiences really do predict both conspiracy beliefs and levels of identification with the alternative spirituality scene. The latter lends support to the notion that there is an individual differences-level selection process

whereby those who are “better at” having certain types of experiences are more likely to go deeper into the milieu. Since level of identification with the alternative milieu also increase conspiracy beliefs, the first supports the conjecture that the tendency to have such experiences *are* related to increased conspiracy beliefs. The high correlation between paranormal beliefs and the experience-dimensions intimates that experiences may be a missing element in the robust correlation between conspiracy beliefs and paranormal beliefs in extant research.

This adds tentative support to the conjecture by Asprem and Dyrendal that individual differences in the tendency to have unusual experiences is an element in the funneling of people into the alternative scene. The prevalence of conspiracy beliefs in the alternative scene would then be partially the result of experiences that give personal credibility to beliefs at odds with science. The specific types of unusual experiences here only to a minor degree overlaps with those used in previous research, which may therefore have underestimated the meaning-making functions experiences can have in leading people to defend individual and collective identity. Tied to holistic thinking styles and motivated cognition in defense of both communally held ideas and personal identity tied to experiences, we have a potentially powerful mechanism for explaining the relation.

However, the support for a separate “motivated cognition” element is at best tentative and implied. In written sources from conspiracist spokespersons, it is quite clear that conspiracy theories are used to defend beliefs and practices related to the paranormal,⁵⁴ but in our material neither use of alternative therapies nor levels of identification with alternative spirituality add *uniquely* to conspiracy beliefs. In our investigation, there is nothing extra to the explanation of (these) conspiracy beliefs to gather from the selected alternative practices nor communal, spiritual identity. These are already accounted for by the variance on paranormal beliefs and paranormal experiences, which may already supply what extra element there is to collective motivated cognition.

Limitations

The study recruited via snowball-sampling, had a relatively low number of respondents, and these were overwhelmingly drawn from a crowd of academics with very high education. This

⁵⁴ See e.g. examples in Asprem and Dyrendal, «Close Companions».

clearly limits the conclusions one should try to draw. We do think that the general mechanisms we mention are valid, as our results support previous findings and fills in an extra element of differences in meaning-making experience-proneness. The strength in which this selection on individual differences operates in a more general, representative population is uncertain.

These limitations also include the uncertainty over separate, unique contribution from level of alternative identity and related practices via increased collective, motivated cognition. We specifically note the relatively low correlation between use of alternative medicine and conspiracy beliefs in our sample. Use of alternative medicine only approaches medium sized correlation with conspiracy beliefs, unlike in larger, international samples, where the association is usually large.⁵⁵ A larger, more representative sample that also covered the less educated segment of the alternative scene,⁵⁶ should yield better data, but if motivated cognition is to be included, it needs to be tested more directly.

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⁵⁵ E.g. Lamberty, Pia, and Roland Imhoff. "Powerful pharma and its marginalized alternatives? Effects of individual differences in conspiracy mentality on attitudes toward medical approaches." *Social Psychology*, 49 no. 5 (2018): 255–270.

⁵⁶ Cf. Botvar, Pål Ketil og Ulla Schmidt (red.). *Religion i dagens Norge. Mellom sekularisering og sakralisering*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010.

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