CHAPTER  12

Delusions and the Construction of Reality

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Observation and conversation allow us to generate definitions of situations much like another person’s, shared culture provides similar concepts for interpreting what we see, and watching another’s actions informs us about his or her priorities. Then, knowing the others’ conceptual framework and values, we can largely duplicate the other’s thinking in our own minds. We understand the other’s ideas and the other’s goals because they are just what we ourselves produce when we take the role of other.*

Occasionally the duplication process generates products that seem out of contact with reality. The other’s ideas seem deluded—not just wrongheaded, but wrong. This is not a matter of the other’s logical processes having degenerated so much that we cannot duplicate them at all. In delusions the other’s thought processes are coherent (Maher & Ross, 1984) but lead us through a mockery of proper thinking to conclusions that seem unreal.

The critical issue in recognizing a delusion seems to be the question of truth, but I argue here that that cannot be the case because truth varies across acceptable social groups and because essentially the same belief can be judged as a delusion or a nondelusion depending on the social conditions of the believer. Instead, the critical issue is whether a person maintains social commitment by thinking in a way that other people want to share. Individuality in thinking is rejected when it becomes too egocentric. Excessive

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The points in this chapter are developed within a social constructionist framework (Schneider & Kitsuse, 1984; Gergen, 1985; Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985). The approach has the annoying feature of turning attention away from a problem and onto those who are trying to deal with the problem. Moreover, the framework’s treatment of truth seems so nihilistic that even sociologists complain (Stryker, 1984). I hope I have made amends by suggesting how the results of this kind of analysis can have practical utility for those who work with thought disorders.

*The preconditions for interpersonal understanding are topics of study in the branch of sociology that deals with ethnmethodology (e.g., Cicourel, 1964, 1974; Leiter, 1980).
egocentrism is controlled by treating its mental products as delusions without truth value, denying authenticity to an autistic reality.

RELATIVITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Judgment of delusion evidently relates to the truth and authenticity of a person’s subjective reality. Yet reality is not as absolute as it seems. Different epistemologies yield different facts, different truths, different realities.

A basic division in the epistemologies of Western society was identified by sociologist Sorokin.

On one extreme is a mentality for which reality is that which can be perceived by the organs of sense; it does not see anything beyond the sensate being of the milieu... Those who possess this sort of mentality try to adapt themselves to those conditions which appear to the sense organs... On the other extreme are persons who perceive and apprehend the same sensate phenomena in a very different way. For them they are mere appearance, a dream, or an illusion. True reality is not to be found here; it is something beyond,... different from this material and sensate veil which conceals it... Whether [true reality] be styled God, Nirvana, Brahma, Om, Self, Tao, Eternal Spirit, l’élán vital, Unnamed, the City of God, Ultimate Reality, Ding fur und an sich, or what not, is of little importance. What is important is that... true reality is usually considered supersensate, immaterial, spiritual.

(Sorokin, 1957, pp. 25–26)

Sorokin subjectively grouped beliefs in mysticism, empiricism, materialism, and so forth, into the subcultural types he called Sensate and Ideational, and showed oscillation between Sensate and Ideational mentalities over time, using data on the number of European intellectuals during each 20-year period from 540 B.C. to 1900 A.D. Simonton (1976) factor analyzed Sorokin’s data and found the two dimensions corresponding to the sensate and ideational subcultures, as shown in Figure 12.1. Analyses based on factor scores showed that during times of low creativity (like the Dark Ages), thinking is mostly Ideational; but “as the number of thinkers increases, philosophers and religious thinkers tend to differentiate into a large number of separate schools or sects—some Sensate and others Ideational” (p. 196).

Contemporary civilization is a highly creative period and contains both kinds of subcultures. Sensate subculture is dominant in the sense that its key institutions—like science—are at the center of societal power. Thus we live in a society that legitimates truth based on sensing a determined material world and the associated ideas of progress, individualism, and utilitarian
Figure 12.1. Structure of philosophical constructs (based on Simonton, 1976).
ethics. The religious and occult institutions of Ideationism are in the background—for Sundays and for alternative cultures where revelations of an eternal idealistic world give basis to reasoning that individuals are unimportant and behavior based on love is the path to ultimate achievement.

While the Sensate framework is dominant in our society, large numbers of people are involved with Ideational concerns. For example, a 1978 Gallup Poll revealed that 57 percent of Americans believe in unidentified flying objects (UFOs or flying saucers), 54 percent believe in angels, 51 percent believe in ESP, 39 percent believe in devils, 29 percent believe in astrology, and 10 percent or more believe in ghosts and witches (reported in Douglas & Waksler, 1982, p. 370). Moreover, the alternative reality that embraces these concepts is elaborated into a system of knowledge.

_When Prophecy Fails_ (Festinger, Reichen, & Schachter, 1956) reported on a small cult organized around a woman who received revelations via automatic writing. In particular, she prophesied that the world would be destroyed December 21, 1949, and that cult members would be flown to outer space in flying saucers. This classic social psychology study clearly reveals that people on the Ideational side operate within a full-scale reality supported by knowledge that requires years to acquire. The prophet of the group, who became involved in the occult 15 years before she was studied, constructed revelations based on her knowledge of contemporary Ideational subculture.

... We must make it perfectly clear to the reader that the ideology was not *invented*, not created *de novo*, purely in Mrs. Keech’s mind. Almost all her conceptions of the universe, the spiritual world, interplanetary communication and travel, and the dread possibilities of total atomic warfare can be found, in analogue or identity, in popular magazines, sensational books, and even columns of daily papers.

The notions of reincarnation and spiritual rariification ... are likewise echoed in “many modern cults and minority religious movements”... The idea that heavenly representatives will visit earth ... to rescue those whose conduct and beliefs have marked them for salvation is older than Christianity.

... True, Mrs. Keech put together ... a combination peculiarly well adapted to our contemporary, anxious age—but scarcely a single one of her ideas can be said to be unique, novel, or lacking in popular (though not, for the most part, majority) support.

_(Festinger et al., 1956, 54–55)_

Her key supporters similarly read “widely and eclectically” on mysticism and the occult:

They studied some of the sacred writings of Hinduism, the Apocrypha, _Oahspe_, and books and pamphlets on theosophy, Rosicrucianism, New
Thought, the I AM movement... The ideas they encountered in this literature, and discussed at length, seem to have opened their minds to possibilities that many people regard with incredulity. They believed in the existence of a spirit world, whose masters could communicate with and instruct people of the earth; were convinced that extrasensory communication and spiritual migration (without bodily change or motion) had occurred; and subscribed to many of the more common occult beliefs, including reincarnation.

(pp. 40–41)

A study of a 1970s UFO cult (Balch & Taylor, 1977) presented a similar finding.

Before they joined, members of the UFO cult shared a metaphysical worldview in which reincarnation, disincarnate spirits, psychic powers, lost continents, flying saucers, and ascended masters are taken for granted... Within the metaphysical social world, the seeker is not disparaged as a starry-eyed social misfit. Instead, he is respected because he is trying to learn and grow. Members of the cultic milieu tend to be avid readers, continually exploring different metaphysical movements and philosophies. Whether in a tipi in the Oregon woods or a mansion in Beverly Hills, their evenings are often spent with friends and acquaintances discussing metaphysical topics like psychic research, flying saucers, or Sufi mysticism. A significant part of their lives is devoted to the pursuit of intellectual growth, however undisciplined that may be in conventional academic terms.

(p. 850)

The keepers of Ideational knowledge even rely on familiar social mechanisms for safeguarding the integrity of their knowledge. For example, Festinger et al. (1956) reported confirmation of revelations by references to periodicals, confirmation of information through independent sources—spiritualists in this case, assessment of a spiritualist’s skill, and appeals to higher levels of authority.

Scott (1980), in her study of a spiritual growth group and a witchcraft order, defined 15 basic premises that are common to such groups (spiritual planes, good and evil spirits, reincarnation, etc.). The manner in which these forms of knowledge provide a basis for everyday reality is illustrated in the following incident involving a female novice who was disliked by members of a witches’ coven.

Clovis, who was the most hostile, brought spiritual charges against her. He claimed he learned psychically that they had been in a group together in a previous lifetime in the Middle Ages and that she had betrayed the group. He also claimed that she had come to Earth during this lifetime from another
planet. Since the high priestess and the others considered these charges valid and discussed them seriously, Nancy had little defense. She could only protest that his charges were not true, but there was no rational way to counter his claim. A spiritual charge permitted no rational proofs.

(p. 153)

Ideationalism in contemporary society provides an alternative lay culture that is elaborated and used in much the same way as the materialistic-technological culture that is dominant. The alternative culture offers different bases for knowing about reality and for assessing whether a belief is true. That creates problems for a clinician trying to determine whether a belief is a delusion or not. The belief may seem like nonsense by Sensate standards but not by Ideational standards. Thus the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980) makes exception for religious beliefs.

**Reality Testing**

Aside from systems of philosophy, some beliefs seem demonstrably bizarre because they do not accord with simple perception, being held “in spite of what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary” to use the words of DSM-III (APA, 1980). However, several problems arise in relying on perceptual testing as a criterion for judging truth and falsity. First, simple perception invokes learned concepts in order to acquire significance (Anderson, 1983; Sowa, 1984), and these concepts may be idiosyncratic. Thus, a man with a belief that he has a misshapen nose may perceptually confirm the idea every time he looks in the mirror, and this is no delusion because he would say the same of anyone who had a nose like his. Johnson (this volume) provides a detailed discussion of frailties in the nexus between perception and conception.

Second, the notion of reality testing presumes a Sensate epistemology—a reliance on evidence of the senses. Evidently, people with Ideational belief systems do make reality tests—they might not be able to survive materially unless they did. The tests lead to discarding some ideas like the failed prophecy studied by Festinger et al., (1956), at least among cultists who lacked social support. In principle, however, people with an Ideational philosophy always can claim that an empirical test constitutes no proof at all.

Third, among those committed to an idea, objective tests are made selectively for their confirmatory value, not in order to disconfirm (Festinger, 1957). Gergen (1985) stated this argument in extreme form as applied to science itself.
Research methods can be used to produce "objectifications" or illustrations useful in advancing the pragmatic consequences of one's work. . . . Although some methods may hold the allure of large samples, others can attract because of their purity, their sensitivity to nuance, or their ability to probe in depth. Such assets do not thereby increase the "objective validity" of the resulting constructions. However, like vivid photographs or startling vignettes drawn from daily life, when well wrought they may add vital power to the pen.  

(p. 273)  

While we like to think of observations as predetermined and unbiased, they are in fact selected and interpreted within the very framework they are supposed to test. Thus many delusions possibly are supported by reality tests, though not the ones we think should apply.  

Religious beliefs and practices of the Aztecs provide an example of how this might occur. The Aztecs, a cosmopolitan civilization (Pasztory, 1983; Fagan, 1984) that occupied the area around Mexico City from about 1200 A.D. until the Spaniards came and decimated them in 1521, had an extraordinary cosmology.  

The sun was born from sacrifice and blood. It is said that the gods gathered in the twilight. . . and one of them. . . threw himself into a huge brazier as a sacrifice. He rose from the blazing coals changed into a sun: but this new sun was motionless; it needed blood to move. So the gods immolated themselves, and the sun, drawing life from their death, began its course across the sky.  

This was the beginning of the cosmic drama in which humanity took on the role of the gods. To keep the sun moving on its course, so that the darkness should not overwhelm the world for ever, it was necessary to feed it every day with its food, "the precious water". . . human blood. Sacrifice was a sacred duty towards the sun and a necessity for the welfare of men: without it the very life of the world would stop. Every time that a priest on the top of a pyramid held up the bleeding heart of a man . . . the disaster that perpetually threatened to fall upon the world was postponed once more. Human sacrifice was an alchemy by which life was made out of death.  

(Soustelle, 1961, pp. 96–97)  

Perhaps as many as 20,000 humans were sacrificed by the Aztecs each year: "The Mexica did indeed offer up victims to the gods on a scale unparalleled in any other society, but they did so with the conviction that the continued existence of the cosmos depended on it" (Fagan, 1984, pp. 228–289).
The Aztec belief that the flow of human blood would keep the sun rising was stupid by our standards of knowledge, as well as a grisly mental construction. Yet, it was confirmed by reality testing every day. Hearts were torn out yesterday, and sure enough the sun rose today. We say that was the wrong reality test—they should have stopped killing and seen the sun rise anyway, but that is a test that adds vital power to our belief, not theirs. Furthermore, that particular reality test was totally impractical from the Aztec viewpoint, like America testing the Soviet Union’s peaceful intent through unilateral disarmament, or like a paranoid approaching his enemies to see if they really want to kill him.

As a criterion for assessing delusion, testing against facts is more problematic than we would like to believe. It depends on what is known and what can be known, both of which are socially variable, and reality tests commonly buttress what already is believed.

Truth and Delusion

Truth is a will-o’-the-whisp once one allows for different systems of knowledge based on different epistemologies. Beliefs that are asinine in one framework are taken-for-granted reality in another framework. Facts do not absolutely credit one belief or another, because facts themselves derive their validity from a system of knowledge, and facts are social constructions as much as representations of nature, even in science: “Although we speak of the resolution of scientific controversies as if it were a matter of the facts closing the case, . . . what actually happens is that scientists close the case and then attribute their action to the existence of facts” (Aronson, 1984, p. 7). Beyond that, facts often are obtained indirectly by communication from others and have to be weighed as a historian evaluates hearsay evidence (McCullagh, 1984). Moreover, people are so subject to social influence (Asch, 1956) that determination of fact has to be suspect when it is supported by an authoritative group. Countering these problems is no simple matter. Institutions like science, law, and scholasticism that winnow facts usually depend on group conflict and social confrontation to do the job.

Thus it is nearly hopeless for a lone clinician to try to judge whether a belief is a delusion or not by determining its truth value. Whatever we ourselves think, the other may be correctly employing truths other than our own. Truth and fact are mercurial constructs that cannot be criteria for resolving controversies across different individual realities. Rather, it must be the case that a judgment about a person’s thought processes precedes assessment of truth. Then the truth value of the person’s beliefs is a consequence of classification, not its source.
DELIUSIONS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Judgment of delusion is intrinsically social, involving a comparison of minds in which one is treated as authoritative and the other as deficient. The judgment is relativistic—each party is certain about the validity of his or her mental productions and sure that the other is wrong, and no absolute basis exists for settling the matter once alternative realities are admitted. Thus, sociologically, delusions are a form of cognitive deviance—the violation of "rules of what one is expected to believe and not believe, to take as true and as false" (Douglas & Waksler, 1982, p. 388, italics removed). The thinking of one party is reified, the thinking of the other party is stigmatized, and the selection of which is which gets settled in a contest of social power, with the loser subject to social control. "What emerges as truth in [ideological] conflicts is established not on the basis of truth itself but rather on the basis of who has the power to decide what truth is" (Douglas & Waksler, 1982, p. 367). "Diverse interpretations of the world... when their social background is uncovered, reveal themselves as the intellectual expressions of conflicting groups struggling for power" (Mannheim, 1936, p. 269).

This sociological perspective raises a different question about delusions—not why or how people reach false conclusions, but rather, what kinds of thinking are being controlled and discouraged in the process of judging delusion? One answer to this question is that accusations of delusion are an aspect of conflict between groups dedicated to Ideational and Sensate philosophies.

People in the Ideational subculture derogate Sensate beliefs. For example, Mrs. Keech (Festinger et al., 1956) advised her followers to cease thinking (p. 47) and referred to nonbelievers as "the scientists" led by Lucifer (p. 52). Scott (1980, p. 14) notes that one of the basic premises of this subculture is that growth can be achieved only by disciplines that "open up the subconscious, intuitive, nonlogical mind and turn off the rational conscious mind." In turn, the believers think that they may be persecuted for their orientations, and they resort to secrecy—even the use of aliases—to protect themselves (e.g., Festinger et al., 1956; Scott, 1980). Festinger et al. (1956) provided good evidence that the antagonism goes in both directions, and the Ideational do have reason to fear persecution.

A special PTA meeting was held to discuss means of restraining [Mrs. Keech's] influence on the children and she was finally warned, she claimed, to stop her talks to the children or she would be taken before "a psychiatric examining board." This threat, apparently from the police, proved effective for it terrified her.

(p. 88)
Dr. Armstrong [Mrs. Keech's key supporter] was asked to resign from his position on the college Health Service staff. The reason given him was candid: there had been complaints from parents and students that he was using his position to teach unorthodox religious beliefs and was "upsetting" some students (pp. 85–86). [Later Armstrong's sister] filed a petition to have the two adult Armstrongs declared insane and to obtain custody of their children and their estate.

(p. 232)

By continuing her participation in the movement, [Bertha, a secondary prophet in the group] risked an investigation of her sanity; her husband declared that, if she had not voluntarily given up all connection with the group by January 1, he was going to send her to a psychiatrist and destroy all the books and writings associated with the movement.

(p. 124)

These examples suggest that lay judgments of madness arise in conflicts over what constitutes a valid reality in the everyday world. Those who stray too far from conventional and socially supported truths risk having their beliefs turned into delusions and their character reduced to insanity. Judging people to be mad and their beliefs to be delusions serves as a means of socially controlling cognition, and in contemporary Western society it serves as a mechanism for protecting everyday Sensate reality.

However, those are lay tactics, not the work of psychiatrists. True, Ideational premises do seem to characterize beliefs that are labeled delusions by psychiatrists. Ideas of reference and external control, of mystical power, of persecution, asceticism, and possession are common themes in the Ideational subculture, as they are in delusions. Maher and Ross (1984, p. 401), in discussing a study of 25 amphetamine abusers with delusions of persecution, report that "an increase in philosophical and religious concerns, the revelation of sudden insights, and an acute concern with the meaning of trivial details are described in these patients and are to be found in much the same progression in Schreber's memoirs." However, this correspondence between Ideational concerns and delusion is merely a correlation with exceptions. For example, Dr. Armstrong finally was examined by two court-appointed psychiatrists: "They declared that, although the doctor might have some unusual ideas, he was 'entirely normal'" (Festinger et al., 1956, p. 252). Nor are beliefs from the Sensate system inviolate: The delusion presented in detail by Maher and Ross (1984) is constructed largely from concepts out of scientific culture.

While laypeople use accusations of delusion and madness to protect the preeminence of the Sensate knowledge system and its corresponding reality, psychiatrists do not join in this crusade. Psychiatrists' diagnoses of delusion
are not administered in the service of one system of knowledge over another.*

Psychiatric Criteria

Basically the DSM-III (APA, 1980) definition treats delusions as ideas that are (1) false and (2) without social currency. Truth and falsity cannot be assessed without taking an epistemological stand, and since psychiatric diagnoses do not take a position in the social conflict between the competing knowledge systems, practicing psychiatrists cannot logically be using falsity as a criterion of thought disorders. This suggests that social currency is the fundamental basis for a psychiatric judgment that someone is deluded. The credibility of this claim is enhanced by reconstructing cases of nondelusional thinking that already have been considered.

A woman sits alone in her room writing messages from outer space all day, and the messages say she alone is to be saved in a coming world cataclysm. This woman seems a good candidate for psychiatric concern. The Mrs. Keech studied by Festinger et al. (1956) removed herself from such candidacy by basing her beliefs on an accepted body of knowledge and by sharing her revelations and her fate with others. Bo and Peep (Balch & Taylor, 1977) had similar ideas; they were the objects of sociological study rather than psychiatric treatment because they, too, devoted themselves to the social activity of creating a cult.

A man claims that he is receiving secret mental messages that he was married to his wife in a prior life: the information he has is that she was unfaithful to him then, as she is unfaithful to him now: moreover, she is not even a true human. This seems a clear enough case of thought disorder. What makes it different from Clovis' story (Scott, 1980) is that no one wants to hear it. Clovis' story was believable to all the witches in the coven in terms of the knowledge base that they shared, it was relevant to the group, and it had important implications for others.

A man is convinced that his continued existence depends on killing another person each day and tearing out the heart. He surely would be considered dangerously deluded in psychiatric terms. Yet this judgment does not apply to the Aztecs. In a morbid way, the Aztecs' similar belief, and the practices it engendered, support the contention that the Aztecs were "one of the most religious civilizations ever developed by humankind" (Fagan, 1984, p. 209).

*Freud may not have been so impartial—as suggested by this statement in Totem and Taboo: "Spirits and demons were nothing but the projection of primitive man’s emotional impulses; . . . quite like the ingenious paranoid Schreber, who found the fixations and detachments of his libido reflected in the fates of the ‘God-rays’, which he invented" (Freud, 1938, p. 878).
Thus their belief is removed from the arena of psychiatric concern. The hundreds of thousands of Aztecs did not all have a delusion by psychiatric standards because their belief had a religious nature—it was shared and socially supported.

On the other hand, textbook delusions fall out of the psychiatric realm if we give the believer social commitment and modify the belief so it has social significance. For example, here is how some major types of delusions have been, or could be, turned into sociopolitical movements of no direct concern to psychiatrists. Being controlled: The mass media is perverting our sexual appetites with subliminal stimulation, and we must seek legislation to prevent this from happening (Key, 1974). Bizarre: Everyone who undergoes surgery in New Haven has electrodes implanted in his or her head—the plot is documented by reference to a book (Delgado, 1969) and concerned citizens are calling for an official investigation. Poverty: Marxists are attempting to foment a revolution so that the belongings of the wealthy can be given to the underclass. Jealousy: Black men have to be intimidated and oppressed because by nature they lust after White women and are devilishly successful in seducing them (a common belief in the traditional U.S. South).

One of the key missions of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists in contemporary civilization is to maintain the population in a reasonable balance between social commitment and individuality. American psychiatry is a liberal profession in that it does not make judgments of delusion on the basis of a patient’s alignment with a deviant sociocultural system, as long as constructed beliefs have relevance for others—regardless of how strange the beliefs may be—and approval and confirmation is sought from a group. Rather, psychiatrists are vested with authority to define the limits of individuality, the breakdown of social commitment, the development of excessive egocentricity. The diagnosis of delusion is one means by which they do this. A belief becomes a delusion when the psychiatrist judges that no one wants to hear it and that the patient does not care to adjust the belief in the direction of social value. Factuality is not part of the diagnostic process; rather, a judgment of falsity is part of the control process—removing authenticity from the patient’s reality.

Delusions are mental constructions so egocentric that they have no social currency. The judgment of delusion occurs when someone is creating a reality that no one else wants to share, and the believer is not responding to this social isolation. Assessments of these conditions can be made with substantial levels of confidence. Indeed, the objectivity of diagnosing the state associated with delusion probably would improve if the concern for factuality of belief were discarded and the focus on sociality sharpened. This approach would make extrainterview information even more important than it
is now—not to check the factuality of a client's beliefs but to check explicitly for a social circle that supports the believer's thinking.*

REFERENCES


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*Diagnoses of shared delusion (folie à deux phenomena—e.g., see Westermeyer's contribution in this volume) suggest that clinicians view sharing a belief with certain others—those who are under the control of a patient and who have no independent social standing—as not really counting. By extension, delusion might be attributed to a whole group or nation under the control of a tyrant, for example, the Manson family (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974). Clear definitions of control and of independent social standing are required in order to diagnose folie à deux objectively.


