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Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East

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Conspiracy thinking is defined as a pattern of explanatory reasoning about events and situations of personal, social, and historical significance in which a "conspiracy" is the dominant or operative actor. While conspiracy thinking exists to some extent probably in every society, the authors note the special prevalence of this type of thinking in the Arab-Iranian-Muslim Middle East, and offer a psychoanalytically based approach to conspiracy thinking based on theories of the paranoid process. The authors also attempt to identify aspects of Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture that may predispose individuals from that culture to conspiracy thinking, especially child-rearing practices, attitudes toward sexuality, and the role of secrecy.

KEY WORDS: conspiracy; Middle East; Iran; Arab; psychoanalysis; paranoia.

It is probably safe to say that conspiracies and conspiracy thinking have a universal, if not uniform, appeal. Certainly in our own culture there is a long-standing fascination with the conspiracy: an invisible, insidious, uncanny force, plotting various kinds of evil—murder, assassination, revolution, the rise and fall of stock markets, and certainly the victories and defeats of political leaders.

Conspiracies are frequently conjured up in popular culture. There are many movies with conspiratorial themes, for example, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Total Recall*, *The Package*, *The Boys From Brazil*, *F/X*, and *Three Days of the Condor*. The television series *Twin Peaks* had its share of conspiratorial premises, and Umberto Eco's immensely popular novels, *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, revolve around conspiracies. Journals and books abound

with accounts of alleged conspiracies surrounding the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.

In American political life conspiracies, both real and imagined, abound. Besides the cases mentioned above, legendary conspiracy theories center on the various "red scares," Watergate, the Iran-contra affair, and the so-called "October surprise." Blacks, especially black Muslims, appear to hold more frequently to theories of oppressive conspiracies being perpetrated by whites in general and, increasingly, by Jews in particular. Such theories are employed both to explain actual traumatic states of affairs, such as the spread of AIDS, the pervasiveness of drugs in black communities, and the appallingly low life expectancy of black males, and also to rail against what is seen as the white establishment, an example being the claim that birth control is a means of checking the growth—and therefore the power—of the black community.

There are full-time conspiracy theorists and grand conspiracies and conspiracy theories that include the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the Illuminati, and their more recent variants—among them the ideologies of Adolf Hitler, Lyndon LaRouche, and others. And, of course, the recent presidential campaign was marked by the accusations of independent candidate H. Ross Perot that a conspiracy against him and his family existed within the Republican Party, forcing him out of the race in July of 1992, accusations that were quickly branded (by those who did not quite believe him) as "paranoid" and "crazy."

Conspiracies are an empirical reality, and the very notion of conspiracy clearly has a powerful hold on the imaginations of many people. Yet conspiracies are frequently invoked to explain events or states of affairs when, by any reasonable set of criteria, no conspiracy exists. Moreover, one often gets the sense that such a misidentification is not a mere mistake but rather the expression of a tendency to interpret the world in a particular way.

This tendency is what we call "conspiracy thinking," and in this paper we sketch out an account of the psychodynamic and cultural factors involved in this phenomenon, with special reference to the Middle East—what we call, for lack of a more precise term, "Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture"—as a case study.

In order to build our psychodynamic account, we turn to some of the literature on a psychological cognate: paranoia. This connection is meant neither to pathologize an entire area of the world nor to trivialize paranoia. There are obvious differences between the two. Paranoia is a psychosis, a serious mental illness. Conspiracy thinking is not. In paranoia, delusions are almost always of conspiracies centered on oneself. In conspiracy thinking there is no need that this be the case. However, there are equally powerful similarities: both are essentially patterns of reasoning about the world in which conspiracies play a role that is out of proportion to reality. The similarities and relationships between conspiracy thinking and paranoia are more than accidental. Conspiracy thinking is isomorphic with, though not identical to, paranoia. Therefore, we briefly examine

some classic and contemporary psychiatric and psychoanalytic theories of the paranoid process for clues to what might predispose individuals to conspiracy thinking.

A psychoanalytic approach to conspiracy thinking directs the investigator to the role of early individual experience. Therefore, we next examine Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture for practices (especially child-rearing practices) and beliefs which may be salient for conspiracy thinking. We conclude that Middle Eastern culture, as reflected in common child-rearing practices, is particularly likely to foster patterns of perceptions and expectations in individuals which constitute a tendency toward conspiracy thinking as a response to intense or chronic psychosocial stressors.

With the wealth of materials so close to home, why does this paper focus on the Middle East? First, the authors share a special interest in the history, politics, and cultures of the Middle East, and are more familiar with that area of the world than with others. Second, anyone even slightly acquainted with the Middle East will have been struck by the frequency with which conspiratorial themes appear in narrative accounts of national, regional, and international affairs. Examples of this kind of thinking range from the mundane and plausible to the truly grotesque and fanciful. An Egyptian Islamic leader, speaking on Cairo radio, recently offered this apt, if extreme, example:

Darwin's theory is another faded theory. Like communism, Masonry, secularism, etc., it is a child of Jewish thought and should not be taught in our Islamic country. America and Britain now prohibit its teaching because of its weakness. And we try to study it! Why? As for Freud, he wanted to implement Darwin's plot against our Islamic society, as indicated when he said, "My mind will not rest nor my eye close until I see humanity return to its origin"—i.e., to its ancestor the ape. He meant that women should go out with their genitals uncovered like apes. The lewdness we see in our streets is merely an immediate translation of this proposition and of this sinful plot.

Conspiracy theories like this one, centered around "the Great Satan," "Zionism," "imperialism," and "Bolshevism," along with all their permutations, have been employed to explain many of the political, military, economic, and social defeats and setbacks suffered by the Arabs and the Iranians.

A number of these conspiracy theories circulated in the Middle East following the Gulf war. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait has been seen, variously, as a Zionist-imperialist plot to provide a rationale for destroying the armed might of the foremost Arab military power, as a sting operation provoked by the Israelis to weaken the Palestinian cause, as a plot to subvert the integrity of the Saudi ruling family, and as a conspiracy to deliver the Persian Gulf into the hands of "the imperialist"—the United States.

But no country has produced such bizarre and pervasive conspiracy theories as has Iran since the victory of the clerics in the Islamic Revolution. Many Iranians believe, for example, that the United States had determined that the shah

was so friendly with the Soviet Union that he was no longer a reliable buttress against communist penetration of the Middle East. The U.S. then identified fundamentalist Islam as a potent enemy of communism. The result was the toppling of the shah and the triumph of the Ayatollah. Other examples of conspiracy thinking abound. The following are drawn from broadcasts of the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic, the official radio station of the clerics.

Once again the Western media is enacting its satanic role, and this time in the Caucasus, where it is trying to fuel tensions and spark armed clashes between Soviet Azerbaijanis and the Armenians by blatantly backing the Christian Armenian sect. The sinister plot has put the Muslims of Soviet Azerbaijan under political pressure with the great Satan openly goading Moscow to suppress the already oppressed Muslims. (January 19, 1990).

Are Western governments and pro-Westerners inside the Soviet Union trying to divert the useful and positive aspects of Gorbachev's perestroika? Are they using the Azerbaijan incidents to divert perestroika, which has become the source of determination and faith for the deprived nations of the so-called Third World, toward the swamp which the West has prepared for it? Are they trying to implement a plan in the Soviet Union's southern republics similar to the one they implemented in the Lebanon in recent years? . . . Have the West and Western elements reached the conclusion that also by killing and expelling Muslims, they can create another Israel? Or if not Israel, another Lebanon? (*Ettela'at*, January 23, 1990)

Historical experience, logical deduction, and the foundation of beliefs all emphasize that with the victory of the independence-seeking and anti-oppression revolution, the domineering powers are not prepared to accept the new conditions and will not give up their inclination for superiority. Rather, in keeping with their impure nature, they conspire to return to the unequal conditions of the past. The materialistic world view dominating the oppressors makes them test such conspiracies so as to bring about results as soon as possible. Hence, the oppressors give priority to military and economic conspiracies, and if they do not succeed, they set their hopes on cultural conspiracies. (A Message from Ayatollah Khomeini to Iranian hajj pilgrims, 1987)

These passages do not describe fully developed conspiracies, nor is there evidence as to the extent to which these claims are believed by their audience. Yet at least Islamic Iran sees conspiracy theories as plausible to its constituents and is willing to advance them frequently—evidence for our contention that, for whatever reasons, conspiracy thinking is an especially familiar mode of reasoning in the Middle East.

Conspiracy thinking is not unknown in other areas of the world, though examples as florid as the above may not be so easy to find. For example, the *New York Times*, in February 1990, quoted a Western diplomat as saying of the Romanians, "There is paranoia, schizophrenia, manipulation, and fear of manipulation. There is a lot of suspicion always looking behind, behind. This is part of a tradition going back hundreds of years. You are not going to overcome the Balkan elements, what these people are."

As for explanations of the evident power of conspiracy thinking, a variety of commonsense accounts offer themselves. For example, a friend of one of the authors attributes the propensity of his fellow Ukrainians for such tendencies to superstitiousness and xenophobia. He traces the propensity's historical roots to

the period when diverse ethnic groups and nationalities were in the process of “inventing,” as he calls it, their histories in an effort to account for their historical fates. This latter remark is interesting in light of the discussion to follow, in that it links conspiracy thinking, albeit indirectly, to processes of world-making and sense-making.

Similarly, a Polish friend has suggested that Eastern Europe in general is suffused with conspiracy thinking. He explains the phenomenon by the fact that the peoples of Eastern Europe have historically been trapped between two powerful empires, Russia and Germany. Having never been in charge of their own destinies, they have come to see the world as the product of the sometimes overt, sometimes clandestine actions of more powerful others. And here, again, is a theme that will become more prominent later on: that of passivity.

A more rigorous, and therefore, one hopes, more powerful, explanation for the pervasiveness of conspiracy thinking is rooted in the idea that massive and rapid political and social change may disrupt the capacity of individuals to use existing cultural constructions to account for the new realities, which the first author of this paper has referred to elsewhere as a “sense-making crisis” (see Zonis, 1984). When individuals can no longer make sense of their worlds, when the realities of change outpace their capacities to rearrange the components of their cultural systems to account for those changes, such a crisis may ensue. These crises induce regression in mental processes and facilitate the eruption of more primitive ideation, including conspiracy thinking.

Unfortunately, the flowering of conspiracy thinking has far outpaced social science research on the subject. No doubt this is due in part to the relegation of the phenomenon to the domain of mental illness, a realm conventionally avoided by social scientists on the ground that it contains little of value for the study of normative social processes—though this does not explain the equally serious lack of psychiatric interest in the topic. In any case, the attitude of social science is certainly in conflict with Freud’s notion that investigation of mental and social pathology is a most useful tool for understanding normal functioning of psychological and social systems.

THE OVERDETERMINATION OF CONSPIRACY THINKING

Conspiracy thinking is a complex phenomenon. To account for it fully requires analysis at a number of levels, including the psychological, historical, cultural, social structural, and political. In a word, conspiracy thinking is overdetermined. This overdetermination is one of the aspects of conspiracy thinking that differentiates it from paranoia, which likely has a rather different constellation of causes.

However, as we have already noted, there has been extremely little research

on conspiracy thinking from any of the social sciences, and we make no pretense of attempting, in a short essay, to erase this deficit by attempting to give a definitive or all-encompassing account of conspiracy thinking. Instead, we offer an account which focuses on the levels of psychology and culture and ignore other factors. In doing so, we are not making any implicit claims such as that conspiracy thinking is a mental illness to which Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims are especially prone, nor are we insinuating that Arab or Iranian or Muslim culture as a whole is pathological. Rather, we are simply making one contribution from one area of the social sciences, that in which both authors are best-versed.

Conspiracies, of course, are an objective fact as well as a subjective fact. That is to say, as prevalent as the tendency may be to find conspiracies where none exists, anyone can think of numerous examples of actual conspiracies from his or her own experience, from reading the newspapers, or from studying history. Nothing said here should be understood to deny that conspiracies have existed, do exist and will exist, that groups of people collaborate to achieve hidden, malevolent ends.

The Middle East appears to have been disproportionately subject to the experience of conspiracies. No wonder, then, that Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture would assume their general presence. But we are concerned here with the tendency to invoke conspiracies out of proportion to their actual presence or efficacy, insofar as those things can be determined by rational, dispassionate reflection. Moreover, we argue that this propensity is not uniformly distributed, that it is particularly prevalent among certain peoples, in particular in the Middle East, for reasons that include psychosocial ones.

Therefore, in any comprehensive account of conspiracy thinking, the historical experience of a society, people, or culture must be taken into account. In addition to the cultural and psychodynamic factors which we address in this paper, one must also ask: to what extent has the existence of actual conspiracies operating as actors in political and social affairs conditioned or predisposed people to interpret events or states of affairs as the effect of a conspiracy?

WHAT IS CONSPIRACY THINKING?

“Conspiracy thinking” is a pattern of reasoning about the world in which a “conspiracy” or “plot” is the dominant or operative element of the explanatory model. As a preliminary step, we can identify what appear to be four basic components of the notion of a conspiracy:

1. A number of actors joining together
2. in a secret agreement
3. to achieve a hidden goal
4. which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent.

However, the above four elements describe a wide variety of phenomena, including, for example, a gang planning a jewelry store robbery. While such plots are technically conspiracies, the most frightening or dangerous conspiracies involve an additional element, namely, the sense that the members of the conspiracy are departing from their familiar patterns of activity, that perhaps one does not, after all, know a person or institution that one thought one knew well. Thus, an important aspect of conspiracy, and of conspiracy thinking, is the perception of the existence of a hidden reality *behind* the familiar reality, the idea that what one thought was going on all the time was in fact, in large part, an illusion or deception.

Conspiracy thinking has some powerful attractions as a way of construing the world. A recent article on “conspiracy nuts” in *SPY Magazine* summed these attractions up well, at least for the American variant:

Like religion . . . conspiracy-theorizing is one way of making some powerful sense of the world. Even as it terrifies, it can comfort: everything’s out of your hands. You’re the perpetual underdog, and all you can do is point out the connections and rail. Hardcore conspiracy-theorizing is also a no-lose proposition, immune to self-doubt. Because whether you’re a nut or a hero, the fact that no one is publishing or airing or even paying attention to your story proves you’re right. Like the theories of the Aesthetic Realists, who wear VICTIM OF THE PRESS buttons and believe their views on art and their techniques for “reversing” homosexuality are being ignored by the media in “the most hurtful suppression of knowledge in history,” your theory becomes more credible precisely because They won’t touch it. And so you find the strength to continue feeding your own particular tapeworm.

Of course, the mere fact that a person explains some event or state of affairs by attributing it to the machinations of a conspiracy does not, in itself, merit that person’s inclusion in the category of “conspiracy thinkers.” Given the existence of conspiracies in fact, pointing out a conspiracy may perfectly express reality. Historical facts such as the Iran-contra affair should be enough to make one pause before judging any person’s conspiracy theory as “crazy.” (In fact, the prevalence of conspiracy thinking in the Middle East may very well be due, in part, to what seems to be a prevalence of actual conspiracies in the political life of the region, very often perpetrated by outside powers, especially the United States. For accounts of such conspiracies by former American CIA agents, see Roosevelt (1979) and Copeland (1969).) What we are interested in here is quite different: a preference for, even an obsession with, a belief in the manipulation of events by a secret, sinister cabal as an explanation for the cruelties, misfortunes, and even petty annoyances that the world visits upon its inhabitants.

PARANOIA

One need not have a deep familiarity with psychiatry or psychoanalysis to recognize the similarities between conspiracy thinking and paranoia. These in-

clude the blaming of others for one's own misfortunes and failures, the belief that others harbor, usually secretly, destructive or evil intentions toward oneself, and a "suspicious and unrevealing" attitude toward others. (LeVine 1982, p. 271, draws similar parallels between paranoia and witchcraft beliefs in Africa.)

While one must always be careful when drawing parallels between psychiatric illnesses and less severe syndromes, we believe that examining the paranoid process is likely to provide fruitful insights in studying the psychodynamics of conspiracy thinking. Therefore, in what follows we examine the etiology, dynamics, and determining factors of both paranoia and what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III-R) of the American Psychiatric Association calls "paranoid personality disorder."

Paranoia is listed by the DSM-III-R as a psychosis, the "essential features" of which are "persistent persecutory delusions or delusional jealousy, not due to any other mental disorder." These delusions "may be simple or elaborate and usually involve a single theme or connected themes, such as being conspired against, cheated, spied upon, followed, poisoned or drugged, maliciously maligned, harassed, or obstructed in the pursuit of long-term goals. Small slights may be exaggerated and become the focus of a delusional system."

This paper assumes that the deficits and stressors that may predispose an individual to conspiracy thinking are similar to, if less intense than, those involved in the etiology of paranoid psychosis and paranoid personality disorder. To make clear the distinction between a psychosis and a similar pattern of ideation with a basis in more normal functioning, psychiatry has distinguished, as noted above, between paranoia and "paranoid personality disorder," the latter being essentially a prepsychotic or neurotic form, in which "there may be paranoid ideation or pathological jealousy, but there are no delusions."

In turn, we suggest that conspiracy thinking may be thought of as a "disorder" less severe than, though similar to, paranoid personality disorder. We call conspiracy thinking a disorder because, particularly in its more intense forms, it represents a narrow, distorted, and oversimplified view of the social and political world, and leads to unrealistic assessments of the state of things and unrealistic expectations for the future. Yet it must be distinguished from psychiatric categories because what we are dealing with in conspiracy thinking is not essentially an individual psychological phenomenon, not an individual aberration, but rather is primarily constituted by cultural forces. Nevertheless, the following discussion of theories of paranoia is offered on the assumption that such theories apply as well to paranoid personality disorder and to conspiracy thinking.

A major issue in the history of attempts to account for paranoia has been the role of homosexuality. Freud's theory of paranoia, presented most fully in his analysis of Schreber's memoirs (Freud, 1911) and in subsequent papers, saw homosexuality, transformed by a process of repression, inversion, and projection, at the core of paranoia. (It is worth noting that Freud never gave an account

of the construction of the elaborate delusional system that is characteristic of paranoia.)

However, Freud, in some shorter papers on paranoia, also suggests that homosexuality is not, in fact, the primary factor in paranoia. In these papers he sees paranoia as a manifestation of unconquered archaic narcissism, expressed in the individual's choice of a person of the same sex as a love object. (In fact, Grauer (1955) interprets Freud as saying that the homosexual fixation is itself the result of the partial success of the patient's recathexis of the external world following a regressive episode. The paranoid delusions are then interpreted as homosexual impulses or as defenses against such impulses.) This is a more plausible account. First, unresolved primary narcissism can be expressed in many ways other than in homosexuality. Freud's alternative formulation can account for the empirical evidence that homosexual ideation is not a significant component of paranoid delusions. Second, and more important, Freud's alternative view, which emphasizes regression to primitive narcissism and the primitive defense of projection, lays the theoretical basis for other theories of the paranoid process, most notably that of Norman Cameron.

More useful than a debate over Freud are other theories by contemporary psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented social scientists. These theories are much more experience-near than the theoretical formulations of Freud. They appear to have the capacity to account for the features of paranoia noted by Freud while simultaneously providing a bridge to social science study of the world of the paranoid patient. We will discuss here two of the most interesting and persuasive of these theories, that of Russell Meares (1988) which emphasizes the role of secrecy in the paranoid process, and that of Norman Cameron (1943, 1959), which focuses on the construction of the delusional system, what he calls the "paranoid pseudo-community."

Meares argues that "certain forms of paranoid experience arise through a failure in the 'act of secrecy,' an idea first put forward by Janet." For Meares, "the child's attainment of the concept of secrecy represents the birth of the self," for it "heralds the birth of an inner life which is conceived as distinct from the outer world" (Meares, 1988, p. 653). Failures in the parental environment may cause the sense of what is inner to become precarious and insecure and lead to a variety of pathologies, one of which is paranoia.

Meares reviews Sullivan's discussion of the "uncanny," and supplements it with "Winnicott's concept of annihilation—a sense of nothing inside one, and of discontinuity of being" that can result from traumatic failures of the mother's attention in infancy (660). Meares notes that "unthinkable anxiety is like a hole in the psyche" (661). A child will carry throughout his life the trauma of the break in life's continuity described by Winnicott, though that trauma may be more or less successfully dealt with. "Since overwhelming anxiety is disorganizing, the episodes cannot be structuralized, but instead make up a zone of formless terror,

the not-me, which it is necessary to dissociate from the other parts of the individual's remembered experience" (661). Later in life, traumatic experience, especially separations, may trigger a repetition of anxiety from this "place." When relatively mild, such anxiety is called the experience of the "uncanny." When such experiences become overwhelming, they threaten the individual with psychological disintegration. As disintegration anxiety becomes intolerable, the individual is compelled to reduce it. One approach to reducing anxiety is delusion formation, which at least gives rudimentary form and meaning to experience.

Meares, then, sees certain kinds of paranoia as having their origins in two different early trauma-inducing experiences: traumatic separations and experiences of intrusion and persecution. Such experiences cause deficiencies in the structuralization and definition of self, which in turn leave the individual with a heightened vulnerability to similar traumata in later life. These traumata may bring about experiences of "unthinkable" or "disintegration" anxiety, to which the psyche responds by forming delusions, which give structure and shape, however distorted, to the individual's experience.

Norman Cameron's classic papers on paranoia (1943, 1959) share Meares' focus on what might be called the "phenomenology" of paranoia, but Cameron is particularly interested in the delusions of the paranoid individual.

Cameron provides a sociological-psychoanalytic theory of paranoia in which individuals with a deficiency in social learning, especially in the social skills underlying communication, react to unusual stress with withdrawal and regression. As a means of making their way back to the social world, these individuals construct, out of the fragments of the social behavior of others, a "pseudocommunity" whose actions seem focused on them; in short, paranoid ideation. In his original paper (1943), Cameron traces paranoia to an inability to appraise accurately the motives, thoughts, and feelings of others, an incapacity to imagine oneself in the place of another—that is, an incapacity for empathy. Under stress, the susceptible person's upset and confusion are aggravated by this handicap and by his consequent inability to suspect judgment pending confirmation of his or her suspicions. Already isolated, the paranoid begins to accumulate evidence that carries him "toward a more and more delusional interpretation of what seems to be going on around him."

In a later paper (1959), Cameron carries his theory forward by attending more closely to paranoid patients' accounts of their own experiences. The paranoid defends himself against anxiety by projecting into social reality his threatening and previously unconscious motivations, a move which requires "a perceptual and conceptual reorganization of object relations into an apparent community" centered on him. Because the motives projected were hostile and destructive, the pseudocommunity is hostile and destructive. The patient often rounds out the conspiracy against him with imaginary persons who usually serve as "helpers, dupes, stooges, go-betweens, and masterminds" (Cameron 1959, p. 56).

In his later paper, Cameron notes that paranoid delusion-formation has positive and adaptive aspects. He recognizes that the motive for the construction of the pseudocommunity is the need to make sense of one's environment. As Cameron says, "the final delusional reconstruction of reality" often brings a sense of relief to the patient, for now he "knows" what the danger is, and something can be done about it.

Combining the insights of Meares and Cameron, we can construct a rudimentary story of the genesis of paranoia and related states. First, *passivity* seems to be a prominent feature in both paranoia and conspiracy thinking. In both phenomena the individual places him- or herself at the center of attention of a malevolent coalition, which he or she is helpless to counteract. This passivity is no doubt related to *regression*, which Freud as well as Meares and Cameron emphasize, to a stage of infantile narcissism (Freud) or to an experience of psychic disintegration (Meares). The importance of regression explains the prominence, in paranoia and conspiracy thinking, of *projection* as the primary defense. Melanie Klein, for example, suggested that projection is perhaps the earliest and most primitive defense.

How can we utilize these insights to understand conspiracy thinking and the role of cultural factors in it? We hypothesize that conspiracy thinking is a form of paranoid-like thinking or reasoning that occurs especially in response especially to stressors that evoke either experiences of traumatic passivity, a repetition of disintegration anxiety first experienced in childhood (Meares), or frustration or incompetence in negotiating social situations under stress (Cameron). Conspiracy thinking as compared with paranoia entails additional factors. In a sense, the notion of the individual must be expanded to include peoples and their cultures. The experience of passivity must be construed to include not only the experiences of individuals but also the *historical* experiences of entire peoples and resulting cultural constructions of reality. Thus, a higher incidence of conspiracy thinking would be found among peoples with lengthy experience of being dominated by others. Frustration in social situations also has a counterpart in the difficulties some cultures and nations have in integrating into the larger community of nations. Such problems have faced the nations of the Middle East for some time and appear to be reflected in the conflictual attitudes of Islamic leaders toward modernization and toward the West. Such conflicts will also come to afflict states emerging from the chaos left after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism.

Other contributions of culture are more significant, however, for our account of the phenomenon of conspiracy thinking—child-rearing practices that may engender early childhood experiences described by Meares; the role of secrecy in society; and attitudes toward sexuality, in particular the degree to which sexuality (especially homosexuality) is shrouded in secrecy and the degree to which certain sexual experiences are associated with passivity. If our hypothe-

sis regarding conspiracy thinking is correct, evidence should be forthcoming that Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture supplies a predisposition to conspiracy thinking via these routes.

CONSPIRACY THINKING, PARANOIA, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

This foray into conspiracy thinking is not meant as a diagnosis of any group of people as “paranoid” or “psychotic.” Nor is it meant to argue that conspiracy thinking and paranoia are identical psychological processes. (Even the most bizarre conspiracy theories are not necessarily the product of a paranoid mind.) Rather, there are two goals to this analysis. First, it seeks to account for the predilection of many in the Arab-Iranian-Muslim Middle East to make sense of their worlds through frequent use of the notion of conspiracy. Second, it seeks to formulate a theory which clarifies the kinds of experiences that may predispose individuals in the Middle East to certain ideational styles. Finally, we are not certain of the validity of the notion of “Arab-Iranian Muslim” culture. There are obviously vast differences between people falling into these three categories. However, the “family resemblances” between them seem to us to be sufficiently substantial and relevant to justify the liberty of construing the region as a single unit for the present purpose.

This attempt to link conspiracy thinking with certain cultural elements, while admittedly speculative, shares some basic assumptions with the work of the brilliant psychoanalyst and anthropologist George Devereux. Devereux argued for a concept of “ethnic psychosis” or neurosis, by which he meant two things: first, that “the underlying conflict of the psychosis or neurosis is also present in the majority of normal people,” and second, that “the symptoms characteristic of an ethnic neurosis or psychosis are not improvised, not invented, by the patient but are furnished ready-made by his cultural milieu” (Devereux, 1980, pp. 216–217). For example, Devereux thought that Western culture predisposed its members, when they become mentally ill, to become schizophrenics, and he catalogued the elements of Western culture that, he thought, were responsible. In a similar manner, we are proposing that the prevalence of conspiracy thinking in Middle Eastern societies may indicate that the underlying “ethnic neurosis” or “ethnic psychosis” of Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture is paranoia, and that conspiracy thinking is a mild expression of this. This, of course, is a hypothesis that is testable in various ways, including examining incidence rates of paranoia. In the immediate context, however, Devereux’s insights provide a powerful way of conceptualizing the relationship between cultural factors and conspiracy thinking. In what follows, three aspects of Middle Eastern culture which may predispose its members toward conspiracy thinking will be outlined—secrecy, early childhood experience, and sexuality.

Secrecy in the Middle East

Secrecy is a powerful force in the Middle East world, and one of its most pervasive cultural manifestations may be associated with paranoia-like ideation and conspiracy thinking—the widespread distinction between the “*zahir*,” or “outer,” and the “*batin*,” or “inner.”¹ The anthropologist Michael Gilsenan writes that

Of all the many factors that in different combinations go to make up a sheikh's authority, perhaps the ideological kernel is his knowledge of the inner secret truth, the *batin*. Behind the vain appearances of the world (the *zahir*) is that which is real and true and answers to God's hidden purposes (the *batin*). In north Lebanon, the sense of this division of what is merely seen with the eye and what is fundamental to the view that men have of the everyday social world. It is particularly present in dealing with sheikhs, who may be of holy lineages but who individually are known to have only too human qualities. To be regarded as a sheikh in the fullest sense means that the individual has to establish some more personal reputation for knowledge and insight into what the ordinary, lay eye does not see. (Gilsenan, 1982, p. 116)

The distinction is especially significant given the predisposing factors for paranoid-like and conspiracy thinking. The *zahir-batin* distinction engenders belief in the existence of a hidden, and therefore more real, reality. Similarly, the conspiracy theorist believes that he alone understands the truth and can see things as they really are, while those around him are deceived by mere appearance.

Early Childhood Experience in the Middle East

In this section we will be reviewing some of the literature on child-rearing in Arab-Iranian-Muslim culture. Because studies of child-rearing were an important part of that school of anthropology known as “culture and personality,” however, we wish to emphasize that we are not endorsing that particular version of the relationship between culture and psychology. In particular, we are not arguing that the patterns of child-rearing we describe issue in a particular personality result or “modal personality.” Indeed, though the existing literature on the Middle East is sparse, there is a variety of perspectives on the question of personality and child-rearing. Kakar (1981), for example, examines early childhood experience in Hindu and Muslim India, and arrives at conclusions that diverge somewhat from Bouhdiba's (which we discuss here); Kurtz (1992), in turn, looking at

¹“Zahir” and “batin” are Arabic words, and in this paper we discuss mostly ethnographic and psychological materials on Arab culture. However, it is important to recognize that this kind of a distinction is also found elsewhere. For example, in Iran, which falls into the cultural region with which we are dealing here, Mary Catherine Bateson et al. (1978) have drawn attention to an “ethncategory” of personality known as “safa-yi batin,” “a certain integrity and simplicity of action and motivation. . . . We believe it is this trait that is central to understanding the cultural image of a positive personality” (Bateson et al., 1978, p. 262). Donald Levine has noticed a similar phenomenon in African culture. See his *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (1965).

Hindu India specifically, criticizes Kakar's findings. What we argue, in this section and in the paper, is that certain types of early experience may well pattern future experiences.

Secrecy and multiple layers of reality figure in child-rearing practices and early childhood experience in Arab-Iranian-Muslim society. The Tunisian psychoanalyst and sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1977) sees Arab-Muslim child development as a passage from a state of social marginalization and total immersion in the world of women, personified at first by the mother, through a violent separation from that world, to gradual acceptance into the world of men. He writes:

The separation from the mother is a tearing away from a world which, with the help of time, will increasingly be perceived in a dream-aura. The more the paternal sense of reality is imposed on the child, the more the world of mothers will be buried in the depths of an idealized past, and enveloped in fantasies. . . . the man-woman dichotomy hides the dichotomy of the real and the unreal, the serious and the imaginary. (Bouhdiba, 1977, p. 131)

Bouhdiba also notes that there are two basic "levels of human experience" for the Arab male, rooted in the masculine and the feminine, a dichotomy which serves as the structure for the cognitive and affective polarizations of later life. "Moreover, . . . they exist in a context of modernization, and are the origin of a series of traumatic experiences which profoundly threaten the psychic equilibrium of the individual personality and the social equilibrium of the group" (Bouhdiba, p. 131). He also lists a number of cultural traits relevant to the mother-child relation which mold the personality of the Arab-Muslim male, including poly-segmented socialization, initial attachment to and then tearing away from the mother, the image of a castrating father, the search for leadership inside the family, conflict, frustration, and rage caused by the sudden termination of an overly stimulating attachment to the mother, and the development of specific forms of aggressivity (Bouhdiba, p. 135).

Bouhdiba's account suggests that even when all is normal, the Arab male child is subjected to an emotionally violent experiential discontinuity and is forced to make a sudden reevaluation of what is real and what is unreal. Yet as Bouhdiba also notes, all is *not* normal in the contemporary Arab family. Modernization and Westernization have touched the Arab-Muslim family in important ways. In particular, because of rapid changes in the educational system and the economy, the father is losing his traditional domination over the family at the same that he is becoming more present in the family. Such changes have left the family in a kind of emotional limbo, potentially damaging to the child.

On the one hand, the mother and child have not yet truly ceased to be marginal, yet the father is himself tending to become so. It would be false to think that the child gains any kind of liberation or emancipation from this situation. Left to himself, and having to make different and contradictory choices from models maintained in turn by his mother, his father, his schoolmaster, and the street, the child is confronted by distressing situations

without now being able to rely on the active complicity and the compensation of his mother. Today it is the totality of interpersonal relationships which is threatened by disintegration and divergence. (Bouhdiba 1977, p. 140)

Sexuality in the Middle East

Sexuality is another important factor conducing to conspiracy thinking because of its awesome salience in Arab-Iranian-Muslim societies and because it belongs to the realm of the secret. (For a comprehensive discussion of sexuality in Muslim life and history, see Bouhdiba, 1985. For an outline of research on homosexuality in the Middle East, see Dunne, 1990.) Cameron observes that sexuality is almost always a heavily guarded subject and is unlikely to become a topic of public discourse. As Cameron (1943, p. 36) notes, "It is easy to understand the almost universality of sexual involvement in paranoid delusions. It is in this sphere that failure to develop genuine social maturity is most frequently encountered in our culture. Sexual attitudes enter relatively seldom into social communication. The ratio of sexual attitudes functioning in private to those freely and genuinely shared with the community is disproportionately high when compared with most other commonly held attitudes." It is, therefore, more likely to supply the kinds of stressful situations that can trigger paranoid-type episodes. Similarly, for Meares, sexuality is highly valued and thus shared only infrequently and with utmost caution.

Sexuality is especially highly charged in the Middle East. Bouhdiba (1977) notes that the life of the adult Arab male is to a large degree centered on women:

The most mature man, the most masculine, will never miss an occasion to re-create, to restore, or to rediscover the uterine milieu—whether through memory, mimic, dream, or imagination. Alongside the real world is forged an exquisite and personal world of compensation. A veritable realm of mothers is founded, and far more than the queen of the hearth or of the night, the Arab woman becomes the queen of the unconscious. (Bouhdiba, 1977, p. 133)

Gilsenan (1982) also has observed the importance of sexuality and relates it explicitly to the "zahir-batin" dichotomy—to secrecy. He says that sexuality and reproduction "is the realm of the secrecy in social life, of purity and pollution, danger and security. It is central to every member of the society at the level of personal identity, as a member of the social group, and of a whole culture that formulates and proscribes certain strict conceptions of rules and sanctions for sexual behavior and for the reproduction of society through its 'proper' conduct" (Gilsenan, p. 117).

Sexuality can also be a source of dangerous conflict, as Gilsenan illustrates by recounting an episode that occurred in a Lebanese village in which he was living as an anthropologist. A mysterious rupture in the friendship of two young men occurred. Although no one ever did find out what precipitated it, friends of the boys and other native observers presumed, because of the silence that both

boys maintained about it, that the cause was some sex-related incident. The whole affair was so hedged with secrecy and so little amenable to discussion or negotiation that the boys' friends, Gilsenan included, were certain that violence would erupt between the friends if the crisis were not resolved. (It was resolved, eventually, through the mediation of the local sheikh who brought about the departure from the village of one of the boys.)

Gilsenan's anecdote illustrates how sexuality—especially homosexuality, which seems to have been at the core of this particular incident—can resist discussion. Shrouded as it is in secrecy, sexuality is often elaborated to produce unfortunate consequences.

The psychological, sociological, and cultural underpinnings of paranoid or paranoid-like ideation appear to be pervasive in the Arab-Iranian-Muslim world. The consequence, we argue, is a propensity for Muslim Arabs and Iranians to understand the world in terms of conspiracies. A diverse repertoire of conspiratorial constructions is available in these cultures for the exercise of that propensity. Deeply ingrained beliefs about the enmity to Arabs and Islam of imperialism, bolshevism, Zionism, capitalism, Westernism, modernism, Judaism, and Christianity tend to make these "isms," and individuals that represent them, stock characters in ready-made conspiracy dramas.

The consequence of all this is that Middle Easterners are more ready and more able to engage in conspiracy thinking than are members of many other cultural groups. Yet, ironically, such thinking is fundamentally inimical to the goals that Muslim Arabs and Iranians seek to achieve. The liberation of their nations from the pervasive and powerful challenges of foreign influence is less likely to be achieved in an atmosphere of pervasive conspiracy thinking. For conspiracy thinking is conducive not to liberating action but to crippling passivity, and what makes conspiracy thinking so soothing and gratifying is in large part its great capacity to rationalize, even valorize, passivity.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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