

DELUSIONAL THINKING: PERCEIVING MEANING IN RANDOMNESS

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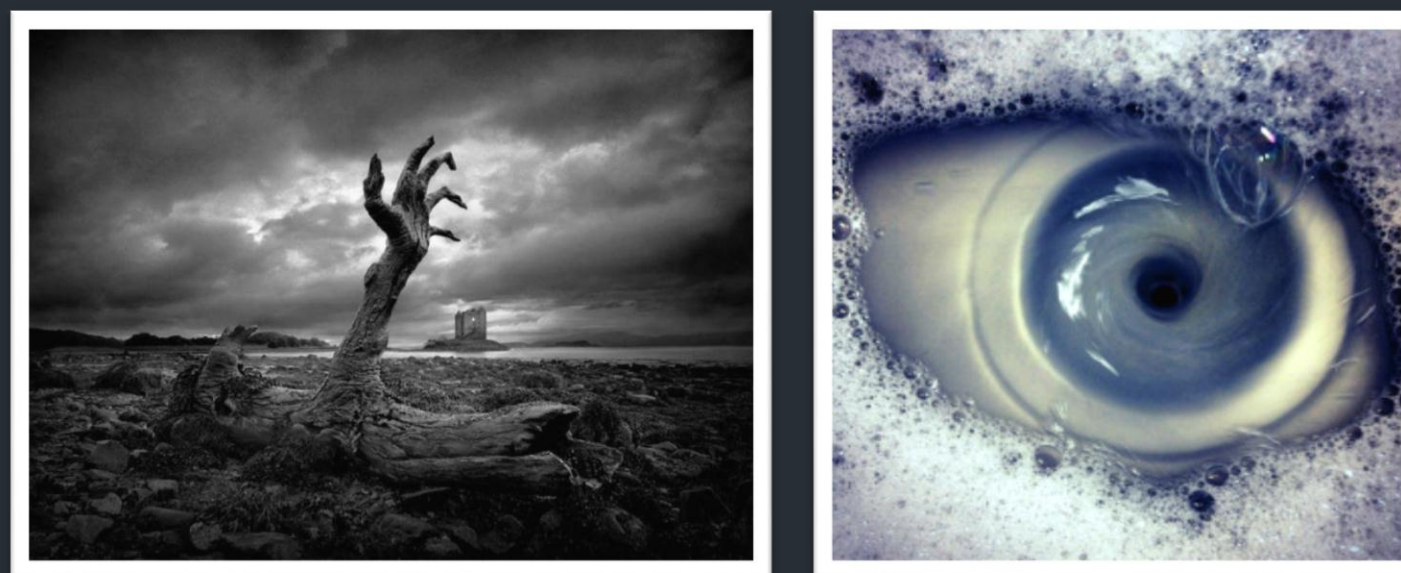
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Coincidences

How often have you come across curious or meaningful coincidences such as, thinking of someone and then running into that person or being in the right place at the right time? Coincidences are fairly common occurrences but while some people attribute these to pure chance, others believe that coincidences are meaningful and must be due to other factors such as destiny, intuition or divine intervention.

Evidence suggests that those who have unusual experiences (Brugger et al., 1993), paranormal believers (Bressan, 2002) and those with schizotypal personality traits (Farias, Claridge & Lalljee, 2005) make more of these meaningful associations and see patterns where none exist. This has led to the suggestion that apophenia (see Figure 1) may be an underpinning factor for the formation of both paranormal and delusional beliefs (Fyfe, Williams, Mason & Pickup, 2008).

Figure 1. 'Apophenia' - The tendency to perceive meaningful patterns and causal connections where none exist (Fyfe et al., 2008)



Delusional Thinking

Recent findings suggest that those who engage in delusional thinking in the general population display cognitive biases, similar to patients with clinical delusions. For example, research has demonstrated that those who score highly on a measure of delusional thinking in the general population tend to accept even implausible information (Jones, Galbraith, Manktelow & Fullwood, in prep; LaRocco & Warman, 2009) due to a lowered threshold of acceptance (Moritz & Woodward, 2004; Moritz, Wood & Lambert 2007).

Aims

The current research aimed to investigate factors that may underpin delusion formation, such as apophenia, in the general population.

Method

Participants (N = 112) completed the coincidences questionnaire (Bressan, 2002) and the Peters et al., Delusions Inventory (Figure 2; PDI; Peters, Day & Garety, 1996) as a measure of delusional thinking in the general population.

Figure 2. The Peters et al; Delusions Inventory

Do you ever feel as if people are reading your mind?		Not at all distressing					Very distressing				
		1	2	3	4	5					
NO YES		1	2	3	4	5					
(please circle)		1	2	3	4	5					
		Hardly ever think about it					Think about it all the time				
		1	2	3	4	5					
		Don't believe it's true					Believe it is absolutely true				
		1	2	3	4	5					

Do you ever feel as if you could read other people's minds?		Not at all distressing					Very distressing				
		1	2	3	4	5					
NO YES		1	2	3	4	5					
(please circle)		1	2	3	4	5					
		Hardly ever think about it					Think about it all the time				
		1	2	3	4	5					
		Don't believe it's true					Believe it is absolutely true				
		1	2	3	4	5					

Findings

Coincidental experiences were found to significantly predict delusional thinking in the general population.

Furthermore, those high in delusional thinking tend to prefer explanations such as destiny, divine intervention and extra sensorial perception for coincidences; while those low in delusional thinking tend to attribute coincidences to pure chance.

Implications

The findings provide the first evidence of apophenia being an underpinning factor that contributes to delusional thinking in the general population.

Apophenia enables those who engage in delusional thinking to make more meaningful associations and see patterns where none exist. Furthermore, this information is then accepted as plausible – potentially leading to the formation of aberrant beliefs.

It is anticipated that apophenia and liberal acceptance of implausible information have important implications for the understanding of delusion formation and the application of cognitive therapies.



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