

Cultural Misbeliefs: A Fertile Ground at Service of Psychological Operations

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ABSTRACT

This paper of ours further expounds on psyops and cultural misbeliefs-their complex interplay in how these deep-seated but very often cultural misbeliefs can be manipulated to have an influence upon perceptions and responses in the public. In psychological warfare, cultural misbelief has formed a two-edged sword wherein skilled players could use these in misleading the target groups in a direction that furthers the strategic aim. The present study has shown how rumors, especially those coinciding with deep-seated fears and prejudices can fuel acts of violence or justify negative behavior and has illustrated the huge impact which cultural background may have on individual behavior and social life. It also reflects upon the degree to which psychological operations have created public opinion and attempted to demoralize one's adversaries by using those cultural cleavages apt to awake social chaos and conflict and it also espouses critical thinking and education as imperatives for overcoming the aftermath of cultural misconceptions and propounds an inclusive approach toward attaining understanding and tolerance of the people within the community. It is when such misconceptions are identified and corrected that societies become resilient to such manipulative misinformation and create a united and peaceful atmosphere.

1. Introduction

The interaction of cultural misbeliefs and psyops represents a serious problem in scholarship in the complex field of psychological operations. In simple terms, cultural misbeliefs are the very deep-seated, usual erroneous views held by a group, which become tremendous tools in the hands of one who knows how to use them. Misconceptions are to be used in the influencing, hoodwinking, and managing of groups being targeted for perception and behavioral manipulation toward pre-determined strategic ends.

Psychological warfare in essence is deliberate propagation with a psychological approach to target the sentiments of the population and erosion of cohesion amongst adversaries. The tactic has assumed immense significance in modern conflict where the theatre of war has moved beyond the conventional military contests to the cognitive and information aspects of war.

This is a landscape that has changed even further with technology integrated into these processes, whereby information spreads fast enough to shape the views of the public around the world at incredibly short speeds. Traditional media-print ads, newspapers, radio, and TV-should not be undervalued either, since their contribution to the promotion of certain issues and the spread of propaganda is undoubtedly great. These psyops are targeted at the population to get influenced with certain ideologies and standpoints. Those could be manipulations of public opinion; probably even disinformation.

The more sensitive a community is to such sly tricks, the more the process of resistance relies on the ability to recognize and master cultural delusions. Awareness and education are at the heart of reducing the impact of PSYOPS through having the capacity to doubt wrong information and reasonably consider the given narratives. The purpose of this research paper is to discuss in detail the relation of cultural fallacy and psychological operations, and explain the immense role of culture in psychological manipulation for betterment towards a harmonious society.

1. Cultural Misbeliefs:

1.1) From Thought to Term: The Literal Birth of Belief

Beliefs are the unseen dictators of our lives. These are the ways of thinking regarding the world, ourselves, and the people in it (Uso-Domenech and Nescolarde-Selva 2016). Whether we recognize their existence or not, beliefs do have an effect on how we think, feel, and behave. They can be based on evidence, faith, intuition, or tradition. Some beliefs are rational, supported by facts and logic. Others are based on faith, a deep trust in something that cannot be proven. Still others are rooted in intuition, a gut feeling or instinct. Beliefs can be personal, cultural, or religious(Price 2014). They can be enabling or disabling, positive or negative. Whichever form they take, or from whatever quarters they emanate, beliefs underpin life and proscribe living. Understanding the power of beliefs can empower individuals to challenge destructive thinking, cultivate positive attitudes, and live fuller lives (Porot and Mandelbaum 2021).

1.2) The Spectrum of Beliefs:

As mentioned, beliefs are mental representations that guide our behavior and actions. By interacting with other cognitive processes, these beliefs encourage us to infer or plan our actions which can be divided into "intuitive beliefs" and "reflective beliefs" (Sperber 1997; Baumard and Boyer 2013). And in this section, we are about to distinguish "intuitive beliefs" from "reflective beliefs". Intuitive beliefs are formed quickly and easily in certain areas and are mostly based on our sensory experiences, memories, emotions and feelings.

Reflective attitudes, which are formed slowly and with logical reasoning, allow us to examine our own and others' beliefs deeply and carefully. These attitudes give us the power to confirm, reject or even change beliefs(Kagan et al. 1964). This type of reflective attitude towards beliefs is very valuable; Because it allows us to interact with others, even if we do not agree with their beliefs; Also, this attitude helps us visualize various and different scenarios in our mind. (Beck 2014)

Intuitive beliefs are automatic, instinctive judgments or thinkings that come about independently of the intentional and logical reasoning commonly involved in reflective attitudes. Where reflective beliefs develop and change more slowly in line with close attention and reasoning, intuitive beliefs often reflect emotions, personal experience, and social influence. These will thus guide our decisions and interpretations in everyday situations, mostly unconsciously and Most of our beliefs are based on intuitive concepts (Sperber 1997).

Most of the time, our reflective and intuitive beliefs work simultaneously and in harmony with each other, but this is not always the case. Sometimes, we may have a reflective belief that is not consistent with our intuitive belief. This conflict, depending on the circumstances and motivations of the individual, can lead to different consequences. Sometimes, this conflict may be resolved by updating our beliefs based on new evidence or logical reasoning; Sometimes, this conflict may be ignored or suppressed by a person relying on a belief that they are interested in. But in some cases, this conflict continues and can lead to cognitive dissonance or confusion (Mercier and Altay 2022a).

Some "cultural misconceptions" are based on Reflective concepts. Understanding the concept that one being can have three beings with the same essence is not based on intuitive concepts (such as the concept of the Trinity in Christianity). In such cases, not only is it not surprising that beliefs based on reflexive concepts persist, but these beliefs usually have no direct effect on our behavior(Barrett and Keil 1996).

However, many cultural misconceptions are based on concepts that can be considered intuitive and directly understood: for example, that ballots were burned in the 2020 US presidential election; Or that Jews killed children during Purim in the Middle Ages; Or that vaccines cause disease by transmitting the virus. We can form such beliefs through simple perception and inference (for example, you can see burned ballots, witness a ritual murder, or hear that someone got sick after being vaccinated); However, we argue here that even when cultural misconceptions rely on intuitive concepts, they often remain as reflective beliefs.

1.3) Cultural misbeliefs, Intuitive or Reflective?

Here, we assume that humans are able to maintain their beliefs in a reflective manner; In a sense, they can maintain their beliefs independently of the cognitive processes that allow us to reason or take actions; For example, a person may have a misbelief, but this misbelief has little effect on his cognition or behavior. The question we are investigating is this: Are most cultural misconceptions formed this way? And how do you know what kind of belief it is?

To determine whether a cultural misconception is formed intuitively or reflexively, the first evidence and clues we need to examine include whether the behavior hypothesized to be the result of this misconception is actually better explained by other factors; For example, if we observe that a certain behavior is repeated in different cultures, but this behavior is not directly and systematically related to that cultural misbelief, this can indicate that that belief may have been formed through a reflective approach. In this case, the cultural misconception is not only caused by individual intuition, but can also be the result of cultural influences and personal experiences (Elshami et al. 2024). The evidence that shows that a specific misbelief cannot cause a costly behavior, actually raises the possibility that the formation of that belief is reflexive; But these evidences alone cannot conclusively prove this hypothesis. To be able to say with more confidence that a belief is reflectively formed, we need more direct evidence. This evidence can include the following two types:

- There may be a misbelief that has no specific cognitive, emotional, or behavioral consequences, whereas an intuitive belief can include such consequences.
- Or that there is a misbelief that has certain cognitive, emotional or behavioral consequences, while the intuitive belief does not have these consequences.

We are now trying to figure out how to tell whether people have intuitive or reflective beliefs. One of the effective methods for this task is to pay attention to the effects of beliefs on people's behavior and thinking; But it should be kept in mind that all beliefs do not have the same effects. Some beliefs are very strong and

coherent and continuously lead people to perform a certain behavior. On the other hand, other beliefs are weaker and more flexible and force people to show different behaviors depending on different conditions and situations; So, how can we measure the effects of beliefs in these different cases? To answer this question, we can refer to several different examples and models. These examples and patterns help us to better understand how beliefs, whether intuitive or reflective, shape people's behavior and thinking.

For example, we know that a pan full of boiling oil is very dangerous. This belief is due to people's intuition, which is obtained from the experiences of seeing, hearing or even feeling heat. This intuitive belief has a strong and constant effect on people's behavior; For example, they always avoid touching the pot or dipping their hands into it. This behavior is completely logical, because contact with a hot pot can seriously injure them; Thus, in this case, intuitive belief directly and predictably guides behavior (Matsumoto 2007). Another example is when people witness someone who needs help, such as someone who is injured or attacked. The belief that is formed in this state is also intuitive and comes from seeing, hearing or feeling discomfort; But this intuitive belief does not have a uniform and strong effect on people's behavior. Sometimes people help that person and sometimes not. But why does this happen? Researchers have found that multiple factors can influence people's decision to help or not Some of these factors include personality, mood or individual values in people's minds. (Darley and Latané 1968; Hortensius and Gelder 2018). Despite the huge variation in people's behavior, there are still noticeable patterns that we can observe. First, almost everyone is affected by circumstances in some way, even when helping someone in need. They may experience emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, or guilt; Also, their attention, memory and thinking can change due to what they see or hear (Regehr et al. 2002; Hortensius and Gelder 2018). Second, there are always large numbers of people who decide to help—for example, in one study, more than half of the people in small groups helped the target person (Darley and Latané 1968). Therefore, even when we look at an example with high power in influencing people's behavior, we still see some systematic and persistent effects of their intuitive beliefs. This shows that intuitive beliefs can play an important role in shaping our behaviors, even in situations where we have different behavioral experiences. Now let's compare the reviewed examples with some common misconceptions. In many cases we see that:

- Most people who have misbeliefs do not show a different pattern of thinking, feeling or acting because of having these beliefs; In other words, their misbeliefs do not directly affect their behavior significantly.
- What people think, feel, or act based on their misbeliefs usually does not match what we would expect from an intuitive belief.

In other words, misbeliefs may not only differ from our intuitive beliefs, but also have different effects on our behaviors. This is an important point to consider when we want to compare misconceptions and intuitions (McKay and Dennett 2009).

We set it against a misbelief in the U.S. wherein a secret crime ring involving powerful politicians and celebrities is abusing children under a pizzeria in Washington; a belief called "Pizzagate" culled from fake news and online rumors. Because, in reality, a secret criminal ring is an abstruse notion that has no tangible sense; this multidimensional and fearsome concept wraps up truths, lies, and speculations within itself. We will be hard-pressed to implement any difference in daily choices over belief in Pizzagate unless we have the appropriate knowledge and skills. Different persons might have different conceptions about what a secret crime ring is and what a prevention could be (Bleakley 2023). Cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and values may account for such differences in interpretation of Pizzagate. Hence, its belief varies from person to person, and one needs to make a careful understanding. The concept of a secret crime ring may only be Reflective, which leads us to tentatively believe that Pizzagate is real. This example illustrates how reflective misbeliefs can differ from intuitive beliefs: while in the U.S. millions claim to believe that Pizzagate is true, it rarely guides their daily life-except for a few significant exceptions, such as someone intuitively believing in Pizzagate. He thinks that children are being held illegally in the basement of the pizzeria and decides to attack. He enters with a gun in order to save them but finds no

children or hidden areas. He gets arrested by the police, but that's just one case of Pizzagate believers. The rest do it simply by leaving nasty comments related to the pizzeria online (Metaxas and Finn 2017). If these people truly believed in Pizzagate, their actions would be illogical. Are negative comments relieving you of your responsibility if you see pictures of children exposed in a restaurant? In fact, the belief in conspiracy theories is really contrary to this behavior, so those who believe in a theory like Pizzagate should take more serious action.

It means that, in fact, they don't really believe in such problems; it follows from reflection. Then they doubtlessly are passively accepting the theory because others influence them, group identity, or discontent with the government. Now, this might explain why conspiracy theories like Pizzagate spread so fast on the Internet.

Before going deeper into intuitive and reflective beliefs, we must clarify two important points. First, having reflective belief does not mean lying; For example, when someone claims to believe in Pizzagate, but doesn't act on it, that doesn't mean they're necessarily lying; Rather, he merely has a reflective belief. Second, being certain or unsure about a belief is different from having an intuitive or reflective belief. Intuitive beliefs can be indeterminate (for example, you are in a crowd and someone's face looks familiar), while deductive beliefs can be very definite: a scientist's belief in complex scientific theories, or a religious leader's belief in complex religious ideas can be very strong and firm. We know that to determine whether a cultural misconception is intuitive or reflective, we need to look at people's behavior based on their beliefs (Alaei Ardekani, Kondorani, Alaei Ardekani 2023). Sometimes people's behavior does not match their beliefs; In other words, their beliefs are not the real reason for their behavior; Rather, their behavior may be the result of other interests, preferences or values, and they have created different beliefs to justify such behaviors. Perhaps these things are interesting and attractive to humans because they correspond to something in our minds, and then such things become beliefs. These beliefs can help us to justify our behavior and explain to others why we do what we do. Rituals and rituals are examples of activities that people in different cultures constantly do with a specific pattern. These activities do not change much over time and sometimes it seems that there is no specific reason for doing them (Boyer and Linard 2006).

These rituals are attractive to humans because they align with our evolved "caution system." This system directs us to issues that may be dangerous or important; Thus, it can be said that a part of our mind is interested in rituals, rituals and ceremonies. The explanations that people give about the reason for performing these rituals are more to justify this interest than there is a requirement to perform them (Turner et al. 2017).

One of the examples that can be seen abundantly in people's lives is their continuous and continuous effort to discover the truth (Alaei Ardekani, Kondorani, Alaei Ardekan 2023). Sometimes, some people use different methods such as fortune-telling or hard tests to prove their innocence in order to understand the reality more deeply. In divination and prediction, people use signs or symbols to get information about the future or hidden issues. A hard test is when people expose themselves to danger and suffering to find out who is guilty or innocent. These are known as "truth-making institutions" also It seems that these activities are dangerous and costly, especially for people who expose themselves to suffering. (Mercier and Boyer 2021; Mercier 2020a).

Sometimes, people get involved in things that cost them a lot, and their motivation is not their conscious beliefs, but their intuitive feelings. Such works and actions are observed in different cultures and contexts; But it is interesting to know that the justifications (rationalization) that people provide to explain these actions can be very different or even not objective at all. This shows that "rationalization" is not the real cause of these actions, but the justifications that are presented immediately (Mercier and Altay 2022b). To further support this claim, in the following, it will be compared how having a belief affects behavior at different cognitive levels. The argument will be that when people have a reflective belief, that is, they are able to consciously confirm and express it, so their behavioral effects will be as follows:

1) Their behavioral effects are less powerful or more indirect than when they intuitively hold the same belief; In other words, they believe that something is true, even if they are not aware of it or cannot verbalize it.

2) Sometimes, their behavioral effects are quite different from the effects of intuitively holding a belief; In other words, even if they believe that something is true, but if that belief is not maintained at the intuitive level, their behavioral effects can be completely different (Alaei Ardekani, Alaei Ardekani 2023). In the following, "**rumors**" and "**conspiracy theories**" will be explained using comprehensive examples. These cases are mostly created by a group of people in a reflective manner and are supported and accompanied by others in a sensory and intuitive way.

2. Psychological Operations

2.1) The essence of the concept:

Psychological operations, or PsyOps, have been increasingly recognized as an integral component in modern military conflict, using psychological tactics to influence the perceptions, moods, and behaviors of adversaries and civilian populations alike. The key objective in such operations is to ensure strategic objectives are met by manipulating information and perceptions in a manner that undermines rivals' wills and shapes the environment of operation. Changes in technology and changes in the character of conflict have influenced psychological warfare in its progress, particularly in hybrid contexts and counterterrorism. (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2023; Petrocchi 2022).

The foundational principles of psychological warfare emphasize the planned use of propaganda and psychological tactics to sway public opinion and disrupt enemy cohesion (Aniq Luqman Shamsul Afkar and Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad 2022). This strategic use of psychological tactics has become increasingly relevant in contemporary conflicts, where the battlefield extends beyond traditional military engagements to include cognitive and information warfare (Petrocchi 2022; Briggs et al. 2021). The integration of technology into psychological operations has transformed the landscape of warfare, enabling states to conduct sophisticated operations that can rapidly disseminate information and influence public perception on a global scale (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2023).

2.2) Roles of psychological Operations:

PSYOPs are planned programs that help influence the target's thoughts, motives, reasoning abilities, or conduct, as well as that of their organization. Psychological operations are a means to an end, and that end can either be benevolent or malevolent in nature.

Military and National Security: PSYOP can also be used in gathering information by forcing target populations to yield sensitive information. Counterinsurgency efforts may utilize psychological operations to diminish the morale of adversaries, erode their support networks, and incite discontent towards their own leadership (Lamb 2005b).

• **Force Multiplier:** To apply conditions for making the military operations more effective, PSYOPs may be utilized to influence the target population's perception about the conflict.

Governance and Social Control: PSYOPs can either maintain social order or suppress dissent

• **Shaping Public Opinion:** PSYOPs can be utilized to shape public opinion in support of a particular policy or leadership.

• **Propaganda:** PSYOPs may be utilized for distributing propaganda to foster a certain ideology or world view.

• **Brand Building:** PSYOP helps in projecting positive brand imagery or that of a particular company.

• **Consumer Behavior Influence:** Psychological operations can be utilized to influence consumer behavior, influencing people towards the purchase of a particular product or service.

• **hostile psychological operations:** It can denote operations needed for countering adversary propaganda and misinformation activities.

• **Protection of National Interest:** PSYOPs protect national interests by countering threats to national security.

It should be noted that PSYOPs can be used both in an ethical and unethical manner. Ethical usages provide PSYOPs as a valuable tool in peacemaking, stabilization, and human rights, whereas in unethical usage, it is a weapon of manipulation and control (Munoz 2012).

2.3) The purposes of PSYOPs can include:

- **Advocating for a specific ideology or perspective:** Disseminating propaganda or misinformation to sway public perception.
- **Weakening an antagonist's will:** This may refer to depleting a foe's resolve or creating dissatisfaction among his ranks against their leadership.
- **Setting conditions for military efforts:** Influencing the interpretations of events and activities of a selected target audience, helping military forces to achieve their goals.
- **Conditioning the behavior of some targeted population:** encouraging or discouraging particular acts, including cooperation with government authority or participation in particular behavior.
- **Social stability or opposition demoralizing:** It involves regulation of collective perception, preventing discord.

While PSYOPs can be a real force for peace, stability, and human rights if used ethically, they are also a powerful weapon of manipulation and control. The potential consequences of PSYOP need to be understood, and great care undertaken in their use. Psyops strategies (Narula 2004).

2.4) Strategies of Psychological Operations:

Psychological Operations: PSYOPs seek to affect the target group psychologically in order to influence them toward a particular aim. Techniques employed include attempts to shape public opinion and degrade adversary capacity to counter.

Propaganda & Disinformation

- **White Propaganda:** Information shared to influence public opinion, such as news articles, speeches, or ads.
- **Black Propaganda:** False information from a hostile source aimed at discrediting it, like a government fabricating a story against an opposition group.
- **Gray Propaganda:** Uncertain origin information that seems neutral or objective, including anonymous leaks or rumors.
- **Disinformation:** Disseminating false information to deceive via social media, traditional media, and personal networks (Petersen 2020).

Media Manipulation

- **Censorship:** Controlling information, thus limiting public access. Governments and organizations may censor news and social media to restrict information spread.
- **Media Control:** Controlling media to shape public opinion. Governments, corporations, and powerful entities own or influence outlets to promote their agendas.
- **Astroturfing:** the simulation of grassroots movements through actors or social media bots in order to manipulate public opinion (Mladenova 2019).

Psychological Tactics

- **Rumor Mongering:** Spreading false or exaggerated info to create confusion via word-of-mouth, social media, or traditional media.
- **Sowing Discord:** Creating divisions in a target population by using negative propaganda or harassment against specific groups or individuals.
- **Psychological Attacks:** The use of psychological manipulations to undermine the morale or efficiency of individuals or groups by inspiring fear, guilt, or shame.

Social Engineering

- **Phishing:** Trying to obtain sensitive information through deceptive emails or messages, often mimicking legitimate organizations to trick people into revealing personal details.
- **Social Engineering Attacks:** Exploiting trust to gain unauthorized access. This involves tricking people into revealing passwords, clicking malicious links, or opening attachments (Petersen 2020).

Cognitive Warfare

- **Cognitive Manipulation:** The use of psychological techniques with the intention of an individual or group

in changing their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, often involving cognitive biases and emotional manipulations.

- **Information Warfare:** The use of information as a weapon to achieve strategic objectives by disrupting or impairing an adversary's ability to function (Brazzoli 2020).

Cultural and Linguistic Control

- **Cultural Appropriation:** The use of aspects of foreign culture in a strategic way can include cultural symbols or stereotypes to influence public opinion.

- **Linguistic Manipulation:** Using language to shape perception. This includes euphemisms, jargon, or techniques to obscure truth or manipulate emotions (Bourne Jr and Yaroush 2003).

2.5) Channels of execution:

The training of PSYOPs can be done through several means depending on the target audience, goals, and resources. Some common strategies include:

Traditional Media:

Newspapers and Magazines: Releasing articles based on support for a particular view.

- **Radio and Television:** Broadcasting news and programs that promote a specific agenda.

- **Print Ads:** Advertising in newspapers, magazines, or publications to promote a product, service, or idea.

Digital Media:

Social media: Accounts are to be maintained for propaganda and/or disinformation.

- **Websites and Blogs:** Content that supports a specific viewpoint.

- **Email Marketing:** Sending targeted emails to promote a product, service, or idea.

Events:

- **Rallies:** Organize or participate in a public event in support of something.

- **Conferences and Workshops:** Hosting or attending events to share information or sway public opinion (Hamzepour 2024).

Personal Contact:

- **Face-to-Face Meetings:** Persuaded the individuals or groups to alter their views.

- **Telemarketing:** Calling people to help market a product, service, or idea.

Other Approaches:

- **Subliminal Messages:** Hidden messages within various media that influence the subconscious.

- **Psychological Warfare:** Methods and techniques that degrade the morale or effectiveness of a target group.

Cultural Appropriation: The use of the characteristics of another culture for strategic purposes.

The different ways PSYOPs can be conducted are only viable under various circumstances. Indeed, they can serve both in an ethical and an unethical way. While in their ethical usage they are targeted at peace, stability, and protection of human rights, in unethical usages they turn into weapons of manipulation and control (Lamb 2005a).

3. Cultural Misbeliefs the Ground Amplifier of Psyops

3.1) The Enduring Power of Cultural Misbeliefs

Cultural misbeliefs are well-entrenched inside societies, passed on from one generation to the next, often unchangeable. Such misbeliefs can be on anything: superstition, folklore, historical misconceptions, societal stereotypes. Their strength lies in their ability to connect with the collective consciousness, striking an emotional chord, and frequently bypassing rational examination. For instance, a community might have an incorrect belief about the supernatural powers of a subgroup—a thought that this subgroup is uniquely talented. The wrong belief might lack a factual foundation, but it nonetheless represents a core attribute of cultural identity and informs day-to-day interactions and perceptions. Some will wish to avoid the members of the subgroup, or fear them. Others seek out their help or advice. These kinds of misunderstandings

perpetuate racism, discrimination, alienation, and may lead to violence. Accordingly, Cultural misbeliefs perpetuated through history, such as biased versions of past wars or events, serve only to continue bitterness and distrust among diverse groups. For example, a myth about the behavior of a certain group during a historical event can create feelings of hatred and resentment among people for generations. Such would obviously impede any process of reconciliation and peacemaking, wherein people and groups would cling to their own wrong versions of history. Cultural misbeliefs have deeply affected people's lives. Such misunderstandings can shape one's decisions, interaction with people, and the quality of life. For example, a person who believes in superstitions can develop some actions or places to avoid, which will limit their possibilities and reduce their freedom (Mercier 2020b).

Cultural misbeliefs can also create a playground for psychological operations-psychological activities planned to affect the target audience's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Most of the time, these are tailor-made to exploit certain prevailing vulnerabilities, prejudices, and miscalculations associated with a culture. With cultural misbeliefs, PsyOps could effectively influence perception and behavior to bring about desired results.

3.2) The Exploitation of Cultural Misbeliefs in PSYOP

1. Vulnerability to Target: Cultural misbeliefs can be used to instill insecurity, fear, or doubt among members of a society. On such occasions, individuals become highly susceptible to control. For example, if a civic society is deeply afraid of foreign threats, then messages that heighten those fears can lead them to accept extreme or radical measures in response (Lamb 2005a).

2. Cognitive Bias: Cultural beliefs make a big difference in confirmation bias, when one searches for and gives more importance to information that supports their preconceived beliefs, and in-group/out-group bias, when one favors their group and degrades the others. These kinds of biases offer a fertile ground for misinformation and propaganda to spread since people tend to embrace and spread information supporting their worldview, no matter how true or false it is (Taylor 2007).

3. Social Cohesion: Cultural misbeliefs destroy social cohesion by causing divisions within the community. When the people start getting divided due to various beliefs, this situation may be exploited to further accelerate friction and lead to conflict. For instance, a psychological operation might point at cultural differences to initiate strife between different groups; this would destabilize social stability and make the society more vulnerable to manipulation from outside.

4. Deficiency in Critical Thinking: Cultural misconceptions frequently impede the development of critical thinking abilities, resulting in individuals embracing information uncritically, especially when it corresponds with their pre-existing convictions. This deficiency in critical examination renders them increasingly vulnerable to deceit and manipulation. In settings where critical thinking is not prioritized, the spread of misinformation can occur without restraint, further solidifying misconceptions (Schleifer 2006).

3.3) Examples of Cultural Misconceptions in Psychological Operations

3.3.1) Conspiracy Theories: Outrageous beliefs about certain unexposed plans may successfully work against confidence in authority and create a climate of mistrust. These may be exploited in psychological operations to destroy confidence in authority, inspire paranoia, and increase the prospects that individuals will be disposed toward alternative interpretations which play on their fears. - Stereotypes: Preconceived views about particular groups can help justify discriminatory and prejudicial acts. These stereotypes may become the target of psychological operations to create an "us versus them" mentality, further dividing communities and making them more susceptible to influence. In other words, "Conspiracy theories" refer to beliefs in which hidden and powerful groups manipulate events and circumstances for their own benefit. These beliefs, which are usually in conflict with the public interest, can motivate people to act irrationally and even violently (Gray 2010).

It is not surprising that institutions such as the media, the government, and scientists, who are distrusted and criticized by conspiracy theorists, are also concerned about the spread and influence of such theories (Uscinski and Enders 2023); However, it is important to note that not all beliefs about conspiracies are false or baseless. In history and even in the present, there are many cases where small groups of powerful people

have actually conspired to achieve their goals, often at great cost to others; So, how can we distinguish between true and misbeliefs about conspiracies? One way to approach this complex question is to compare the consequences of believing in a conspiracy theory with the consequences of believing in a real conspiracy. In fact, by examining the consequences and results of these two types of beliefs, we can gain a better understanding of them. Working in an organization with suspicious activity, you might suspect a conspiracy among leaders. This can cause worry and fear, leading to silence due to job concerns (Santoro and Kumar 2018). To disclose the conspiracy publicly, legal protection and evidence are crucial. Conspiracy believers differ from those who believe in real conspiracies. Real conspiracy believers fear consequences and remain silent. Conspiracy theorists openly announce beliefs, often spreading false narratives. "Infowars" is a prominent example, with Alex Jones claiming government involvement in events like Sandy Hook. This asymmetry shows real conspiracies can remain hidden, while false ones spread widely (Gray 2010).

What about behaviors that seem to be influenced by conspiracy theories and that have high costs? We must admit that there is no comprehensive and perfect explanation for all these behaviors, but we can raise two points. First, only a small percentage of people who believe in conspiracy theories actually take actions that have high costs. Second, even if we assume that these behaviors are caused by an intuitive belief in the existence of a conspiracy, they still do not seem logical.

We tried to analyze the cultural phenomenon of "cultural misbeliefs". These misbeliefs, such as fake news, conspiracy theories such as mystery stories, and unscientific treatments that look more like witchcraft, are often identified as sources of concern; Because these beliefs can lead to behaviors that are harmful to individuals or society, like a destructive storm. In fact, we believe that most cultural misconceptions, like old myths, are not intuitively supported; Rather, these beliefs are considered among reflective beliefs; In other words, these beliefs are not based on evidence or direct experience, but are formed based on social and rhetorical factors such as persuasion and conformity, like paintings that change color over time; Therefore, these beliefs do not directly lead to costly behaviors; Rather, they play other roles, such as expressing identity, feeling belonging or opposition to a particular group or idea. This is a rather optimistic conclusion, but it includes two important features:

First, we must accept that many true cultural beliefs are also created in a reflective manner and have few (useful) behavioral consequences; For example, belief in climate change is not enough to motivate people to reduce environmental impacts. Second, we must acknowledge that even if misbeliefs are reflective, they can still be harmful in various ways: like a road map, these beliefs can lead people to certain behaviors. Even if these behaviors are considered costly and are placed in the margins of society, beliefs can provide logical reasons for doing them. Beliefs can also help coordinate social behaviors. When people have common beliefs and act based on them, these beliefs can help facilitate coordinated and costly behaviors. This is one of the reasons why misconceptions can become common in different societies.

Recognizing the reasons for the formation of false cultural beliefs, both intuitively and reflectively, is very important from a theoretical and practical point of view. From a theoretical point of view, the cognitive mechanisms involved in accepting, maintaining and acting based on these beliefs are different for intuitive and reflective beliefs. These beliefs act on the basis of various processes proposed by Sperber (Sperber 1997). From a practical perspective, if cultural misbeliefs play only a limited and indirect role in explaining costly behaviors, this suggests that any efforts to prevent the spread of these beliefs will have little effect; Therefore, we should turn our attention to deeper factors that explain costly behaviors; Such as ethnic hatred, lack of trust in the government or economic grievances. These factors can contribute to the success of cultural misconceptions and should be seriously and carefully analyzed.

3.3.2) Rumors:

"Rumors", as a type of "improvised news" (Shibutani 1966), arise when people need information and insufficient or unreliable official sources of communication and information are available; On the other hand, rumors are not always lies and sometimes they may be true, but they usually have a strong emotional appeal and can influence people's beliefs and behaviors; Thus, contrary to popular stereotypes, rumors are not always false or malicious (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007) especially when they are spread among small

groups that have a direct stake in the subject of the rumor. Here it can be said that rumors have strong and direct effects on behavior only when they are created intuitively, and rumors that are generated and spread in a reflective manner will have weak or indirect effects on behavior. In some situations, rumors have no practical and direct effect on the behavior of the people who believe them; In Iraq, for example, there are rumors of coalition airstrikes fueled by propaganda and disinformation campaigns (as of this writing); But for people who live in areas far from these attacks, the misbelief that these attacks target civilians does not have the same practical consequences as for people who live near the areas under attack; For example, this belief does not make them move (Diggory 1956; Silverman et al. 2021). This suggests that false rumors are more likely to spread when they have no behavioral impact and are considered purely Reflective. However, in some cases, it seems that false rumors can have significant consequences; For example, rumors often precede violent mass riots and appear to lead to ethnic riots (Horowitz 2001; Ateng et al. 2024). To explain our argument, we will provide examples of rumors and ethnic violence from different regions of the world that show how rumors can provoke or escalate violence by tapping into existing fears and prejudices among different groups. In any case, rumors are associated with costly behaviors; But the question is, do rumors really cause these behaviors? We argue that this relationship is not so strong and direct, because believing in rumors is usually considered a type of Reflective belief. One of the fascinating and different aspects of false rumors is that they seem to be used primarily as a means of justifying people's behaviors or attitudes; In other words, instead of people changing their behavior or beliefs based on new information, they may use false rumors to justify something they already intended to do or believed. This behavioral pattern can be seen in various fields such as health, politics and intergroup conflicts (Mercier 2020b; Mercier and Altay 2022a).

One of the main problems of human societies is coordination in collective action. This issue becomes more important especially when we are competing or conflicting with other groups. Sometimes, some people resort to rumors to justify their behavior, even if these rumors lack credibility (Hamzepour 2024). But the question is why some rumors have more influence on people? Now, we examine the difference between two types of rumors: rumors that spread in small networks and rumors that spread before ethnic riots. Rumors that form in small groups tend to be more specific and clearer, while rumors that spread in larger groups are often vaguer and more general and difference shows different types of beliefs: intuitive and reflective beliefs (Mercier and Altay 2022a).

Reflective beliefs, like a mirror, reflect the influence of others on us. These beliefs can change under the influence of conversations, actions of others or even the group we are a member of. Sometimes, these beliefs may not be consistent with reality and are formed based on rumors or lies; For example, in some cases, rumors may be about a certain group of people, describing them as dangerous or evil. These rumors can cause anger or fear in the opposite group and force them to attack; But the exact details of these rumors, such as who did what and why, usually remain vague and unspecified (Kim and Kim 2018).

Intuitive beliefs are usually consistent with reality and our behavior; But reflective beliefs can sometimes be inconsistent and contradictory; For example, suppose some people believe that a certain group of people are bad or dangerous; But they do not take any action against that group until a rumor or a specific trigger provokes them. In fact, people do not believe these rumors in their hearts or minds, but simply in their words and actions (Mercier and Altay 2022a).

Conclusions

Conclusively, cultural misbeliefs prove to be a fertile ground for psychops, creating vulnerabilities in building cognitive biases, disrupting social cohesion, and demotivating critical thinking. While they open the doors toward manipulative capabilities, they shut the doors toward resilience at the levels of individuals and collectives. It would be helpful to recognize and transcend such myths as a capability for developing awareness and harmony in society.

In mitigation, it importantly goes parallel with a call for awareness and education. Giving people the wherewithal to examine misinformation for what it is and to critically evaluate the messages received

develops not only the prospect of a community's resistance to manipulation but also a better-informed citizenry. This is where an educational and dialogical approach becomes necessary in being resilient against the psychological ways of elements trying to mislead through cultural misconceptions. In other words, deconstructing cultural misbeliefs doesn't just clear up a number of misconceptions; it deals with making the climate right for reevaluation to bring about understanding. It is with this reevaluation that there is a possibility for a closer, better-informed, and psychologically resistant-to-manipulation society—one which could also make for a far more agreeable world and an open-minded society.

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