

Paranoia and Social Inequality

**Dave Harper (University of East London)
John Cromby (Loughborough University)**

- **What is Paranoia?**
- **Deconstructing Paranoia**
- **Re-theorising Paranoia**
- **Paranoia and Social Inequality**
- **Implications for Intervention**

What is Paranoia?

- **“I feel reluctant to leave my house with the goings on outside and that.. so many people in one area it can't be normal.. It's the overcrowdedness, just too many people, diseases..”**
- **“I got into chatlines and things, I believe that the same people who were bugging my house were giving me death threats and that made me feel very anxious..”**

What is Paranoia?

- **“Messaging through the TV.. And you get dictates from the government who are telling presenters how to talk and what to say and how to behave and who to attack and who not to attack and not attack but you know who to appease and who to attack.. It changes with the weather really but there’s a racial mix as well, you know, hot and cold..”**

What is Paranoia?

- **“He’s a guy that lives around xx, he’s a criminal, he’s a murderer, he’s a thief, he’s a liar, he’s a dud, he’s a copy, he’s a clown person.. He’s a copy of myself as impersonates me and all my stuff and he’s a clown person, changes different appearances. Its hard to explain but the FBI are very advanced in technology, goes to the moon and you know Mars and all them places you know so its very advanced technology”**

What is Paranoia?

- **Appears in multiple DSM categories**
 - **Paranoid schizophrenia**
 - **Delusional disorder**
 - **Personality disorder (paranoid type)**

- **Diagnostic categories**
 - **Invalid**
 - **Unreliable**

What is Paranoia?

- **AIMS:**
- **1 Re-theorise without diagnostic categories**
 - the social and material constitution of experience
- **2 Explore associations between paranoia and social inequality**
- **3 Draw out some implications for intervention**

Deconstructing Paranoia

- **PSYCHIATRY AND PARANOIA**
- **Irrational and false belief(s)**
- **A sign of pathology**
- **Context and content meaningless**



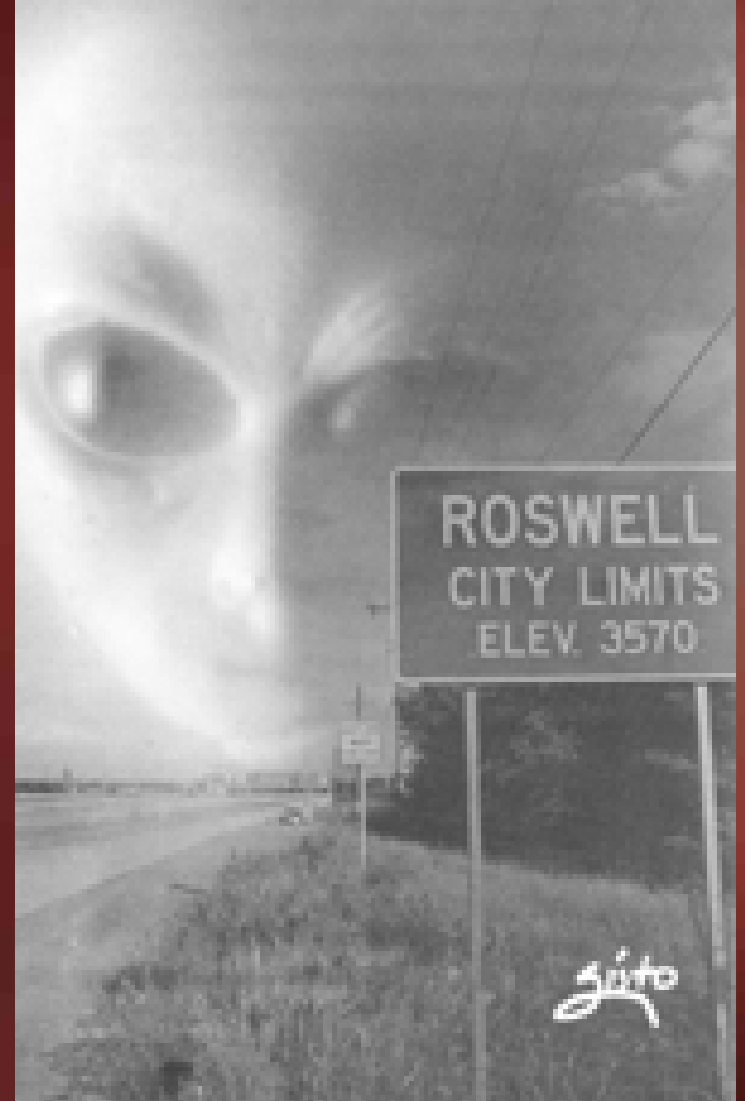
Deconstructing Paranoia

- **Irrational and False?**
- **Psychiatry is naively realist**
- **Diagnosis rarely involves empirical investigation**
- **Many “normal” beliefs lack evidence**



Deconstructing Paranoia

- **Pathological?**
- **People vary in the strength of conviction of their beliefs**
- **High rates of belief in the supernatural**
- **High levels of “everyday” suspicion**



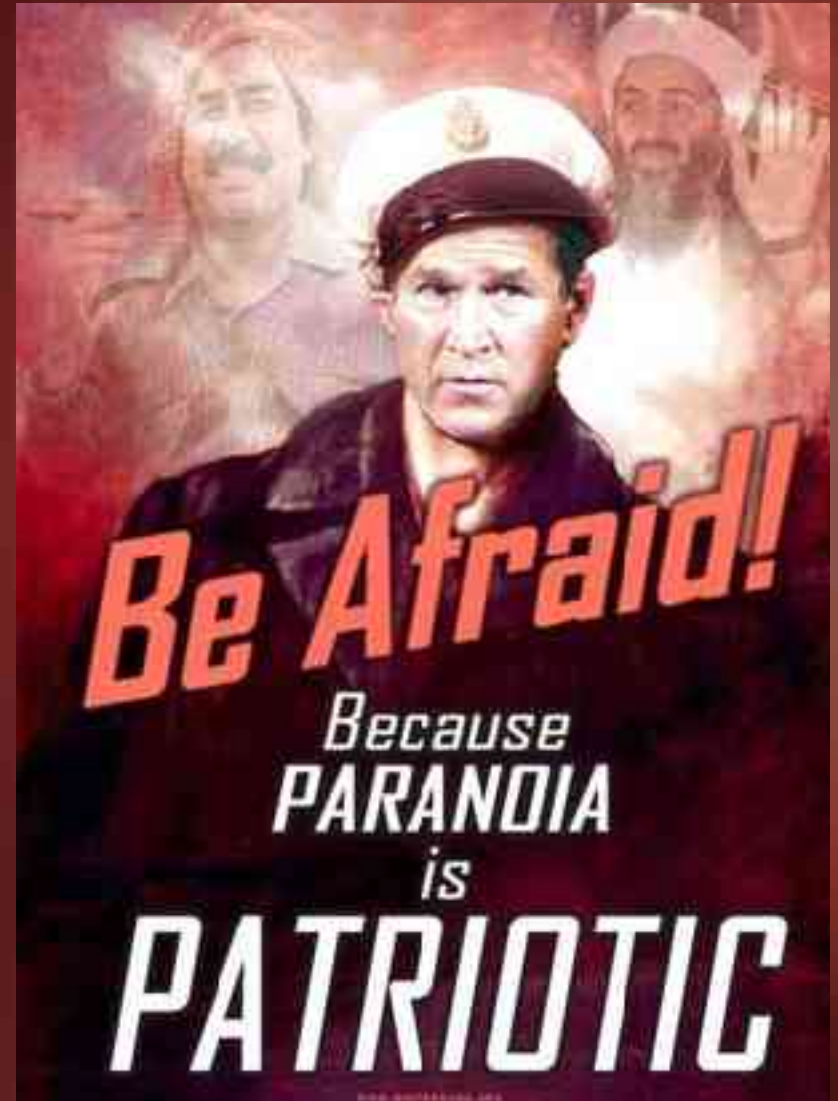
Deconstructing Paranoia

- **Pathological?**
- **Delusional beliefs more common than psychiatry presupposes**
- **“Psychotic” beliefs associated with more distress and preoccupation**



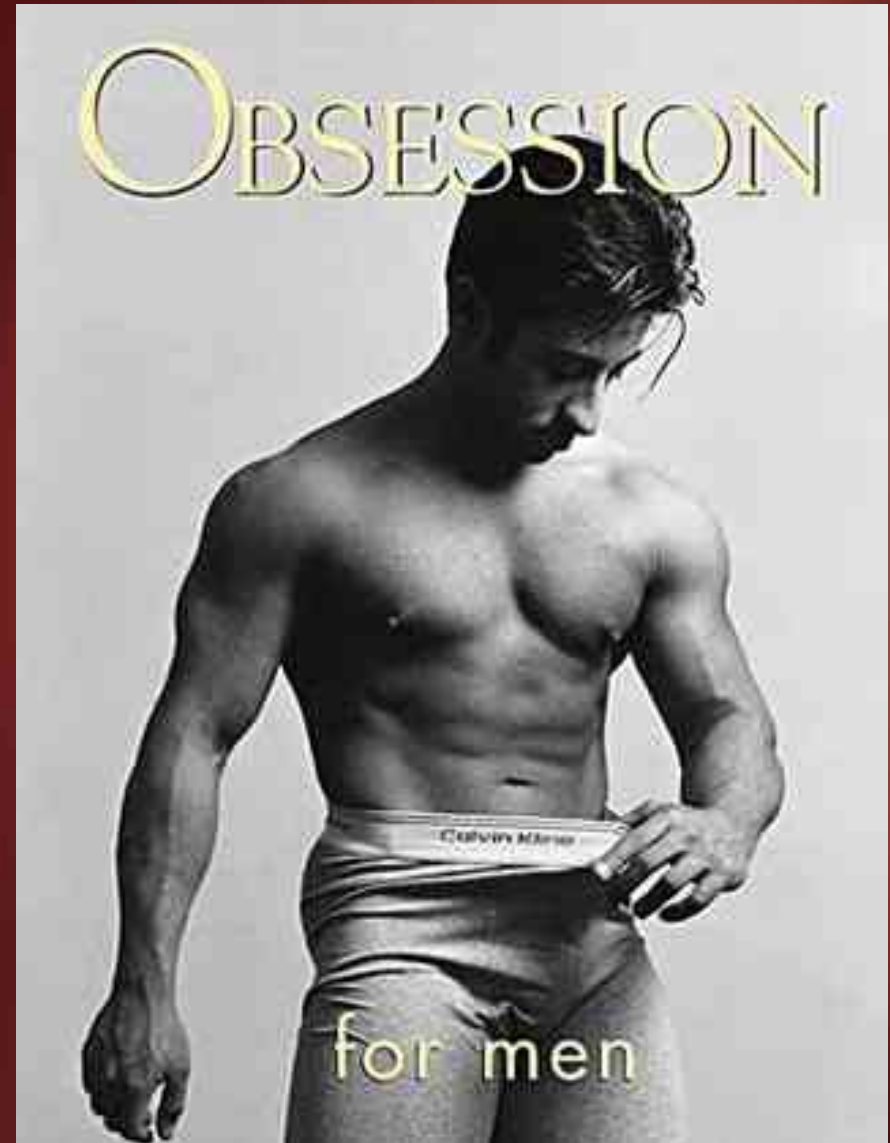
Deconstructing Paranoia

- **Meaningless?**
- **May relate to purpose and meaning in life**
- **Associated with person's experience**
- **Associated with societal factors**



Re-theorising Paranoia

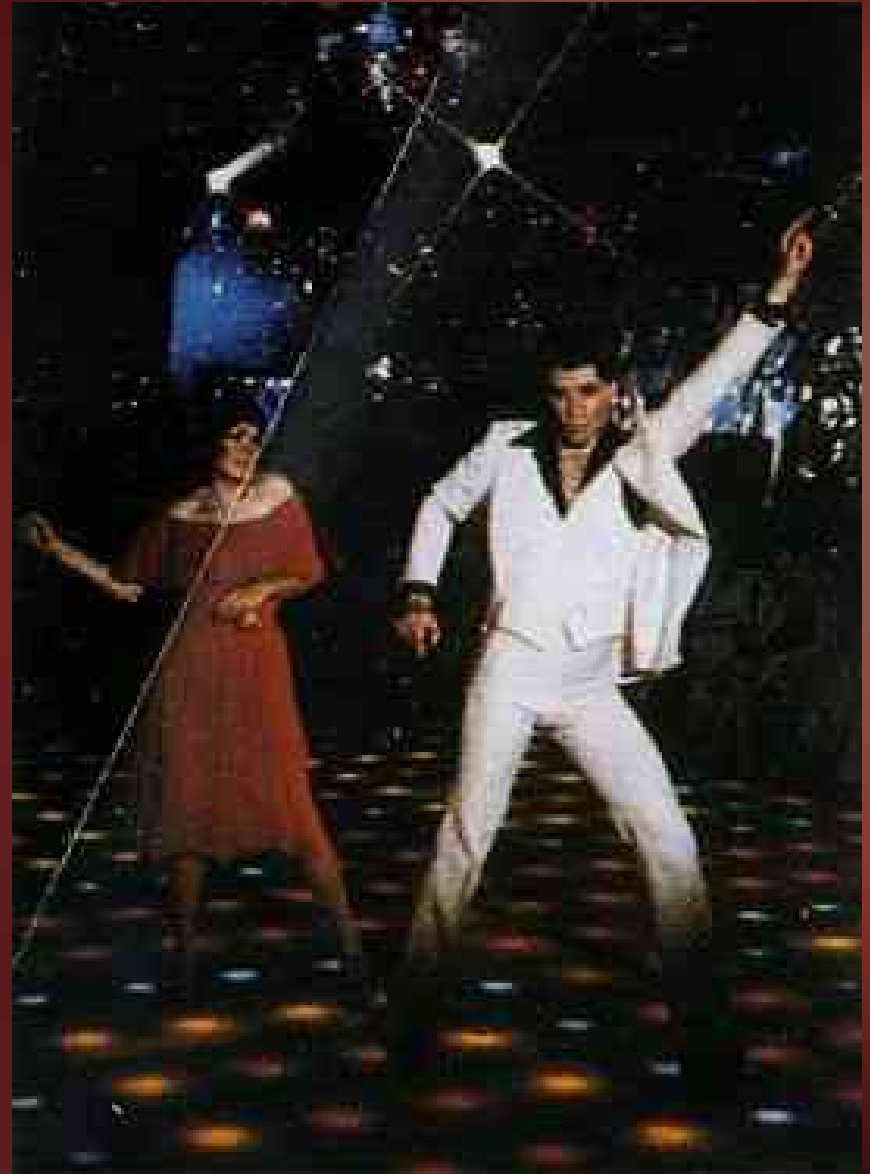
- **FOCUS:** the social and material constitution of experience
- **Experience is embodied**
- **Resources:**
 - **Phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty)**
 - **Social theory (Bourdieu)**
 - **Neuroscience (Damasio)**



Re-theorising Paranoia

- **John's dancing paranoia**

- **Explicable by past history**
- **Situation specific**
- **Bounded to a single activity**



Re-theorising Paranoia

- **The Primacy of Feelings:**
- **Wider than emotions**
- **The “default” mode of human experience**



Re-theorising Paranoia

- **Feelings influence:**

- **What we attend to**

- **The meanings we confer**



Re-theorising Paranoia

- **Feelings are socialised**
- **The socialisation of emotion**
- **Bourdieu: dispositions and the “habitus”**
- **Damasio: “somatic markers” as feelings**



Re-theorising Paranoia

- **Feelings regulate decisions..**
- **..decisions influence experience..**
- **..experience produces feelings**
- **Feelings shape trajectories of social participation**



Re-theorising Paranoia

Paranoia is the product of feelings

- Fear, shame, anxiety, discomfort, difference, alienation
- Bentall (2003): the “reaction maintainance” principle
- People are agents whose actions shape their experience



Paranoia and Social Inequality

**Harrison et al 2001
(BR. J. Psychiatry):**

**8.1> prevalence of
schizophrenia if father low SES
and born in a deprived area**

**King et al 1994
(B.M.J.):**

**overall incidence 2.2/ 10 000
Asian/black 3.6/ 10 000**



Paranoia and Social Inequality

- **Paranoia associated with:**
- **Low SES & immigration (Kendler 1982)**
- **Refugee status (Westermeyer 1989)**
- **Victimisation, stressful life events, maleness (Johns et al 2004)**
- **Discrimination (Janssen et al 2003)**



Paranoia and Social Inequality

- **Belief in external control associated with low SES, Mexican heritage, femaleness (Mirowsky & Ross 1983)**
- **Disadvantaged areas characterised by disorder, low levels of trust, powerlessness (Ross et al 2001)**



Paranoia and Social Inequality

- **Black people living in majority white areas have elevated incidence of schizophrenia (Boydell et al 2000)**
- **Voice hearing and feelings of persecution more likely in urban than rural areas (Varma et al 1997)**



Paranoia and Social Inequality

- > risk of assault

- > risk of theft/burglary

- > graffiti, vandalism, derelict buildings, street drinking/drug use, visible gangs

“Rotherham’s dog rough now man, fuckin’ dog rough. All you get is people eyein’ you all the time.. Trouble is, there’s more n more with guns now.. you need to watch who you’re fallin’ out with. Look at X, his mother keeps a shotgun for him, his brothers have both got guns .. and all these lads hanging around on street acting hard, that’s all they’ve got to do, there’s nowt else for them to think good about themselves so all they do is attack us .. its us innocents and families that’s suffering”

Paranoia and Social Inequality

- > risk of unemployment

- > risk of homelessness

- “You ..[sighs].. cos you’re just constantly on an edge, know what I mean, you’re constantly on an edge, unsettled, you’re thinkin’ all the time.. you got to bed at night you’re laid there thinkin’, I mean, ‘What happens if I lose my job?’ Its always on your mind.. You can’t have a good time, you can’t relax.. Its there all the time”

Paranoia and Social Inequality

- > social isolation
- fewer opportunities
- more restrictive choices

•“I feel different, especially when I go out. Like I’ll go for a video or somethin’ and when I’m there I feel worried an’ threatened a bit, like, an’ I sort of can’t decide which to have. Then I’ll get home and I don’t watch it but I’m bored an I need something to do. So I watch it! But I don’t enjoy stuff at the moment . . . nothing seems right to me, not like it was”

Paranoia and Social Inequality

- > physical ill health
- > mental distress
- > Pressure on relationships

“You feel guilty for not working. I started to feel depressed early on.. I feel fuckin’ bored. There’s nowt, is there. Our lass comes home and I feel terrible cos she’s been to work and she’ll say ‘what have you done today?’ and I have to say ‘well nowt’. And worse, I don’t seem to have the will anymore to do anything, stuff that I used to do, and yet I feel restless, right pent-up in myself but I can’t settle”

Paranoia and Social Inequality

• **Inequality = lack of resources**

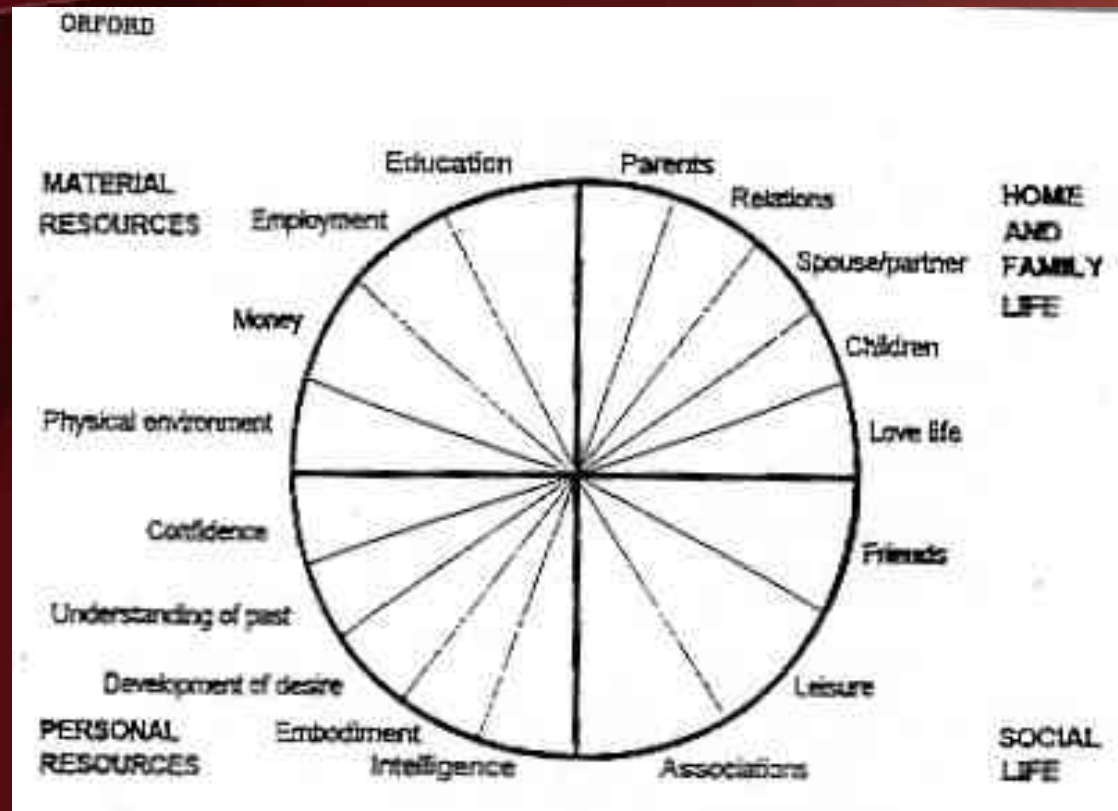
– **Material**

– **Cultural/symbolic**

– **Relational**



Paranoia and Social Inequality



- “What people tend to see as ‘inner resources’ are most usually outer resources which they have acquired over time” (David Smail)

Paranoia and Social Inequality

Sources of paranoia 1:

–The material and social environment

- Neighbours
- Relationships: family, peers
- The material environment
- Workplace



Paranoia and Social Inequality

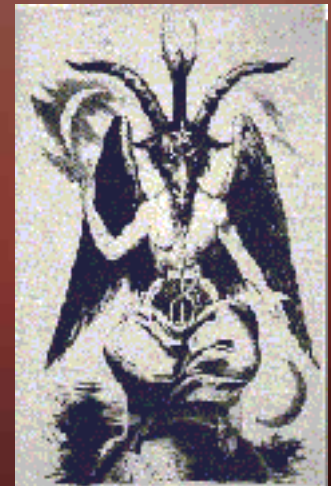
•Sources of paranoia 2:

–Mass media themes

- Spies, governments, police, powerful corporations, technology

–Differences made significant

–Religion



What Might Paranoia Offer?

- **A sense of meaning and purpose**
- **Revelatory evangelism
“knowing what is really going on”**
- **Makes sense of a confusing world shaped by distal forces**



Implications for Intervention

- **Importance of therapeutic relationships**
- **Sensitivity to social and personal meanings**
- **Facilitating a better fit between beliefs and lives**
- **Importance of self help groups e.g. Paranoia Network**
- **Paranoia and “false consciousness”**