THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FALSE BELIEFS

Collective Delusions and Conspiracy Theories

EDITED BY JOSEPH P. FORGAS

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FALSE BELIEFS

This exciting book outlines the fascinating social psychology of false beliefs and tribal delusions, examining the common human tendency to create and maintain collectively shared belief systems that have no foundation in reality. Bringing together leading international researchers, contributors explore how evolutionary, biological, cognitive, and social variables shape the creation and maintenance of widely shared but obviously false belief systems. The authors review how psychological processes promote the formation and maintenance of fallacious beliefs and discuss the philosophical and epistemological criteria we can use to classify some beliefs as false, and others as true.

The chapters draw on many core areas of contemporary social life where false beliefs are of topical interest, highlighting the applied implications of this line of research. Topics include political polarisation, false narratives about group differences, pandemic conspiracy theories, fallacious theories in academia and the role of the media and the internet in creating distorted narratives.

This book is engagingly written and will be of great interest to students and researchers in social psychology and the social sciences, as well as anyone seeking to understand one of the most intriguing issues that shape human social life.

Joseph P. Forgas is Scientia Professor of Psychology at the University of New South Wales, Australia. He received his D.Phil. and D.Sc. from the University of Oxford and his research focuses on affective influences on social cognition and behaviour. He has published over 30 books and 300 papers and for his work he received the Order of Australia, the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, the Alexander von Humboldt Research Prize and a Rockefeller Fellowship as well as a number of academic fellowships and honours.

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PART 1

The Nature and Origins of False Beliefs

1

FROM FALSE BELIEFS TO COLLECTIVE DELUSIONS

The Psychology of Human Credulity

Joseph P. Forgas

Abstract

False beliefs have always been with us and will remain so. The human mind and consciousness evolved not so much to discover objective reality but rather to promote the creation of highly cohesive groups, our primary means of survival, often at the cost of ignoring reality the better to develop binding group ideologies. False beliefs become of concern when they develop into consensual delusions that drive intergroup conflict such as fascism and Marxism and cause political polarisation, as is often the case today. In this introductory chapter, the nature and origins of false beliefs are explored, with special focus on the historical prevalence of false beliefs and the ubiquity of delusional beliefs in our age, including in academia. The question of how true and false beliefs can be distinguished is addressed, and the role of the limits of human rationality in fostering the spread of false beliefs are discussed. The influence of visceral, sub-rational brain processes such as the functions of the autonomic, instinctive and associative systems on false beliefs are explored, and the critical role of in-group preference and conformity in creating and maintaining false beliefs is examined. The current dangerous spread of delusional beliefs, even by highly educated and cognitively competent people in academia, receives special attention, and the chapter concludes with a brief summary of the contents of the book.

An Arc of Madness?

False beliefs appear to be a universal feature of the human condition and a defining feature of most civilisations from the Stone Age to the present (Harari, 2014; see also Goel; Dunbar; French; this volume). Indeed, there

appears to be an arc of tribal madness running through human history (and inside our brains) that we ignore at our peril. No other species has committed as much systematic and pre-meditated violence against its own members as humans. What is remarkable is that these acts of aggression were mostly committed by people who were convinced that they are acting in the rational pursuit of desirable moral objectives in the name of their group or tribe. They were driven by false beliefs and consensual tribal delusions. The fragile system of liberal democracy is currently also under growing strain from the spread of false beliefs, fake news and conspiracy theories (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019; Albright, 2018; Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2008; Forgas et al., 2021), and even highly educated academics may be captivated by bizarre woke ideologies (Saad, 2020; see also Forgas, Jussim et al., Fiedler; this volume). Understanding our psychological propensity for shared false beliefs and the continuing dangers of collective delusions is a key objective of this book, and this introductory chapter. Consider a few historical examples of absurd yet enduring false beliefs:

– In 1212, a 'children's crusade' was approved by the Pope, sending some 30,000 children to re-occupy the Holy Land and convert Muslims to Christianity, following visions of Christ appearing to some of their leaders. Most of the children died of hunger and disease, and many were sold into slavery.

– Following Martin Luther's Protestant reformation, for 300 years, Europe's religious wars resulted in up to 40% of deaths in some regions and widespread devastation of the continent, focused on delusional beliefs about Christian doctrine.

– In 1942, the brightest of the German Reich assembled in Wannsee to plan the systematic extermination of 11 million Jews using gas chambers and mass cremation, led by Heydrich and Eichmann. They were driven by their 'scientific' conviction that the purity of Aryan race must be defended against contamination by inferior Jews.

– Following the 1917 Bolshevik putsch, Lenin and later Stalin set out to fulfil Marx's prescriptions for a proletarian revolution leading to a communist utopia. In the process, over 20 million people died, with a further 70 million people killed in Mao's China, 2 million people in Cambodia and millions more in North Korea pursuing the same delusional ideology (see also Forgas; Jussim et al., this volume).

This is just a small selection of our bizarre historical delusions. The key difference between humans and other species is that uniquely; we have symbolic consciousness that allows us to live not only in the present but also in alternative symbolic realities, including the remembered past and the imagined future (Dunbar, 2019; Harari, 2014; Ridley, 2004, 2015). Other animals

obey evolutionary imperatives to survive in the here and now. Humans alone are often captivated by our fallacious representations of reality and imagined futures that sometimes drive us to commit unspeakable acts of violence. Fascists and communists followed their delusional beliefs to justify murdering millions of people in pursuit of their illusory utopias.

False Beliefs Are Everywhere

False beliefs are all around us, and always have been. It is truly remarkable how many crazy ideas have been earnestly believed by people throughout the ages, sometimes for millennia without anyone doubting or seriously questioning their veracity (see also French; Dunbar; this volume). 'False' beliefs often served as the core ideology or religion of otherwise successful cultures, and highly intelligent people have spent their entire lives interpreting the obscure verbiage of their respective dogmas, rather than challenging them (Benedict, 1989; James, 1902; see also Dunbar; French, this volume). During periods of insecurity such as the recent COVID pandemic, false beliefs, conspiracy theories and collective delusions offered illusory explanations shared by millions (Atlas, 2022; Forgas et al., 2023; Frijters et al., 2021; see also van Prooijen; Stanovich & Toplak, this volume).

Belief in witchcraft (Middle Ages), human sacrifice (Aztecs, Maya), the immaculate conception, trans-substantiation, the Holy Ghost, flat Earth, the second coming, milk and meat must not meet (Judaism), the rainbow serpent (Aboriginals), martyrs rewarded by 72 virgins (Islam), Chinese medicine and acupuncture (China) as well as countless other elaborate false beliefs were shared by cultures everywhere.

Since the 'cognitive revolution' and the evolution of human symbolic consciousness around 200,000 years ago, the maintenance and cultivation of false beliefs became a central feature of both tribal and agricultural societies (Benedict, 1989; Buss, 2019; Harari, 2014; see also Dunbar, this volume). Highly organised and increasingly elaborate religious institutions, priesthoods and rituals were created in the service of cultivating the dominant tribal delusion. In most cultures, strict rules punish anyone who dares to question the communally endorsed nonsense everyone was expected to believe. In Islam apostasy is punished by death, in Christianity it is only the promise of posthumous hell, and in many historical cultures murder, excommunication and ostracism were the lot of anyone who dared to doubt the current consensual delusion, and any exclusion is still experienced as agonising by most of us (Williams & Nida, 2011).

Our own allegedly enlightened age is no less burdened by false beliefs than earlier epochs (see also Ritov & Bruck; Stanovich & Toplak; Sutton et al.; Forgas, this volume). Just consider a few obvious recent examples: the QAnon conspiracy, German racial superiority, the promised proletarian

revolution, that Trump won the last election, that Putin was provoked by NATO, that humanity is on the verge of extinction (Ehrlich, 1968, 1974; Extinction Rebellion), that all whites are racist (critical race theory), the denial of biological sexuality (gender ideology), that all humans are either oppressed, or are oppressors (intersectionality theory), that humans are born with a blank slate (woke ideology), and countless others (see also Forgas, Jussim et al., this volume).

Science has also been dogged by false beliefs (see also Fiedler, this volume). The polymath Newton himself was an enthusiastic alchemist. Arthur Koestler in 'Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe' (1964), charts the history of countless false beliefs and the development of cosmology. The geocentric Ptolemaic view placed Earth at the centre of creation, because people just could not imagine that humans are not the centre of the universe, or that God would arrange the planets in anything other but in a perfect circular pattern. The great cosmological systems, from Ptolemy to Copernicus have mostly reflected the metaphysical and psychological prejudices of their age. Many great scientists were like 'sleepwalkers' (Koestler, 1964) imprisoned by their paradigmatic false beliefs, and this is often still the case today (see chapters by Fiedler; Forgas; and Jussim et al., this volume).

Consensual delusions and religious dogmas extinguished the once flourishing Islamic scholarship after the eleventh century A.D., when the imams of Baghdad imposed the Quran as the sole source of revealed knowledge (Figure 1.1). Intellectuals fled to Europe, and Islamic countries suffered centuries of backwardness, lasting to this day as a result (Chaney, 2023). Fortunately, around the same time, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that the known world is a reflection of God's creation and so is a proper subject for scientific inquiry, opening the way for the development of science in Christian Europe of which we are still the beneficiaries today.

Perhaps even our currently cherished core beliefs in liberty, equality, fraternity and the value of life may yet turn out to be false beliefs from the perspective of some future historian, as these beliefs were notable by their absence throughout human history. Our ideas about free will, or the value of life may also be false (see Krueger & Gruening, this volume). Philosophers like David Benatar argue that since life is more suffering than pleasure for almost everyone, so 'not being' should be a preferable alternative (antinatalism). Given the ubiquity of false beliefs even among our cognitive elites (see Dunning; Jussim et al.; Forgas; Fiedler, this volume), we may conclude that false ideas are not an aberration but a fundamental evolutionary feature of the human condition. False beliefs may have served an adaptive evolutionary purpose in the past, binding groups together (see Dunbar; Goel, this volume). Instead of our claimed wisdom as suggested by *homo sapiens*, humans often act as the misguided hominid, or *homo delusionalis*. Understanding the psychology of pervasive false beliefs is the objective of our book.
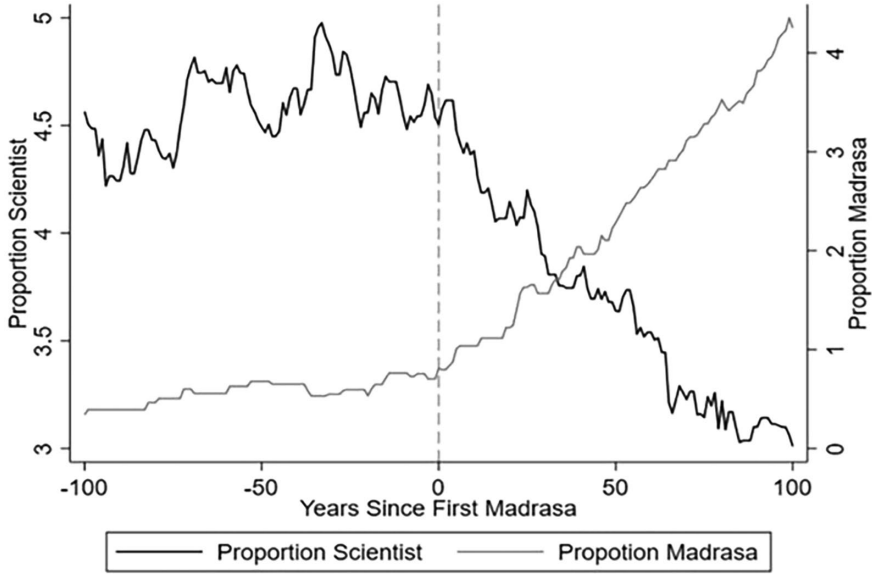
FIGURE 1.1   The growth of religious indoctrination (growth of Islamic religious schools, madrassa) is inversely related to proportion of scientists (after Chaney, 2023).

What Is a False Belief? Life in Plato's Cave

How do we know when a belief is false, and when it is true (see also van Prooijen; Crano; Cooper & Packman; Fiedler; Stanovich & Toplak; Sutton et al., this volume)? Plato's (1943) famous cave metaphor in 'The Republic' suggests that we are all prisoners confined in a cave and can only see reality through the fleeting shadows projected from outside. The real world is beyond our reach, consisting of eternal, unchanging forms, according to Plato. Probing the nature of human understanding has been a favourite topic of philosophers (metaphysics and ontology), including how knowledge is derived (epistemology). Metaphysical and ontological questions lie at the heart of deciding which beliefs are true, and which are false. Even at the cutting edge of science the formulas of quantum physics can be seen as just Platonian approximations of reality according to physicists like David Bohr. Ultimately, the most basic questions about the nature of reality remain subject to debate.

No less problematic is the question of how we can *find* truth, the topic of epistemology. The search for truth may involve inductive, empirical or deductive, rationalist approaches, but neither empiricism nor rationality necessarily produces a clear distinction between true and false beliefs (Krueger & Gruening; Cooper & Packman; Fiedler; Crano, this volume), leading some sceptics to question the very possibility of any true knowledge.

Indeed, as the philosopher Karl Popper (1945) argued, empirical observation logically can never prove the truth of a proposition, since future falsification is always possible. Theories must be falsifiable to be scientific, and knowledge advances when propositions are falsified and new ideas are generated. Popper's epistemology suggests that all beliefs are only true until potentially falsified, emphasising the importance of an open mind and an open society for real knowledge to advance.

Fortunately, although absolute truth and certainty are elusive, we still can and do accumulate knowledge about the world. Our perceptual and cognitive apparatus has been honed by evolution to operate with sufficient reliability in order for us to survive, allowing humans to distinguish between more or less correct beliefs. This common-sense view or *'naïve realism'* accepts that for most practical purposes there is a real world out there, and we can get to know it sufficiently well to distinguish between ideas that work in practice and ideas that do not. It is our mundane everyday experience of the world that makes science possible and allows us to successfully design aeroplanes, mobile phones and bridges.

Science is the crowning achievement of common-sense realism and its flowering in Western societies confirms the power of this approach (Pinker, 2018). Science uniquely produces knowledge and beliefs that are supported by reality. It is all the more surprising then that many scholars in the social sciences and humanities have fallen prey to obscure social constructivist theorising that sees the world as socially constructed and not subject to empirical testing. We shall return to this question later (see Jussim et al., Forgas, this volume).

The Limits of Reason

When we encounter manifestly false beliefs, we tend to assume that they indicate a failure of reason. Humans take great pride in our unique capacity for reason and rationality, as our conceited label 'homo sapiens' illustrates. However, there is growing evidence from evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology and social psychology showing that reason does not occupy the hallowed position that we would like to believe (Buss, 2019). Indeed, reason may be something like a secondary, accidental quality that only emerged with the very recent development of the cerebral cortex, superimposed on earlier brain structures (see also Goel, this volume). Rather than discovering reality, reasoning may have evolved to serve the much more pressing evolutionary need to establish and maintain tribal consensus as the major tool of our survival (Mercier & Sperber, 2017).

Does this mean that humans are, to put it plainly, naturally gullible (Forgas, 2019; Forgas & Baumeister, 2019; Trivers, 2013; Walker, 2003)? Depending on the definition of the word, the answer might well be yes, and

Plato (1943) certainly thought so in 'The Republic'. People suffer from both *deductive failures* when they fail to follow rational arguments and logic, and *inductive failures* when they fail to derive valid conclusions from observations (see also Fiedler, this volume). Many false beliefs are the consequence not only of failures of inductive and deductive reasoning, but also the influence of instincts located in the subcortical structures of the brain (Goel, this volume).

As the Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2013) showed, our judgements and decisions rarely conform to rational standards. The psychologist Paul Meehl also argued that in many real-life decisions, simple mechanical decision rules produce consistently superior outcomes compared than human judgements. Numerous studies of forecasters confirm that their predictions are often no better than random choices (Tetlock, 2017) and sometimes just wilful misrepresentations such as Paul Ehrlich's absurd doomsday predictions of impending environmental disaster over 50 years ago (Ehrlich, 1968, 1974). Even efforts to rationally predict our own future reactions are woefully inadequate (Gilbert, 2007). Could it be that our cherished belief in the supremacy of human reason is just another 'false belief'?

It appears that human reasoning evolved incidentally, not so much as a rational means to discover reality, but rather, as a system of interpersonal persuasion and communication designed to generate essential tribal consensus (Mercier & Sperber, 2017). Shared beliefs also continue to be an important requirement for successful personal relationships (Douglas et al., this volume). Human survival depends on sophisticated forms of tribal cooperation, and so the primary evolutionary purpose of reasoning was probably to manage and coordinate social groups. Throughout human history, exclusion from the group has meant death, and we still react this way to ostracism and exclusion (Williams & Nida, 2011). Many of our most bizarre false beliefs – such as religious beliefs, creation myths, conspiracy theories or the 'blank slate' fallacy function as 'cultural attractors', shared tribal narratives that are memorable, emotionally resonant or socially influential, promoting group integration within a culture. Such beliefs are also particularly likely to be resistant to disconfirmation and survive as 'false beliefs' (Festinger et al., 1956; see also Albarracin & Granados-Samoyana; Crano; Cooper & Packman, this volume).

Although humans possess an impressive ability for symbolic thought to plan, learn and adapt to changing circumstances, this does not mean that reason is our dominant faculty, nor that we are free from the emotional, tribal and motivational constraints that our evolutionary history imposes on us (Ross, 1897; von Hippel, 2018). Reason is only the most recent among various earlier evolutionary systems that served our survival (see also Goel; Dunbar, this volume). It should not be unexpected that human reasoning is precarious, and it is only in the last few hundred years that reason and science

came to the fore as systematic means to discover the world. It should not be surprising that reasoning is done poorly, but rather that it is done at all.

Cognitive Bias and Noise

The creation and maintenance of many false beliefs owe a great deal to the inherent shortcomings of human cognition (see also Crano; Cooper & Packman; van Prooijen; this volume). Human information processing has not been optimised over evolutionary time for analytic thinking and the systematic discovery of reality, but rather to produce quick, effortless reactions in recurring situations (Buss, 2019; Kahneman, 2013). Fast, superficial and heuristic thinking mostly produced adequate reactions in stable environments (Gigerenzer, 2015), but now favour the spread and survival of false beliefs. In our fast changing social and technological environment new, unfamiliar situations are the norm, and fast heuristic thinking may often produce suboptimal outcomes.

False beliefs benefit from two distinct sources of distortion: *bias*, and *noise*. Bias occurs when judgements depart from rationality in consistent, predictable ways due to suboptimal information processing. For example, people overestimate the likelihood of memorable events (like shark attacks or plane crashes) (the availability bias). In contrast, *noise* means non-systematic random errors and variation, due to unpredictable internal and external influences that distort our judgements (Kahneman, 2013).

Numerous biasing cognitive shortcuts and heuristics have been identified. These cognitive biases appear culturally universal, indicating an evolutionary origin. For example, in-group preference, social categorisation and the use of prototypes are universal features of human thinking (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023). Attributing internal causation to people (the fundamental attribution error) is another common judgemental bias and a source of many false beliefs about others. Attributing our own (often undesirable) behaviour to external causes also helps to maintain idealistic beliefs about ourselves (see also Crano; Cooper & Packman, this volume). The universal self-serving bias distorts our beliefs in the direction of seeking credit for positive actions and blaming external causes for negative behaviours. We also tend to engage in direct *confirmation bias*, selectively focusing on, remembering and interpreting evidence to confirm our pre-existing beliefs or expectations. Paradoxically, expertise may even increase the confirmation bias as experts have greater confidence even in erroneous beliefs (the Dunning-Krueger effect; see also Dunning; Albarracin & Granados-Samayoa, this volume). Overestimating the consensus supporting our false beliefs is another common heuristic people engage in.

Even simple person perception judgements suffer from a variety of biases, and the resulting false beliefs about people are impervious to correction and

create an illusory reality (Snyder, 1984). One common example is *the halo effect* where a positive characteristic of a stimulus influences how the stimulus is perceived on other dimensions for which no information is available (Forgas & Laham, 2009). *Primacy effects* bias our beliefs when people give disproportionate weight to early information. Intriguingly, these common judgemental errors tend to be magnified when people are in a good mood and tend to think superficially (Forgas, 1995). However, these common cognitive biases in how our beliefs are formed only go some way to explain why false beliefs are so common. Many of the sources producing false beliefs exist at a sub-rational level, driven by subcortical regions of our brains.

Visceral Influences on False Beliefs: An Evolutionary Perspective

As we have seen, reason is a fragile system and subject to many limitations when it comes to correcting false beliefs (Albarracin & Granados-Samoyana; Stanovich & Toplak; Krueger & Gruening, this volume). Our cognitive shortcomings only go some way to explain false beliefs. Numerous as yet poorly understood evolutionary influences also shape the way we process information, originating in the ancient subcortical regions of our brains (Goel, this volume). Basic evolutionary mechanism for seeking safety, familiarity and pleasure, to avoid pain and danger, as well as many powerful instincts and subconscious associations also shape our beliefs (Buss, 2019; Dawkins, 2009). According to Goel's tethered brain' hypothesis the *autonomic* system, the *instinctive* system, the *associative* system, and the *reasoning system* jointly determine our beliefs and judgements.

These four systems *jointly* produce a blended response where reason is just one conscious source. Changes in arousal (autonomic system), activated instincts and differences in associative history all contribute to how we respond to the world. These systems often override reason – for example, a 'visual cliff' will stop us even if *know* that a perfectly safe glass platform lies ahead. Many fears, phobias, compulsions and anxieties originate in ancient brain structures, and are not easily controlled by reason.

Fluctuating **autonomic states** such as incidental moods also influence our judgements and beliefs (Al-Shawaf et al., 2015). For example, in one of our studies that shoppers reported significantly better memory for their surroundings when in a negative mood due to inclement weather, consistent with bad mood triggering a more attentive information processing strategy (Forgas, Goldenberg & Unkelbach, 2009; Figure 1.2). Even people's responses to public opinion surveys are influenced by their incidental mood, when questioned after seeing happy or sad movies (Forgas & Moylan, 1987; Figure 1.3). Numerous other studies confirmed that people in a negative mood are less likely to succumb to judgemental distortions, use language more effectively, and show greater fairness to others in the dictator game

IMAGE 1.1 Notice any similarities? Most belief-based disagreements are not about reason but have deep evolutionary roots in the subcortical regions of our brains, driven by emotions such as fear and anger triggered by primaeval motives such as seeking security, familiarity, group coherence and avoiding risks.
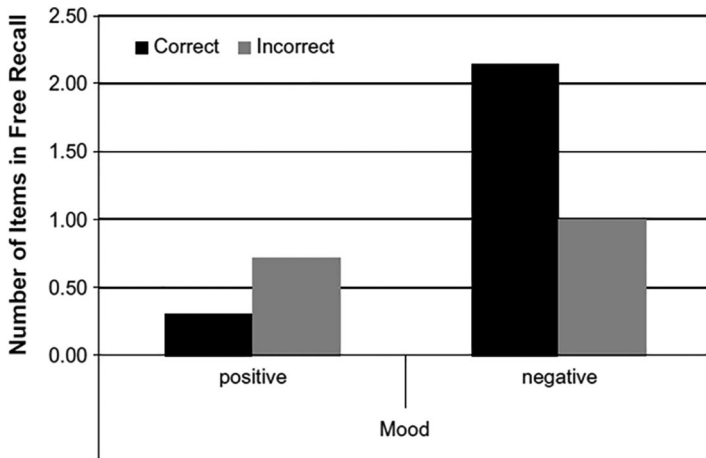
FIGURE 1.2 Visceral influences on cognition: Shoppers automatically remember more details when in a negative mood (bad weather) rather than in a good mood (nice weather) (After Forgas, Goldenberg & Unkelbach, JESP, 2009).
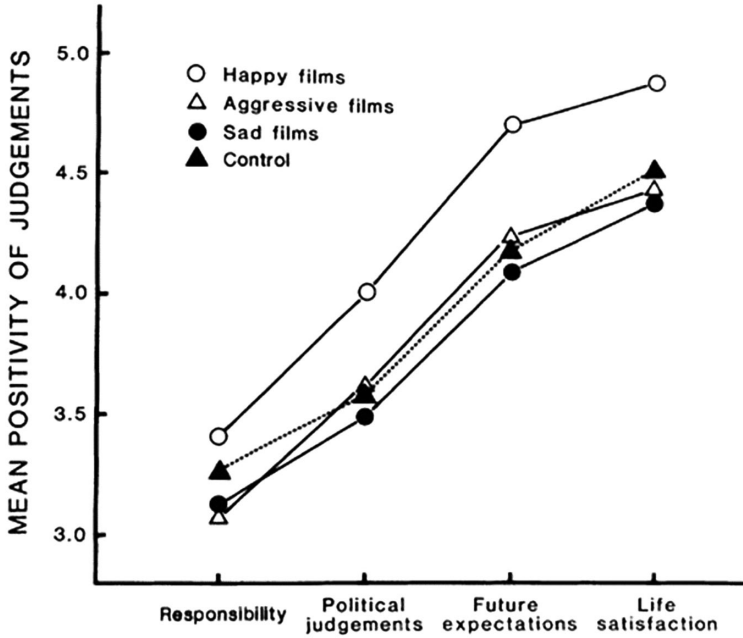
FIGURE 1.3 After the movies – Visceral influences on judgements: People report significantly more positive beliefs and judgements when in a good mood after seeing a happy, rather than a sad, aggressive or control film (After Forgas & Moylan, PSPB, 1987).

and the ultimatum game (Forgas, 2022). What these studies illustrate is that shadowy subcortical reactions triggered by mood, the weather, time of day, stress, fatigue etc. jointly contribute to what should be rational judgements and decisions.

Even important real-life decisions are influenced by subconscious autonomic states located in subcortical brain regions. For example, judges make more lenient parole decisions after meal breaks, as elevated glucose level produce more positive autonomic states. Bank officers were also more lenient to borrowers in the morning than in the afternoon when they were more fatigued (Baer & Schnall, 2021). Doctors show similar bias – when tired and under time pressure, they are more inclined to choose a quick-fix solution and prescribe more opioids and antibiotics at the end of a long day. Other studies showed that couples saw their relationship problems differently depending on whether they were in a good or a bad mood at the time (Forgas, 1994).

Instinctive reactions are another powerful influence on false beliefs. The evolutionary instinct for in-group solidarity drives many false beliefs, as much of human history illustrates (Koestler, 1964). Maintaining a shared – even if false – view of the world was more important for survival in our evolutionary past than challenging the group consensus with the dispassionate analysis of reality (Buss, 2019; Ridley, 2004; 2015; von Hippel, 2018). In-group identification is an instinctive reaction that supported many tribal delusions throughout history (Harari, 2014; Ross, 1897; see also Fiedler; Jussim et al.; Forgas; Sutton et al.; Krueger & Gruening; French; Ritov& Bruck, this volume). Eleven-months old infants already show in-group bias by preferring puppets of their own kind (Mahajan & Wynn, 2012), and young children also prefer puppets that *have harmed out-group puppets* (Hamlin et al., 2013). From an age, people do not simply favour the ingroup but actively seek to harm the outgroup, the same pattern confirmed in adults in Tajfel's classic minimal group experiments (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). Some neuropsychological evidence suggests a role for endorphins and oxytocin in promoting in-group biases in humans.

The universal preference for familiar rather than unfamiliar stimuli is consistent with the in-group bias (Zajonc, 2000). In numerous studies, people *prefer* familiar to unfamiliar faces, geometric figures or even Chinese ideographs, even when they could no longer *remember* ever having seen them before. These studies confirm the powerful effects of instinctive forces on preferences even in the absence of any cognitive memory or representation, a formidable yet subconscious tendency shaping many of our beliefs.

Classic research in social psychology corroborates the principle that people will spontaneously create, maintain and follow group beliefs irrespective of their veracity, and will create and maintain even arbitrary and meaningless group norms (Sherif, 1936; Asch, 1951; Janis, 1972; etc.). Many of our false beliefs are bolstered by an instinctive reaction to seek safety and familiarity and prefer familiar in-group beliefs (Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Tomasello, 1999; Williams & Nida, 2011).

Learned *associations* also play a critical role in shaping our beliefs. Social reinforcement is essential for beliefs to remain stable, as the classic *brainwashing studies* of US servicemen captured by the Chinese in the 1950s Korean War showed. Immersion in an alien social world produced a profound change in beliefs and personality, such that after returning from Chinese captivity, their families could barely recognise their relatives. As Goel (2022; also in this volume) showed, some learned associations are facilitated by deep-seated evolutionary influences, and it seems much easier to associate positive qualities with ingroups, and negative qualities with outgroups. Such implicit associations appear to be enduring and not subject to conscious control (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), but not necessarily related to overt prejudice and discrimination (Fiedler et al., 2006).

The visceral influences shaping our beliefs are not easily controlled, and rational deliberation is often overwhelmed by inchoate feelings originating in deeper brain regions. It is the maintenance of in-group cohesion that allowed us to survive and become the dominant species of the planet, and its role in maintaining false beliefs will be considered next.

When False Beliefs Become Consensual Delusions

False beliefs like company. The care and nurture of false beliefs is essentially a social process (Albarracin & Granados-Samoyana; Cooper & Packman; Crano, this volume). If you were the only person in the world who believes in the immaculate conception, or the inevitability of proletarian revolution, you may be dismissed as a harmless crank or at worst might be locked up (as the Soviets did with people who did *not* believe in the proletarian revolution). False beliefs gain plausibility if shared with others, and group processes play a crucial role in the generation and maintenance of false beliefs. Much of what we know about the world is consensually validated, and as studies on groupthink, conformity and brainwashing showed, immersion in a social group is a powerful source of beliefs, irrespective of reality (Asch, 1951; Janis, 1972; Sherif, 1936). Many successful collective ideologies such as fascism or Marxism – still the 'opium of the intellectuals' (Aron, 1957/2011) - are constructed to be unfalsifiable and endure because they cater to our primaeval need to create a consensual reality. (Popper, 1945; see also Dunbar; van Prooijen, this volume).

Experimental social psychology provides compelling evidence for the fundamental human tendency to follow, imitate and conform to what others do, confirming that tribalism is a defining aspect of human nature (Forgas, 2024). Striving for common goals is a powerful driver of group formation (Sherif, 1936), just as competing for resources sets groups against each other (Sherif, 1936). Strangers will spontaneously form and maintain arbitrary shared norms in ambiguous situations to eliminate disagreement (Sherif, 1936). Our tribal instinct can also lead us to publicly agree with obviously incorrect beliefs by strangers (Asch, 1951). As Janis' (1972) studies of groupthink showed, seeking and maintaining group consensus often overrides reason in highly cohesive groups. Disagreement is always experienced as stressful, triggering autonomic and instinctual reactions directed at maintaining agreement (see also Crano; Cooper & Packman, this volume).

Once shared beliefs are established, discussion tends to increase the extremity of beliefs as members try to outdo each other in representing the group consensus, a process of **group polarisation** (Forgas, 1977). As soon as in-group and out-group categories are established, however superficial, people will show an automatic preference for benefiting the ingroups and discriminating against outgroups (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). It seems that false

beliefs thrive as a result of fundamental evolutionary mechanisms promoting in-group agreement, consistent with our built-in preference for safe, familiar and rewarding situations hardwired into our subcortical system (Buss, 2019; Dawkins, 2009; see also Goel, this volume).

What defines an ingroup may be flexibly acquired at critical periods in our lives resulting in a lifelong tendency for instinctive in-group preference and out-group hostility. Many false beliefs are nurtured by these processes (see also Stanovich & Toplak; Krueger & Gruening; Forgas; van Prooijen; Ritov & Bruck, this volume). Conservatives may believe that life begins at conception or follow radical ethno-nationalist movements, and woke ideologues believe in a 'blank slate' and deny the role of inherited characteristics, reinforced by their reference groups (Eatwell 7 Goodwin, 2018). Such consensual false beliefs often make rational discourse impossible, and lead to motivated belief affirmation (Festinger et al., 1956; Cooper & Packman; Albarracin & Granados-Samayoa, this volume).

The classic Enlightenment belief in universal humanism and open exchange as advocated by John Stuart Mill (1859) has great difficulty combatting our inherent tribalism. Political propaganda can easily exploit our propensity for intergroup hatred by focusing on victimhood, grievance and hostility as exemplified by ideologies like critical race theory and intersectionality on the left, and by tribal campaigns by Trump, Putin, Orban and Erdogan on the right, appealing to the tribal instincts of followers.

True Believers, Fellow Travellers, Useful Idiots and Fact-Free Zones

Many people become completely captivated by tribal delusions and turn into 'true believers' – but by no means everyone. Sometimes, consensual delusions are imposed on a group or society (as in communist dictatorships), and many people then become compliant followers or 'fellow travelers'. And then there are 'useful idiots' – a term attributed to Lenin to describe clueless Western supporters of the murderous bolshevik cause who endorsed horrific ideologies out of naivete, idealism or the desire for moral superiority, always from the safety of liberal democracies. Many Western intellectuals still act as 'useful idiots', endorsing totalitarian tribal ideologies (see also Jussim et al., Forgas, this volume). George Bernard Shaw in the 1930s he was an avid admirer of Stalin, and visitors to his house near London can still see mementoes of his meetings with Stalin and Dzerzinsky, the head of the murderous Soviet secret service. More recently, Tucker Carson has qualified for the title of 'useful idiot' by broadcasting fawning and sycophantic interviews with right-wing autocrats, like Viktor Orban in Hungary, and murderous tyrants like Putin in Russia. One can only speculate about his motives, but ignorance would be a poor excuse for becoming a tribal acolyte.

Academic Delusions

Education may offer little protection against false beliefs (Dunning, this volume). Delusional ideas now flourish in academic fields like the humanities and the social sciences that have become 'fact free zones', divorced from tangible reality (Saad, 2020). In the recent past academics in these fields sought to place their disciplines on a factual, empirical basis, but now a new social constructionist ideology has gained ascendancy, maintaining that all reality is socially constructed (see also Forgas; Jussim et al., this volume). Once reality is discarded, there is no limit to the speculative verbiage that now passes for knowledge (Murray, 2019; Pluckrose et al., 2018; Saad, 2020; Sokal, 1994, 1996).

It is the unique human ability for symbolic consciousness and language that gives rise to the 'nominalist fallacy' when people confuse mere words with actual reality. Many social theories such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, critical race theory, intersectionality are little more than inventive word games with no tangible link to reality (Popper, 1945). Language control and language manipulation then become essential to maintain such false consensual ideologies, prohibiting some words and mandating others to support the ideology, such as 'homophobe', 'misogynist', 'patriarchy', 'misandry' 'Islamophobe' and 'denier', attributing pathology to those who disagree with the 'politically correct'.

Many fields in the social sciences and humanities have been taken over by social constructionism, discourse analysis, critical theory and post-modernist theory and have become completely detached from the real world. Their output has often become incomprehensible verbiage masquerading as knowledge (Pluckrose et al., 2018; Sokal, 1994, 1996). It is puzzling that intelligent and well-educated people can seriously believe that their word games have the same epistemic status as reality. The delusional social constructionist ideology has even been applied to science, claiming that science has no privileged status over other 'ways of knowing' such as native mythologies (!), and represents just another noxious power ideology invented by white patriarchal men to oppress and colonise various worthy minorities. Mathematics has been denounced for supporting colonialist paternalistic hegemonism by insisting that there can only be one correct answer to an equation. Yet just a moment's reflection on the miraculous features of their laptops and mobile phones should awake these 'scholars' to the fundamental epistemic difference between things that do work, and the vacuous words that they produce. False beliefs, once they reach the status of consensual delusions, often become impervious to reason and reality. It is a testimony to our profound vulnerability to false beliefs that in many branches of the social sciences and humanities incomprehensible verbiage can now pass for knowledge (Pluckrose et al., 2018).

Overview of the Book

In addressing these issues, the book is divided into four parts, dealing with (1) the nature and origins of false beliefs, (2) the link between false beliefs and consensual delusions, (3) the spread of false beliefs in academia and (4) conspiracy theories as false beliefs

Part 1. The Nature and Origins of False Beliefs

Vinod Goel (Chapter 2) proposes a 'tethered mind' hypothesis to explain false beliefs, arguing that human reasoning is built on top of evolutionary older non-cognitive systems such as the autonomic system, the instinctive system and the associative system that jointly determine our representations of the world. As an example, he discusses the broad influence on the in-group – out-group 'instinct in shaping our beliefs'.

Joel Cooper and James Packman (Chapter 3) explore how false beliefs are maintained when challenged by reality, focusing on the motivational effects of cognitive dissonance mechanisms. They analyse some current false beliefs such as MAGA Republicans from this perspective, and present evidence that understanding the psychological factors that buttress false beliefs can also be applied to reducing their impact.

Dolores Albarracín and Javier Granados Samayoa (Chapter 4) focus on interventions that may be used to fight false beliefs. Rather than confronting, they suggest that *bypassing* (presenting information to counter the evaluative implications of false beliefs) may be a more effective strategy for attitude change, avoiding defensive reactions by recipients.

William Crano (Chapter 5) draws on the literature on persuasion and attitude change to understand false beliefs, and argues that false beliefs, even though they may be objectively invalid and harmful to survival, typically involve strong identification and resistance to change. Attitude change strategies may also work in changing false beliefs.

Part 2. False Beliefs as Consensual Delusions

Joachim Krueger and David Gruening (Chapter 6) analyse one of the most common false beliefs, belief in a free will, from a historical, philosophical and psychological perspective. Most people believe in free will without achieving conceptual clarity, as do many experimental psychologists. Krueger and Gruening conclude that the doctrine of free will, although enduring, has a variety of problematic implications.

Robin Dunbar (Chapter 7) looks at religions, perhaps the most ubiquitous consensual 'false belief' in human history. He argues that religion arises from ancient psychological predispositions, including a tendency for magical

explanations, and a tendency to follow charismatic leaders. He analyses the role our advanced mentalising capacities in these processes that played a central role in our evolution as a species.

Christopher French (Chapter 8) explores the enduring human tendency to believe in paranormal phenomena, and how and why such beliefs should be considered false. Anomalistic psychology focuses on such factors as the unreliability of memory, hallucinatory experiences and a range of cognitive biases in explaining paranormal beliefs, comparing believers' and non-believers' performance on different tasks.

Robbie Sutton and his colleagues (Chapter 9) discuss the common false belief that feminism involves prejudice toward men (misandry). The chapter presents six studies across nine countries, showing that (women) feminists' attitudes to men were not significantly different from non-feminists', nor indeed men's, attitudes to men, revealing that feminists were incorrectly stereotyped.

Part 3. False Beliefs in Academia

Lee Jussim, Sonia Yanovsky, Nathan Honeycutt and Danit Finkelstein (Chapter 10) focuses on false beliefs in academia, and the proliferation ideologically biased false beliefs as facts. They analyse published academic literature for false claims masquerading as scientific facts, and the reasons for such misrepresentations. They conclude that widespread academic misinformation is a key reason for the plummeting public confidence in academia.

Joseph Forgas (Chapter 11) analyses three common 'consensual delusions' currently dominant in the humanities and the social sciences (the *'blank slate'* delusion, the *nominalist fallacy* where words are confused with facts, and the *equality fallacy*, that equal group outcomes are possible and desirable). The chapter discusses the origins of these fallacies, their common origin in neo-Marxist conflict theories, and the damage they have done to the reputation and standing of universities.

Klaus Fiedler (Chapter 12) questions the categorical distinction between science and false beliefs, arguing that (a) all non-trivial scientific insights are principally disputable; (b) normative assumptions often turn out to be unwarranted; (c) even 'rational people' often follow wrong beliefs due to metacognitive myopia and (d) wrong beliefs are susceptible to repetition biases causing truth illusions. The chapter offers several illustrations of such problems in academic practice.

Dave Dunning (Chapter 13) argues that although knowledgeable individuals hold more valid views and reach more accurate judgements, their opinions are still distorted by motivated reasoning. Their proficiency is due to greater confidence in correct views than doubts about their erroneous ones. Experts endorse their mistakes with greater confidence than less

knowledgeable peers. Thus, cognitive ability helps to spot false beliefs in others, but do not produce greater self-insight.

Jan-Willem van Prooijen (Chapter 14) analyses conspiracy theories as evolved responses to existential threats, and their prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic. He looks at historical examples, and analyses the psychological processes linking conspiracy theories, health behaviour and polarisation. Conspiracy beliefs polarise believers against the government, and had a negative effect on social trust and societal cohesion.

Keith Stanovich and Maggie Toplak (Chapter 15) revise the criteria for conspiratorial thinking, and argue that conspiratorial thinking is not necessarily or *obviously* irrational. They offer a new definition of conspiratorial thinking and argue that previous definitions were too content-laden and thus burdened the concept with too much prejudged theory.

Karen Douglas and her colleagues in Chapter 16 look at the effects of conspiracy beliefs on relationship quality. Partner commonly report having 'lost' a loved one who has fallen down a 'rabbit hole' of conspiracy beliefs. They highlight some examples from their current research, focusing on factors that could prevent relationships being eroded by unshared conspiracy beliefs.

Ilana Ritov and David Bruck in Chapter 17 explore the role of false beliefs in the growing polarisation between social and political groups, a major problem for modern democracies. Studies found that individuals hold false beliefs about how other groups perceive them and those meta-perceptions are often negative and exaggerated. The chapter explores the antecedents, constraints and behavioural outcomes of false beliefs about rival groups in Israel.

Conclusion and Acknowledgements

The rise in false beliefs, fake news, conspiracy theories and collective delusions is one of the striking features of recent public discourse. Our aim with this book is to contribute to a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of how false beliefs originate, how they are maintained and their individual and social consequences. There is now good evidence from evolutionary, social, cognitive and neuropsychology suggesting that the tendency to believe false information is a universal feature of human nature, and an important aspect of effective group cooperation and in-group cohesion (Dawkins, 2009). Recent advances in information technology created unprecedented opportunities for false beliefs to spread and turn into collective delusions.

In an adaptive sense, shared false beliefs such as religions, creation myths or tribal traditions conferred significant adaptive advantages in our evolutionary past (Buss, 2019; Harari, 2014; von Hippel, 2018). The unique human ability for symbolic consciousness, mentalising and our 'theory of mind' make it possible to dwell in imaginary worlds unconnected to tangible reality, and

even highly educated academics are prone to believe manifestly false propositions (Harari, 2014; Ridley, 2004, 2015; Saad, 2020; see also Dunbar; Dunning; Jussim et al., Fiedler; Forgas; this volume). Understanding the psychology of false beliefs is particularly important at this time, when populist political movements can easily exploit the current longing for safety, security and certainty in many Western democracies (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Forgas et al., 2021). At its extreme, unquestioning attachment to delusional tribal narratives can produce conflict and violence, as human history amply demonstrates (Albright, 2018; Harari, 2014; Pinker, 2018; Koestler, 1964).

We hope these chapters will help to highlight the complex mechanisms involved in the creation, maintenance and sharing of false beliefs, and the psychological implications of this research for a better understanding of individual gullibility, and public discourse (Trivers, 2013). The last few decades produced genuine breakthroughs in our understanding of false beliefs and their consequences, and this introductory chapter in particular sought to give a general conceptual framework to the volume and anticipate some of the main themes that would be covered.

As editors, we are deeply grateful to all our contributors for accepting our invitation to contribute to this, the 26th anniversary volume of the Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology Series and for sharing their valuable ideas with our readers. We are also grateful to the Australian Research Council and the University of New South Wales for financially supporting this project. We sincerely hope that the insights contained in these chapters will contribute to a better understanding of the crucial role that the human propensity for false beliefs and collective delusions plays in shaping us both as individuals and as communities.

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