



## Delusions and the madness of crowds



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The problem of distinguishing between delusions and other incorrigible beliefs has taxed the greatest minds in psychopathology and seems ever more important in an age of extreme ideology. Clinically, this leads to difficulties in deciding who should be receive mental health care, especially in the forensic domain, in which professionals often fail to decide whether a particular person (Ron and Dan Lafferty in the United States, Anders Breivik in Norway) is mentally ill. Standard criteria (e.g., that delusions are resistant to counterargument, are held with extraordinary conviction and are “ununderstandable”) either do not stand up to empirical scrutiny or collapse in the face of counterexamples (e.g., the extreme certainty with which religious and political beliefs are held). A major element of the problem is that there is no agreed understanding of ‘belief’ against which delusions can be compared, so that clinical studies have typically compared delusions with an unrealistic comparator (mundane beliefs or a folk psychological concept of belief) rather than socially consequential beliefs such as religious and political ideologies and conspiracy theories. In this talk, I will highlight three features of belief that are important to consider in this context - the mechanisms by which certainty judgments are made, their multi-propositional structure, and their transmissibility - and outline a program of research that is leading to a novel, social-psychological account of delusions.

Richard Bentall is Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Sheffield, has previously held chairs at Liverpool University, Manchester University and Bangor University, and is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and the British Academy. His research has focused on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved in psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions and the social risk factors (for example childhood adversities ) that lead to these symptoms. He has also conducted large-scale randomized controlled trials of psychological interventions for people diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and prodromal psychosis. During 2020-22, he led a project measuring the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK population. He has published approximately 350 peer-review papers and a number of books, including *Madness explained: Psychosis and human nature* (Penguin, 2003) and *Doctoring the mind: Why psychiatric treatments fail* (Penguin, 2009). He is currently working on a book on extreme beliefs, including delusions, provisionally titled *Delusions, democracy and the madness of crowds*.

