



Conspiracy Theories are Not Beliefs

J. C. M. Duetz¹

Received: 9 May 2022 / Accepted: 10 September 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Napolitano (*The epistemology of fake news*, Oxford University Press, 2021) argues that the Minimalist Account of conspiracy theories—i.e., which defines conspiracy theories as explanations, or theories, about conspiracies—should be rejected. Instead, she proposes to define conspiracy theories as a certain kind of belief—i.e., an evidentially self-insulated belief in a conspiracy. Napolitano argues that her account should be favored over the Minimalist Account based on two considerations: ordinary language intuitions and theoretical fruitfulness. I show how Napolitano’s account fails its own purposes with respect to these two considerations and so should not be favored over the Minimalist Account. Furthermore, I propose that the Minimalist Account is the best conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ if we share Napolitano’s goal of advancing the understanding of conspiracy theories.

1 Introduction

Conspiracy Theory Theory—i.e., the study of conspiracy theories—is a relatively new field of study for philosophers. Since Sir Karl Popper’s (1945) brief characterization of conspiracy theories as the “typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition” (95), some philosophers (e.g., Cassam, 2019; Clarke, 2002; Mandik, 2007; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) have argued for outright dismissal of conspiracy theories as they are poorly evidenced, inconsistent, and incredible explanations that do not merit a rational agent’s attention.

However, this tendency has begun to fade, as more and more philosophers (e.g., Coady, 2007; Dentiith, 2019; Hagen, 2020; Keeley, 2003; Pigden, 2007) have taken interest in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and the people who believe them. In fact, most philosophers in the field today agree that what’s missing in the literature is a non-question begging justification for labeling either all or a significant chunk of the total class of conspiracy theories as unwarranted explanations, where

✉ J. C. M. Duetz
j.c.m.duetz2@vu.nl

¹ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, HG-04B10, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

the justification for the fact that they are unwarranted is unique to those explanations being about a conspiracy.

There are some philosophers—i.e., the *generalists*—trying to fill this gap in the literature by proposing justifications for labeling most or all conspiracy theories as unwarranted explanations. That is, generalists believe that “the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories” (Buenting & Taylor, 2010: 568). They aim to find a way to exclude historical explanations about conspiracies from the total class of conspiracy theories, hoping to end up with a class of explanations belief in which would be *prima facie* irrational. However, most philosophers—i.e., *particularists*—agree that no such *prima facie* justification can be found, as conspiracy theories should be considered on a case-by-case basis. As Brian Keeley (2007) puts it, “[t]he chief problem is that there is a class of quite warranted conspiracy theories about such events as Watergate, the IranContra Affair, etc., and that there is no principled way of distinguishing, a priori, the two classes from one another” (137). Hence, these philosophers ascribe to a Minimalist Account of conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’—i.e., which defines conspiracy theories as explanations, or theories, about conspiracies without any pejorative aspect.¹

The fact that most philosophers in the field promote particularism about conspiracy theories has some implications. Firstly, one important kind of contribution a philosopher could make to a multidisciplinary research field like that of conspiracy theories is conceptual clarity. Traditionally, the art of conceptual analysis has been mastered in philosophy and so part of the relevance of philosophy for other disciplines lies in advanced understanding of the concepts at play. Yet, this sense of relevance of philosophy is often downplayed by a lack of consensus amongst philosophers about the right conceptualization of a term. However, this problem does not seem to arise in the field of conspiracy theories. For, as Patrick Stokes (2018) puts it, “something like a broad consensus has emerged: regarded simply as explanations, conspiracy theories are not intrinsically irrational” (25). Thus, the fact that most philosophers promote particularism plausibly advances the relevance of philosophical insights on the concept of ‘conspiracy theory’ for other disciplines.

Secondly, and relatedly, if particularist accounts conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’ are setting the scene for multidisciplinary research endeavors, then it seems less inevitable that academia furthers conspiracy theory-induced polarization—i.e., where we see social problems arising from the fact that there are (1) people believing that *some* conspiracy theories are true, warranted and important for us to consider as social and political beings, while (2) others believe that *all* conspiracy theories are false, unwarranted, and ought to be met with outright condemnation.²

¹ Minimalist Accounts can be found in different versions, with the common factor being that these accounts do not include epistemic evaluations in the conception of ‘conspiracy theory’. See, for example: Dentith (2014, pp. 22–23), Basham (2003, p. 91), Coady (2003, p. 199), Buenting and Taylor (2010, p. 569), Pigden (1995, p. 5), Keeley (1999, p. 116), Cohnitz (2018, p. 359), Mandik (2007, p. 206).

² In Duetz (forthcoming), I argue that it is problematic for Conspiracy Theory Theorists to contribute to conspiracy theory-induced polarization by adopting a generalist conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ because it precludes constructive engagement with the reasons or rationales behind—and increasing our understanding of—belief in conspiracy theories. Furthermore, even if one believes that it is unproblematic for academics to further societal polarization, it is still the case that this *kind* of contribution—i.e.,

Starting from a descriptive, rather than evaluative, conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ implies a neutral starting point with respect to the rationality of believing such theories, and, hence, does not contribute to conspiracy theory-induced polarization as strongly as does a non-neutral conceptual basis.

Besides these two merits following from the fact that most philosophers in the field promote particularism, there is a third implication: namely, that, for the above two merits to materialize, notable dissenting voices need to be addressed. For, the strength of the consensus and its relevance for other disciplines depend on its ability to, on the one hand, survive scrutiny, and, on the other, counter and refute deviating accounts. The latter is the aim of this paper.

M. Giulia Napolitano’s (2021)³ account is deviating from the particularist-consensus as it promotes a generalist’ take on the conceptualization of ‘conspiracy theory’. She argues against the Minimalist Account and in favor of her account, which takes conspiracy theories as self-insulated beliefs in conspiracies. Her arguments depend, roughly, on two considerations: first, the *ordinary language intuitions* of much of the current conspiracy theory-talk outside of academia and, second, the *fruitfulness of conceptions* of ‘conspiracy theory’ for theoretical, interdisciplinary research purposes.

My aim is to meet the two challenges to the consensus (and its merits) posed by deviating accounts. I show how Napolitano’s account fails its own purposes with respect to the two considerations above and so should not be favored over the Minimalist Account. Furthermore, I propose that the Minimalist Account is the best conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ if we share Napolitano’s goal of advancing the understanding of conspiracy theories.

In Sect. 2, I delineate Napolitano’s account and her objections to the Minimalist Account. To show how Napolitano fails to meet her own purposes, I consider, in Sect. 3, how her account does on the first consideration—i.e., in capturing natural language intuitions. In Sect. 4, I continue this line of argument for the second consideration—i.e., theoretical and interdisciplinary fruitfulness. In Sect. 5, I conclude that Napolitano’s account should be rejected and that the Minimalist Account should be favored over other (evaluative) conceptions of ‘conspiracy theory’.

2 Napolitano’s Account

In the Conspiracy Theory Theory arena, Napolitano (2021) takes a new and controversial standing in defining conspiracy theories as self-insulated beliefs in conspiracy theories. In her words:

Footnote 2 (continued)

that is based on Napolitano’s generalist’ conception of ‘conspiracy theory—is unwarranted because it fails to provide a non-question begging justification for its pejorative features. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to clarify the notion of conspiracy theory-induced polarization.)

³ In what follows, I focus on Napolitano’s (2021) account unless stated otherwise.

I maintain that conspiracy theories are not theories (or explanations) at all. Instead, I take ‘conspiracy theory’ to refer to a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy. The attitude of the believer, rather than any feature of the theory, determines whether a person’s belief in a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory or not. (82)

From the Minimalist Account of conspiracy theories as theories about conspiracies, Napolitano only retains the *conspiracy* feature of belief in such theories. It is the characteristics of a belief being about a conspiracy that makes such belief suspicious if the belief is held in a particular way. Conspiracy beliefs (beliefs in the (past) existence of conspiracies) are epistemically suspect, though not yet *prima facie* irrational, because, sometimes, “the existence of the conspiracy is taken to justify the dismissal of any seemingly disconfirming evidence that one could encounter under normal circumstances” (88). If this is the case, then someone has a conspiracy belief with the attitude Napolitano argues is essential of unwarranted conspiracy theory beliefs—i.e., an attitude of evidential self-insulation:

[C]onspiracy theories are only those conspiracy-beliefs that are self-insulated. What I mean by ‘self-insulated’ is that the believers take the conspiracy to neutralize the relevant counter-evidence. No evidence could be presented to them that would cause them to change their minds, because any counter-evidence would be dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators to steer the public away from the truth. (87)

Having explicated the conception of ‘conspiracy theory’, the accompanying attitude of self-insulation and the fact that conspiracy theories are empirical beliefs, Napolitano concludes that “it is irrational to hold conspiracy theories” (88).

2.1 Considerations for Conceptualizing ‘Conspiracy Theory’

Napolitano attempts a consolidation of research on conspiracy theories from different disciplines to ameliorate our understanding of a highly problematic political and social phenomenon—i.e., that we seem unable to persuade some people or certain groups of people to stop believing unwarranted conspiracy theories—and I concur with the importance of contributing to that objective.

Put differently, we ought to deal with the fact that, *seemingly*, the Enlightenment has not obstructed collective irrationality—i.e., understood as the common failure of people to be sufficiently reason-responsive—from being a standing problem in modern societies. Explaining such manifestations of collective irrationality is a serious task, and some parts of that task fall upon philosophers and their comprehension of conceptual engineering. Any conceptual engineering endeavor is performed, however, with a particular goal in mind, determined by the function(s) the stipulative conception is designed for.

Napolitano has several (interdependent) reasons to propose her specific conception of ‘conspiracy theory’. In her words:

My account looks to maintain the epistemically negative connotation that characterizes the current meaning of ‘conspiracy theory,’ while making this expression clear, more precise, and suited to be employed in empirical studies of the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing. (84)

Napolitano’s broader aim is that of “promoting the understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories” (97). More specifically, the phenomenon she wants to address is that of “people believing absurd theories about conspiracies, and believing them to be the best explanations of the available evidence” (83), but also of “of people believing outlandish theories about conspiracies in a way that seems to resist falsification” (85).

She means to contribute to this broader aim by developing a conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ based on two considerations. First, even though “our natural language intuitions about conspiracy theories seem rather confused” (84), Napolitano nonetheless believes that her conception should take the ordinary language intuitions of “conspiracy theory” as a starting point. Her conception should therefore be *narrow*, in contrast with other (particularist’) accounts that have proposed broad definitions. In this context, narrow definitions are those “which allow for the semantic possibility of theories involving conspiracies that are not conspiracy theories” (85).

The content of the narrowing factor, then, is determined by the second consideration. Napolitano wants her conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ to be theoretically fruitful in an interdisciplinary research context. She argues that the narrowing factor should map onto the way in which most empirical scholars “have typically focused on conspiracy theories as a problem to be addressed, or as an instance of irrational behavior” (85). Her account should therefore be *negatively loaded*, in contrast with other (particularist’) accounts that have no narrowing factor and, as a result, contribute to a “hostile intellectual climate” (85) in interdisciplinary Conspiracy Theory contexts.

Napolitano goes on to show how the content of a belief in a conspiracy theory cannot justify the dismissal of all counterevidence, and that therefore the attitude of evidential self-insulation characteristic of conspiracy belief is irrational in all nearby possible worlds. The content of a secret plot and accompanying cover-up is supposed to cause and justify the attitude of self-insulation, but, Napolitano argues, the content of a conspiracy theory can only provide this sort of justification if it is so general that it is unable to make specific predictions. Only a very general conspiracy theory can accommodate or predict any type of counterevidence that is to be expected if the conspiracy is real. However, excessive generality of a conspiracy theory, she argues, renders it “a bad explanation of the evidence, because it fails to make specific predictions” (92). In other words, holding (belief in) a conspiracy theory (with the attitude of self-insulation) is irrational. For, on the one hand, it is irrational to believe an excessively general and thereby bad explanation, or, on the other hand, it is irrational to believe a conspiracy theory with a self-insulated attitude if there is no justification for that attitude.

In short, Napolitano’s conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ is concerned with conspiracy beliefs rather than the content of the explanation appealing to conspiratorial activity, and conspiracy believers rather than conspiracy beliefs. The content of

conspiracy theories, she argues, is sometimes taken as a justification for the self-insulated attitude towards belief in such theories. And only in cases where believers take the content of the theory to justify this attitude of self-insulation are we talking about a conspiracy theory in the ordinary language-sense of the term (i.e., “conspiracy theory”).²

2.2 Why (Not) the Minimalist Account?

Napolitano rejects the Minimalist Account because she argues it does not satisfy the two considerations discussed in Sect. 2.1. To be sure, she argues that Minimalist Accounts do not capture the ordinary language meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ as they do not exhibit the pejorative connotation typical of conspiracy theory-talk (I return to this argument in section 4). Furthermore, she maintains that a minimal definition is not operationalizable in other disciplines. It does not allow for being utilized in “empirical studies in the psychology of conspiracy theorists without [them] having to make problematic assumptions about the rationality of believing conspiracy theories” (97).

So, according to Napolitano, philosophical accounts incorporating the minimal definition, lacking the typical pejorative connotation, have ignored the fact that psychologists, cognitive scientists, and social scientists have taken conspiracy theories as a deeply problematic social phenomenon and as instances of irrationality. Hence, she concludes that accounts relying on the Minimalist Account have failed to acknowledge that there is something specifically problematic, in an epistemic sense, with “the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing” (102).

However, Napolitano does not seem to write off the usefulness of Minimalist Accounts completely, and thus there may be some room left for particularism. She admits that:

[I]t has been suggested that focusing on a neutral and minimal definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ is necessary in order to avoid begging the question whether it is ever rational to believe conspiratorial explanations, and what the difference is between this explanation type as opposed to other types, more discussed in philosophy of science. Investigating the epistemic status of conspiratorial explanations could be a worthwhile philosophical project, and a minimal account of conspiracy theory might be the best revisionary account for *this* goal. However, I take it that what we’re interested in as a public and as a research community is not this goal, but rather, we want to understand and address resilient beliefs in wild conspiracies. (fn. 7, 84)

First, it must be clear that if Napolitano believes Minimalist Accounts to be the best conception of ‘conspiracy theory’ to investigate “the epistemic status of conspiratorial explanations” (84), then including an assumption about the epistemic status of conspiracy theories (i.e., as irrational self-insulated beliefs) without the right (i.e., epistemic) kind of justification for that status is an unwarranted philosophical project. Referring to a *pragmatic* concern such as ordinary language intuitions about conspiracy theories is not a proper justification for how academics should

understand the *epistemically* problematic characteristics of the concept ‘conspiracy theory’ in their research endeavors.

Furthermore, if Napolitano wants to address conspiracy beliefs of a certain kind, then we might wonder whether she is actually talking about the pejorative connotation accompanying ‘conspiracy belief’, not ‘conspiracy theory’. In fact, we encounter similar category mistakes of defining conspiracy theories as beliefs in the work of (social) psychologists. For example, Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) note that conspiracy theories are “commonly defined as explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement in order to achieve a hidden goal that is widely considered to be unlawful or malevolent” (324). It should be obvious that, in general at least, a theory, in and of itself, is not a belief. So why do Van Prooijen and Douglas claim that this is a ‘common’ definition? One explanation could be that they (and Napolitano) are not talking about conspiracy *theories*, but rather about conspiracy *beliefs*. This explanation is supported by the fact that, relating to the above definition, Van Prooijen and Douglas refer to a paper from Zonis and Joseph (1994) that focusses not on ‘conspiracy theory,’ but on ‘conspiracy thinking.’ The latter’s definition of conspiracy thinking seems to map on to Van Prooijen and Douglas’ definition of conspiracy theory: “‘Conspiracy thinking’ is a pattern of reasoning about the world in which a ‘conspiracy’ or ‘plot’ is the dominant or operative element of the explanatory model” (Zonis & Joseph, 1994: 448). Moreover, it could plausibly be said that (social) psychologists are interested in conspiracy theories as theories that are *believed*, for it is in this sense that conspiracy theories are subject to the tools social psychological researchers have at their disposal. As Napolitano wants to propose an account that is useful for, amongst others, social psychologists, we may conclude that her account should be regarded as explicating the epistemic problems of ‘conspiracy belief’, not ‘conspiracy theory’.

3 Conspiracy Theories and Ordinary Language Intuitions

In this section, I consider how Napolitano’s account does with respect to the first consideration she deems important in conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’—i.e., capturing natural language intuitions.⁴

She argues that the Minimalist Account does not capture the ordinary meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ as it does not exhibit the pejorative connotation typical of conspiracy theory-talk. The focus on the ordinary meaning of “conspiracy theory” is required, Napolitano argues, in light of the goal she has in mind, which is to understand the “phenomenon of people believing absurd theories about conspiracies and believing them to be the best explanations of the available evidence” (83). She claims that her account does better at retaining the pejorative connotation of “conspiracy theory” as it focuses on the evidential self-insulating attitude that we find

⁴ Note, however, that I do not agree with Napolitano that this consideration is important to take into account when conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’ with the goal of developing a theoretically fruitful concept that advances our understanding of conspiracy theories.

most disturbing of people who believe conspiracy theories. Recall that some conspiracy belief is only a conspiracy theory if the belief is held with the self-insulating attitude, which means that no evidence could be presented to the believer that would persuade them to change their mind as “any counter-evidence would be dismissed as a fabrication of the conspirators to steer the public away from the truth” (87). Napolitano is also explicit about the fact that her account entails that some belief can be a conspiracy theory the one day, and no longer the next (or for one person, and not for another).

To argue that Napolitano’s account fails to satisfy consideration 1, it seems that we need a case where something would not count as a conspiracy theory on Napolitano’s account but is nonetheless commonly denoted as being a “conspiracy theory” in ordinary language contexts with a pejorative connotation. For, if there is such a case, then Napolitano’s account fails to account for the nature of the pejorative connotation, and hence fails to capture the ordinary language intuitions of conspiracy theory-talk in general.

As it happens, there are plenty such examples to be found. Consider a case where Koos adopts a conspiracy belief, namely; that Trump is one of the leading figures in a fight against a ‘deep state’ regime lead by a group of powerful people who abuse children. Koos joins online groups discussing similar beliefs, does research, finds more and more clues, and ignores, explains away, or outright dismisses counterevidence. So, the conspiracy belief is held with a self-insulated attitude, and is therefore, on Napolitano’s account, a conspiracy theory.

Two years pass and Koos is now neck-deep in the arguments supporting the conspiracy theory, and at the bottom of the conspiracy-well, some “cracks began to form in [their] conviction.”⁵ Inconsistencies in the theory build up to a point where the conspiracy belief is no longer held with an attitude of self-insulation. That is, although Koos is still latching on to the truth of his belief, it is no longer the case that “no evidence could be presented [...] that would cause [Koos] to change [their] mind” (87).

It seems that on Napolitano’s account, Koos’ belief is no longer a conspiracy theory. Do we agree that the attribution of ‘conspiracy theory’ no longer applies to Koos, in any way? Would we, in ordinary language contexts, stop talking about Koos as someone who is a conspiracy theorist, or believes conspiracy theories? I think both questions should be answered in the negative. Clearly, we would still regard the content of Koos’ belief a conspiracy theory: QAnon theories about deep state conspiracies, the conspiratorial explanations believed by Koos, are considered conspiracy theories, regardless of which specific individuals believe them, or with what attitude. Even when Koos’ doubts would grow, causing them to give up their conspiracy beliefs, the attribution of ‘conspiracy theory’ to what Koos’ beliefs used to be about seems unproblematic, or even justified, in ordinary language contexts.

⁵ See Lord & Richa (2020) for the real-life (now former) QAnon believer the example here is modelled after.

Moreover, not only is Koos' belief no longer a conspiracy theory, but it has also never been a conspiracy theory to begin with.⁶ For, according to Napolitano, Koos' view could only be considered a conspiracy theory if it were evidentially self-insulated. The fact that Koos changed their mind based upon evidence means their prior views were never evidentially self-insulated in Napolitano's sense: presenting evidence to change Koos' mind has proven possible. As such, her view fails to capture ordinary language uses of 'conspiracy theory' for describing conspiracy beliefs.

Furthermore, it seems plausible that we would still think of the theories (formerly) believed by Koos in the pejorative sense Napolitano wanted to capture in her account. The QAnon conspiracy theory, not just Koos' belief, is still perceived as wanting, in an epistemic sense, and so the negative connotation with which we normally talk about 'conspiracy theories' is not preserved in Napolitano's account.⁷ For, on her account, we are no longer talking about a 'conspiracy theory.' Thus, Napolitano fails to "maintain the epistemically negative connotation that characterizes the current meaning of 'conspiracy theory'" (84).

Napolitano considers her account superior to Minimalist Accounts because such accounts "have failed to recognize the deeply problematic aspects—both political and epistemic—of the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing" (102). One response at the disposal of Minimalist Accounts is to argue that the opposite is true: by remaining neutral about the nature of the appropriate epistemic evaluation in conceptualizing 'conspiracy theory', Minimalist accounts do not limit themselves to focusing on only one account of problematic conspiracy beliefs. As Napolitano limits her conception to only focus on the problems of self-insulated conspiracy beliefs, her account automatically disregards other problematic aspects of the epistemology of conspiracy theories. There may be classes of conspiracy explanations that share features independent of the way in which they are believed: for example, there may be identifiable classes of such explanations that undermine trust in institutions or exhibit pseudoscientific characteristics. There may be similar identifiable classes for different kinds of conspiracy beliefs: for example, those that are held not in a doxastic way, but are rather expressive moral beliefs.

Another response the Minimalist Accounts could employ is to point out that if you only focus on the people who resist revising their conspiracy beliefs, you miss out on the discovery of possible routes of depolarization. By excluding cases like Koos, you also exclude the possibility of inquiry into which kinds of arguments would trump the attitude of evidential self-insulation, and how we could avoid a kind of ideological segregation in society where we instantly condemn people who hold self-insulated conspiracy beliefs.

⁶ Thanks to M R.X. Dentith for pointing this out to me.

⁷ On a more moderate understanding of this conclusion, we might grant Napolitano that because *some* people believe QAnon conspiracy theories with an evidentially self-insulated attitude, we consider all people who believe such theories (attitude or not) irrational, or epistemically problematic. However, her account cannot accommodate this moderate conclusion, since conspiracy theories are only those conspiracy beliefs that are self-insulated.

In sum, Napolitano's account does not appreciate the plausibly multifaceted nature of the epistemically negative connotation of 'conspiracy theory' in ordinary language usage.

4 Conspiracy Theories and Interdisciplinary Fruitfulness

Firstly, and preliminarily, it is not clear that philosophical conceptions should take the research interests of other disciplines into account.⁸ Other disciplines tailor the conceptions of 'conspiracy theory' to their respective research interests, and it is not clear why philosophy should not be allowed to do the same.⁹ However, if we wish to contribute to the possibility of fruitful interdisciplinary research through our traditional mastery of conceptual analyses, we must take Napolitano's objection into account and show that her account is inappropriate as a conceptual framework for interdisciplinary research.

Recall from section 1 that one of the important implications of the fact that most philosophers ascribe to particularism is that philosophical insights on the conceptual analysis of 'conspiracy theory' may be taken up in other disciplines. However, what was a hypothetical argument before, has turned out true in practice. By emphasizing the importance of a neutral and minimal starting point for inquiries into conspiracy theories, conspiracy belief, conspiracy mindsets, and so on, philosophers have spawned a change in the attitudes of researchers in empirical studies interested in conspiracy theories, namely; that a more neutral conception of conspiracy theories is salient for their research purposes.

Social psychologists (most already before Napolitano's (2021) paper was published) have widely acknowledged that belief in conspiracy theories is relatively normal (Bost et al., 2010), and not, as was formerly the dominant position, reserved for "paranoid individuals whose judgment is affected as the result of an uncommonly angry mind" (Hofstadter, 1965), or caused by "paranoia, delusional thinking, or other psychopathologies ([as was argued by] e.g., Groh, 1987; Plomin & Post, 1997)" (Sutton & Douglas, 2014: 254). In fact, various empirical scientists can be seen to move away from pejorative conceptions of 'conspiracy theory'. For example, Raab et al. (2013) explicitly argue for the abandonment of thinking about conspiracy theories in the paranoid style, as belief in such theories is "a common, regulative and possibly benign phenomenon" (1). Sociologists, too, point to the dangers of taking the pejorative connotation of "conspiracy theory" as a given in terms of demobilizing dissenting voices (Husting & Orr, 2007).

⁸ Later in this section I propose one way in which a Minimalist Account can be developed that is fruitful across disciplines, though it should be noted that it is not the philosophers task to tailor and fabricate a theoretically sound conception specifically for social psychologists (Napolitano's target audience). The considerations that should be guiding the development of a neutral and theoretically sound conception of 'conspiracy theory' are analytical (and philosophical), not social psychological, in nature.

⁹ This holds for, for example, linguistic studies (e.g., Samory & Mitra, 2018), psychologists (e.g., Nera et al., 2020; Swami & Furnham, 2014), and religious studies (e.g., Dyrendal et al., 2018).

Furthermore, various scholars have purposefully focused their research on the positive elements (both epistemic and moral) of belief in conspiracy theories (e.g., see Swami et al., 2010; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013; Van Prooijen, 2022). Some have even argued that belief in incorrect conspiracy theories may have a rational basis (Swami et al., 2013). As Douglas and Sutton (2018) explain:

[R]ecent findings call into question this rather pathological view of conspiracy beliefs. Far from being limited to people who are paranoid and delusional, research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are common (Oliver and Wood, 2014) and may be characterized as the product of everyday cognitive processes. That is, everyone is to some extent likely to believe in conspiracy theories. (259)

In a similar vein, it is pointed out that belief in conspiracy theories is not restricted to the few, but rather a typical feature of social life throughout history (e.g., see Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). As Bale (2007) explains:

The fact that a belief in sinister, all-powerful conspiratorial forces has not typically been restricted to small groups of clinical paranoids and mental defectives suggests that it fulfils certain important social functions and psychological needs. [...] In short, a belief in conspiracy theories helps people to make sense out of a confusing, inhospitable reality, rationalize their present difficulties and partially assuage their feelings of powerlessness. In this sense, it is no different than any number of religious, social or political beliefs [...]. (50-1)

Many more examples can be found of scholars recognizing the normality of belief in conspiracy theories, or the existence of conspiracy theories more generally (e.g., see Knight, 2003). I therefore believe Napolitano's claim that psychologists, cognitive scientists, and social scientists have taken conspiracy theories as "a problem to be addressed, or as an instance of irrational behavior" is false.¹⁰

Importantly, Napolitano deals in empirical research of conspiracy theories herself and so might need a specifically laden conception for her work there. For, isn't it exactly the point that what is problematic about conspiracy theories will have to be figured out by different disciplines? And that finding out what the problem is, will depend on the lens of the discipline through which we research conspiracy theories? Psychologists might say that conspiracy theories are problematic because believing them constitutes an unwarranted paranoid-style of thinking. Political scientists might say that conspiracy theories are problematic because believing them causes greater numbers of policy rejections. Epistemologists might say that conspiracy theories are problematic because believing them is irrational with respect to evidential considerations. Sociologists might say that conspiracy theories are problematic because believing them induces polarization. And so on. One possible way in which

¹⁰ More specifically, it is the overstated generalization of Napolitano's claim that is problematic. She makes an empirical assumption—i.e., that most people who believe conspiracy theories do so in a problematic (self-insulated) way—in order to arrive at a conception that can be used by disciplines that test whether the empirical assumption is true—i.e., whether most people who believe conspiracy theories do so in a problematic way.

the Minimalist Account is suited to serve as a common basis is to develop building blocks that can be added by different disciplines. The upshot would be that by starting out from the same basis, and explicitly stating which building blocks are added to the Minimalist Account, and for what reasons these building blocks are necessary, research on conspiracy theories from different disciplines will become more accessible. More work needs to be done, though, to develop such a conceptual foundation for Conspiracy Theory research.

To assume that one negatively loaded definition will cover all of these possible problems of conspiracy theories shows ignorance of the multifaceted nature of academic investigations of conspiracy theories. To assume that one evaluative conception of conspiracy theory can be operationalizable in multiple disciplines seems similarly uninformed (for another example, see Cibik & Hardoš, 2020). A more educated development, in terms of conceptual analysis, is for philosophers to proceed in providing grounds for interdisciplinary research by suggesting a Minimalist Account that is not discipline-specific, and which can be supplemented by building blocks of which the discipline should take notice. Adopting a Minimalist Account as a common ground thereby signals to other disciplines that they should recognize in which way they add to the neutral definition in a way that is suited for their research, and that doing so brings forth an evaluative rather than descriptive conception of the term in question.

5 Conclusion

Although Napolitano offers her account in light of conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’, it seems that her aim of providing empirical scholars with a concept that is operationalizable in their research endeavors has led her to conceptualize a specific kind of ‘conspiracy belief’ instead. Narrowing the scope of ‘conspiracy theory’ as self-insulated conspiracy beliefs has failed to capture the epistemic nature of the pejorative connotation she believes to underlie common usage of the term. Furthermore, there are good reasons for resisting her narrower concept, as it, for example, excludes academics of inquiring into possible depolarization routes.

Narrowing the scope of ‘conspiracy theory’ has similarly failed to provide us with a theoretically and interdisciplinary fruitful concept. The particularist’ consensus in philosophy seems to have contributed (or at least mapped on) to other disciplines drifting away from the derogatory understanding of conspiracy theories and people who believe them. The academic literature on conspiracy theories is showing that the pejorative connotation correlated with conspiracy theory-talk in ordinary contexts is unwarranted, as conspiracies are everywhere, and there are many good (and bad) reasons to believe them. There is just no a priori way to distinguish between those conspiracy explanations that are credible and those that are not. Hence, a particularist take on the epistemic status of or the rationality of believing conspiracy theories aligns with the aims of both philosophical and empirical work in the Conspiracy Theory arena.

In conclusion, my aim in this paper has been to defend the Minimalist Account from a generalist alternative. Particularist consensus amongst philosophers has

important possible contributions to the multidisciplinary field of Conspiracy Theory Theory, though these contributions are no reason to dismiss any deviating account as unwarranted. We are not exempted from demonstrating the strengths of the Minimalist Account in comparison to other accounts, nor from showing how it survives scrutiny. What is needed for the Minimalist Account to be refuted is a non-question begging justification for labelling all or a significant chunk of the total class of conspiracy theories as unwarranted explanations, where the grounds for that justification are unique to those theories being about conspiracies. Napolitano does not offer such a justification and fails its own purposes. Hence, I conclude that conspiracy theories are theories, not beliefs.

Acknowledgements Thanks to M R. X. Dentith, René van Woudenberg, and Jeroen de Ridder, as well as the members of the CTTSC, for their helpful comments and interesting discussions on some of the arguments in this paper. This work was produced within a Ph.D. position on the *Social Epistemology of Conspiracy Theories*, affiliated with the Extreme Beliefs (ERC Grant) project at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bale, J. M. (2007). Political paranoia v. Political realism: On distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *41*(1), 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220601118751>
- Basham, L. (2003). Malevolent global conspiracy. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *34*(1), 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9833.00167>
- Bost, P. R., Prunier, S. G., & Piper, A. J. (2010). Relations of familiarity with reasoning strategies in conspiracy beliefs. *Psychological Reports*, *107*, 593–602.
- Buenting, J., & Taylor, J. (2010). Conspiracy theories and fortuitous data. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *40*(4), 567–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393109350750>
- Cassam, Q. (2019). *Conspiracy theories*. Polity Press.
- Čibik, M., & Hardoš, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories and reasonable pluralism. *European Journal of Political Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119899232>
- Clarke, S. (2002). Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *32*(2), 131–150.
- Coady, D. (2003). Conspiracy theories and official stories. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *17*(2), 197–209.
- Coady, D. (2007). Are conspiracy theorists irrational? *Episteme*, *4*(2), 193–204.

- Cohnitz, D. (2018). On the rationality of conspiracy theories. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, 18(2), 351–365.
- Dentith, M. R. X. (2014). *The philosophy of conspiracy theories*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dentith, M. R. X. (2019). Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence. *Synthese*, 196(6), 2243–2261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1532-7>
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2018). Why conspiracy theories matter: A social psychological analysis. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 29(1), 256–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2018.1537428>
- Duetz, J. C. M. (forthcoming). What does it mean for a conspiracy theory to be a ‘theory’? *Social Epistemology*.
- Dyrendal, A., Robertson, D. G., & Asprem, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion*. Brill.
- Groh, D. (1987). The temptation of conspiracy theory, or: Why do bad things happen to good people? Part I: Preliminary draft of a theory of conspiracy theories. In C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 1–13). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4618-3_1
- Hagen, K. (2020). Is conspiracy theorizing really epistemically problematic? *Episteme*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2020.19>
- Hofstadter, R. (1965). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Harvard University Press.
- Husting, G., & Orr, M. (2007). Dangerous machinery: ‘Conspiracy theorist’ as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion. *Symbolic Interaction*, 30(2), 127–150. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.2.127>
- Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109–126.
- Keeley, B. L. (2003). Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition! More thoughts on conspiracy theory. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34(1), 104–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9833.00168>
- Keeley, B. L. (2007). God as the ultimate conspiracy theory. *Episteme*, 4(2), 135–149.
- Knight, P. (2003). Making sense of conspiracy theories. In P. Knight (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories in American history* (pp. 15–25). ABC-CLIO.
- Lord, B., & Richa, N. (2020). He went down the QAnon rabbit hole for almost two years. Here’s how he got out [CNN]. *CNN Business*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/16/tech/qanon-believer-how-he-got-out/index.html>
- Mandik, P. (2007). Shit happens. *Episteme*, 4(2), 205–218. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.205>
- Napolitano, M. G. (2021). Conspiracy theories and evidential self-insulation. In M. G. Napolitano (Ed.), *The epistemology of fake news* (pp. 82–106). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863977.003.0005>
- Nera, K., Leveaux, S., & Klein, P. P. L. E. (2020). A “conspiracy theory” conspiracy? A mixed methods investigation of Laypeople’s rejection (and acceptance) of a controversial label. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 33(1), 13. <https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.401>
- Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25(1), 3–34.
- Pigden, C. (2007). Conspiracy theories and the conventional wisdom. *Episteme*, 4(2), 219–232.
- Plomin, R. S., & Post, J. M. (1997). *Political paranoia*. Yale University Press.
- Popper, K. R. (1945). *The open society and its enemies (issue 17)*. Princeton University Press.
- van Prooijen, J.-W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies*, 10(3), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615>
- van Prooijen, J.-W. (2022). Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47, 101352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352>
- Raab, M. H., Ortlieb, S. A., Auer, N., Guthmann, K., & Carbon, C.-C. (2013). Thirty shades of truth: Conspiracy theories as stories of individuation, not of pathological delusion. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00406>
- Samory, M., & Mitra, T. (2018). ‘The government spies using our webcams’: The language of conspiracy theories in online discussions. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 2(CSCW), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274421>
- Sapountzis, A., & Condor, S. (2013). Conspiracy accounts as intergroup theories: Challenging dominant understandings of social power and political legitimacy. *Political Psychology*, 34(5), 731–752.
- Stokes, P. (2018). On some moral costs of conspiracy theorizing. In M. R. X. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking conspiracy theories seriously* (pp. 189–202). Rowman and Littlefield.

- Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2), 202–227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>
- Sutton, R. M., & Douglas, K. M. (2014). Examining the monological nature of conspiracy theories. In J.-W. van Prooijen & P. A. M. van Lange (Eds.), *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why people are suspicious of their leaders* (pp. 254–272). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139565417>
- Swami, V., Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2010). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 24(6), 749–761. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1583>
- Swami, V., & Furnham, A. (2014). Political paranoia and conspiracy theories. In J.-W. van Prooijen & P. A. M. van Lange (Eds.), *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why people are suspicious of their leaders*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139565417.016>
- Swami, V., Pietschnig, J., Tran, U. S., Nader, I. W., Stieger, S., & Voracek, M. (2013). Lunar lies: The impact of informational framing and individual differences in shaping conspiracist beliefs about the moon landings: Conspiracy theories. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 27(1), 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2873>
- Zonis, M., & Joseph, C. M. (1994). Conspiracy thinking in the Middle East. *Political Psychology*, 15(3), 443–459. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791566>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.