**Dimensions of Conspiracy: Toward a Unifying Framework**

**for Understanding Conspiracy Theory Belief**

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***Abstract***

Researchers have argued that believing in conspiracy theories is dangerous and harmful, both for the individual and the community. In the philosophical debate, the divide is between the generalists, who argue that conspiracy theories are prima facie problematic, and the particularists, who argue that since conspiracies do occur, we ought to take conspiracy theories seriously, and consider them on merit. Much of the empirical research has focused on correlations between conspiracy belief and personality traits, such as narcissism, illusory pattern perception, and paranoia, in the spirit of a generalist account. However, there is also ample empirical evidence that conspiracy belief is widespread in the population at large, which would be surprising and in need of explanation if the generalists were correct. In sociology and political science studies have demonstrated the role of group motivation and social aspects of belief in conspiracies. There is currently lacking a unified account of what motivates conspiracy belief that can capture the different intuitions, if possible, in one framework. This is the lacuna I wish to address, by introducing a framework that incorporate the many dimensions of conspiracy theories. The framework identifies three motivating factors for endorsing a conspiracy theory: group cohesion, cognitive needs, and truth seeking. A fourth dimension is the isolation value, or the level of ‘knowledge-anomie’ that the conspiracy theory takes. Thus, the framework is able to capture more normal cognitive functions that drive conspiracy beliefs, such as adopting to the in-group’s beliefs and the quest for truth, but also the plausibly more abnormal ones. Conspiracy theories can be positioned in a three-dimensional space depending on the degree to which they exemplify each motivating factor and the extent they deviate from the ‘knowledge-norm’. I suggest that the generalist and the particularist have focused on different parts of this common three-dimensional space. I also indicate a relatively small area where I believe pathological conspiracy belief is to be positioned. Ultimately, it is an empirical question what part of the space (pathological or otherwise) conspiracy theories occupy.

1. **Introduction**

Researchers and policy makers have argued that conspiracy theories[[1]](#footnote-1) are dangerous and harmful, both for the individual and the community (Lewandowsky, Holford and Schmid, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). However, it is far from decided whether the danger is caused by the nature of the theories or the individuals who believe or subscribe to them. When philosophers debate the thing we call ‘conspiracy theory’, it is often on the question of its definition or conceptualization, and whether or not conspiracy theories by their definition ought to be met with suspicion and skepticism. Some have argued that most conspiracy theories are false, and a form of political propaganda (Cassam, 2019), or otherwise irrational to accept (Boudry 2023; Harris, 2018; Levy, 2007; Napolitano and Reuter, 2022). The opposite is also argued, namely that conspiracy theories should be held to their individual merit, since conspiracies happen all the time and it would be a premature dismissal if we do not first consider the evidence for or against a particular conspiracy theory (Dentith, 2018; Hagen, 2022). Psychologist and social scientist have paid more attention to the individuals who believe these things we call conspiracy theories. For psychologist studying the psychology of conspiracy theories the central question has not been to determine which conspiracy theories are true or false – it is a question who does or does not believe in them, and to understand the psychological factors that drive the popularity of conspiracy theories (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, 2017).

Both philosophers and psychologist agree that conspiracy thinking is ubiquitous and a product of political reasoning. Thus, whether the question of who believes in conspiracy theories is interesting (or not) will depend on how the area of research is defined, and if it is narrow enough to be theoretically fruitful. Tsapos (2023) has argued that our interest will guide how we define the term; if our interest is manly scientific, we need an empirically fruitful concept. Efforts by social scientist thus far have not been successful in narrowing the research domain in such a way that it would sufficiently differentiate between people with ordinary cognitive function making judgments about the social and political world, and those with cognitive disorders and deviating personality traits that would give rise to conspiracy belief. As a result, empirical researchers and philosophers are seemingly lacking a unified account that can capture the different intuitions of motivated belief in conspiracy theories, such as biased social or cognitive desires and formation of judgment such as evidence accumulation, aggregation, and evaluation. In this paper I offer a framework toward such an account, one that incorporates the different dimensions of belief in conspiracy theories. Such an account would help to better understand the nature of conspiracy theories, potentially uncovering underlying structural features common to seemingly diverse accounts of conspiracy theories.

The framework I propose, following Kunda, Mercier and others, presuppose causal motives operating when people acquire and sustain beliefs (Kunda 1990; Mercier 2020; Mercier and Sperber 2011). I identify two dimensions as motivated reasons – by motivation, again following Kunda, I mean any wish, desire or preference that concerns the outcome – by cognitive needs and group cohesion. A third dimension is typically part of the formation of judgments motivated by truth seeking[[2]](#footnote-2), namely epistemic aims. The fourth dimension is not a motivation, but rather tracks the content of the conspiracy theory, its isolation value, or the extent of *content-anomie*; from alienation as a well-established phenomenon in Marxist sociology, and anomie adapted from Durkheim, used here as a technical term (Boudon and Bourricaud 2002; Marks 1974; Durkheim 1933).[[3]](#footnote-3) The framework I propose is an effort toward unifying the many different accounts of conspiracy theories and belief in them, that are currently scattered across different disciplines. Each research project typically targets different aspects of conspiracy theories and motivations for people’s beliefs in them. Hence, a framework to locate these could, I argue, uncover underlying structural features (if there are any) common to seemingly diverse accounts of conspiracy theories.

First, I will provide an analysis of the philosophical debate, which has traditionally cantered around the epistemic status of conspiracy theories, and the definition of the term itself. Then, I turn to the empirical research, and results indicating correlations of belief in conspiracy theories with various non-epistemic motivating factors; in psychology mainly psychological factors and personality traits, while sociologist have found correlations of belief in some conspiracy theories with social factors, such as group cohesion and political reasoning. In the third section I expand upon the framework that I believe captures the various dimensions of conspiracy theories. Finally, I compare the framework with other accounts of conspiracy theory, and argue that my model offers a more complete understanding and perhaps a unified account of conspiracy theories.

1. **The epistemic status of conspiracy theories**

The main concern for the philosophical debated has been whether or not one is justified to be prima facie suspicious of conspiracy theories. In a brief historical overview on the philosophy of conspiracy theory, Dentith (2023) paints a picture of a broad consensus that has emerged among philosophers, the view known as particularism – which argues that there is nothing inherently disqualifying about conspiracy theories qua theories. The particularist appeal to a simple definition[[4]](#footnote-4) of conspiracy theories, one that would typically capture any sort of theory that contains a conspiracy, including the ones that most historically and politically literate people believe (Pigden 1995). This is strikingly different from how conspiracy theories are discussed in the wider public, in the media and other areas of academia (particularly the social sciences), which tend to follow a “common language intuition”. The common language intuition presupposes, as Dentith puts it, that there is something “mad, bad, and dangerous” about conspiracy theories (Dentith 2023: 2). Often equated with other phenomena, such as fake news and political extremism. The generalist position in the philosophy of conspiracy theory is more in line with the common intuition, that there is something about conspiracy theories that should make us prima facie skeptical and dismissive of them. Some generalists have suggested additions to the simple definition of conspiracy theory. For example, Huneman and Vorms (2018) write that conspiracy theories are an “explanation of an event […] that unnecessarily appeals to the hypothesis of a group of malevolent agents that remains hidden”. Others argue that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is a pejorative because they are implausible theories (Räikkä 2023), or that true conspiracies and conspiracy theories are two different things (Napolitano and Reuter 2021; Napolitano 2022). The later claim is essentially comparing conspiracies to witches and Watergates (i.e conspiracy theories that hold an epistemic status to be considered true, or confirmed conspiracies) to Wiccans (Stokes 2023: 5), with the assumption, of course, that witches don’t exist but Wiccans do. Other accounts still, have claimed that conspiracy theories are primarily a right-wing political tool and a form of propaganda (Cassam, 2019).

If we start with a pejorative gloss or only a subgroup of conspiracy theories, it just means we have to work “backwards elsewhere” (Dentith 2018). The definition provided in Huneman and Vorms (2018: 6) is just one example among others that makes working backwards from a pejorative definition necessary, adding to their account that we need to demarcate what “divides the set of theories appealing to conspiracy between proper ones and ill-informed ones”. The same can be applied to Räikkä’s (2023) account claiming that the term ought to have a pejorative connotation since the theories are implausible. As Räikkä rightly points out, not all conspiracy theories deserve further investigations. But, to separate the wheat form the chaff, some judgment concerning the *content* of the conspiracy theory, be it space lizards or lab leak coverups, must play a part in determining which are worthy of investigation and which are not. Hence, Dentith (2018, 6) is right that “our work would be much more fruitful if we started with a value-neutral definition of “conspiracy theory that admitted that, yes, conspiracy theorizing can be healthy”.

Patrick Stokes characterized the difference between the two philosophical positions as the generalist having a tendency to focus “solely on examples of conspiracy theories with clear epistemic fault and on outlandish conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones and David Icke”, and particularist having “a tendency to not engage with the troubling character of contemporary conspiracy theories at all” (Stokes 2023: 5). As appealing as it may be, to portray the divide as neatly as Stoke has, it is not entirely a correct characterization. Brian Keeley’s (1999) account engaged with the concerns of troubling conspiracy theories when he famously coined the term ‘unwarranted conspiracy theories’. Dentith has likewise acknowledged that some conspiracy theories are troublesome, with an emphasis on some when writing that “after all, it is not as if my colleagues think all conspiracy theorizing is healthy; just that some of it is, contra the claims of our critics. […] We simply think you can’t assume a conspiracy theory is suspicious just because it is (or has been labelled) a conspiracy theory” (2019: 6).

Generalist consider conspiracy theories to be so abnormal and not part of everyday life, that it is worth excluding from immediate consideration (Stokes 2023: 6). Cassam refers to political propaganda and antisemitism, and that these are more dangerous, making it a good enough reason to dismiss conspiracy theories and treat them with suspicion, without the need for examining them. According to Stokes the difference in intuition “seems to come down to background assumptions about how the world works”; either conspiracies happen all the time, or they happen sometimes but most claimed conspiracies don’t turn out to be true.

I believe Stokes rightly observed that the conclusion of the particularist accounts often place great focus on the epistemic risks of dismissing conspiracy theories. Clark (2019), for example, shifting the attention to conspiracy theorist, identifying some as “victims of cognitive failure”; and evens so, Clark insist that conspiracy theorizing is beneficial still:

“Although conspiracy theorists do commit a cognitive error that leads them to prefer theories that are otherwise less plausible over theories that are otherwise more plausible, the activities of the conspiracy theorists are not to be condemned outright. The prevalence of conspiracy theorizing is beneficial to us in several ways.”

And he continues:

“The conspiracy theorists may be a victim of cognitive error, but it is perhaps to our advantage that they remain in error. Although we would not wish to fall victim to the fundamental attribution error, it can sometimes be to our advantage that others do. Perhaps we should thank the conspiracy theorist for remaining vigilant on our behalf.”

The debate between the particularist and the generalist has mainly focused on the epistemic status of the theories, and has resulted in a difficult to reconcile field. As we have seen, at times the discussion has naturally shifted from the definition or conceptualization of the term itself, to the reasons and motivations individuals have when they come to believe the things they do. Next, I turn to the empirical research, mostly concerned with the people who believe conspiracy theories, the conspiracy theorists.

1. **Psychology – group versus individual perspectives**

In contrast to the philosophical debate, research in the social sciences and psychology have mainly focused on correlations of personality traits, political orientation and socioeconomical features of conspiracy theorists. On the one hand, studies have demonstrated the role of group motivation, environmental- and social aspects of belief in conspiracies, arguing that “conspiracy beliefs emerge as ordinary people make judgments about the social and political world” (Radnitz and Underwood 2015). On the other hand, studies emphasis individuals’ characteristics, personality traits, cognitive errors and pathologies, such as narcissism, illusory pattern perception, magical thinking and paranoia (Lantian, Wood and Gjoneska 2020). I will discuss some of the research to illustrate how contrary accounts emerge as a result. The juxtaposition of the accounts brings forth the issue of diverging opinions on the consequences and solutions to belief in conspiracy theories, whether we take them to be doxastic or non-doxastic, and ultimately rational or irrational. I will start by discussing the accounts that identify cognitive functions and psychological characteristics as the driving factors for such beliefs, before moving on to those that identify social and political reasoning, and collective motivated cognition as underlying such beliefs. But first, a note on what the empirical work I discuss take as their working definition of conspiracy theories.

Many studies put forth a definition of conspiracy theories that is some version of conspiracy theories as “explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups” (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017)[[5]](#footnote-5); such theories are not – by definition – necessarily false as the particularist have promptly argued, and most social scientist seem to agree (Moulding et. al. 2016; Dentith). Researchers more often than not, tend to take a presumption-of-guilt approach, primarily emphasizing their negative effects (van Prooijen 2022); and often depart from the definition they initially embrace, focusing on a sub-category of conspiracy theories instead, such as unwarranted conspiracy theories or contrarian beliefs[[6]](#footnote-6). Lantin et al (2020) highlight this point when they ask why psychologist have been asking the question of why some people tend to believe conspiracy theories, while others do not, demonstrating how the particularist argument ­– that most historically and politically literate people believe some conspiracy theory – is over looked or ignored. However, some of the research I will discuss define the concept in other ways; but unless indicated otherwise some version of the definition above is implied.

**3.1 Individual psychological mechanisms**

The interest in the psychological driving factors of conspiracy belief is evident from the growing literature. While the area can be divided into roughly two fractions – pathological belief in conspiracy theories and mere sub-clinical correlations – some claim that the former “has fallen out of favor” (Moulding et al 2016); although this is not obviously so.

Moreover, studies have identified cognitive needs as part of motivation for conspiracy beliefs, such as a cognitive need for closure to maintain one’s world view and to make sense of stressful events (Leman and Cinnirella 2013; Marchlewska, Cichocka and Kossowska 2018). Feelings of control are essential for people’s psychological well-being. In cognitive science the phenomena of illusory pattern perception, typically caused by experiencing a lack of control, is linked to conspiracy belief. According to Whitson and Galinsky (2008: 115) when faced with a lack of control, people turn to pattern perception in general, the identification of a coherent and meaningful interrelationship between a set of stimuli. Individuals make sense of events and develop predictions trough pattern perception. They hypothesis further that lacking control will lead to illusory pattern perception, such as the tendency to perceive false correlations, see imaginary figures and embrace conspiracy theories. They suggest that seeing and seeking patterns as a response to sensing a lack of control is due to pattern perception being a compensatory mechanism “designed to restore feeling of control”. Conspiracy theories, then according to the authors, are one example of how this process works, as they give causes and motives to events “in order to bring the disturbing vagaries of reality under control”. Much of the results from the empirical studies point to it being the case that conspiracy belief is linked with individuals who have a so-called "crippled epistemology" (to use the term coined by Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), resulting in an overwhelming impression that belief in conspiracies are irrational beliefs, in support of the generalist thesis. Although these studies point to a variety of such causes and correlations, they don’t differentiate between conspiracy theories that are a result of epistemic vices and those that are not (Husting and Orr 2007). It is also evident that there are correlations for belief in conspiracy theories that are epistemically motivated; individuals who believe conspiracy theories could also be epistemically motivated in their search for ‘the truth’, finding explanations to the circumstances they find themselves in, and a desire to find the most plausible explanation for an event. In turn, this area of the research field seems to have neglected to incorporate studies that account for the perspective of believing in a conspiracy theory by predominantly epistemic motivations. These conspiracy theories may be believed by individuals who typically are not considered to be victims of cognitive errors; these could perhaps be certain journalist, secret service agents and others with unique positions that are otherwise fit to pursue the epistemic validity of a conspiracy theory. Ultimately it is an empirical question of who would fall under such a category. In other words, belief in those conspiracy theories that (for argument’s sake) most of us believe, like the Watergate scandal, the NSA Prism affair, the plotted murder of Julius Caesar, and so on, are not covered by these studies. The reason for this neglect in the literature is not obvious. However, it is clear that it is not due to unawareness or a different definition of conspiracy theories. Orr and Dentith (2018: 141) suggests that central to these confusions or refusals to put theory before practice is “not just a lack of philosophical rigour when it comes to defining and presenting views, but an active disinterest in such conceptual work”. I will next turn to the social motivation dimension and the subsequent empirical research, before furthering the much-needed framework.

**3.2 Social-psychological factors**

The social psychological factor that contributes to and motivates belief in conspiracy theories are pragmatic rather than epistemic, in that they typically feature non-doxastic beliefs (Ichino and Räikkä 2021) and identify precisely that, social motivations, such as signaling to the in-group, rather than a motivation to understand the world. Although people have a general tendency to make sense of the world, according to Kreko (2015: 63) it does not mean that individuals want pure reality, but “to receive knowledge that satisfies their needs”. As such, psychologist and sociologist have focused on specific social cognitive processes that may increase the likelihood of people believing conspiracy theories. For example, people may have the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group and as such conspiracy theories, it is argued, are particularly appealing to those who find the positive image of their self or in-group to be threatened in some way (Douglas et. al. 2017; Chichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala 2016). Douglas et. al. (2017) suggests that conspiracy theories are recruited defensively, and as such conspiracy belief is associated with narcissism, and liked to paranoid ideation; and groups that feel that they have been victimized are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories about powerful out-groups.

Kreko (2015)[[7]](#footnote-7) argues against the view that beliefs in conspiracy are products of individual psychology. Rather, conspiracy theories are “normal”, and should be explained as normalcy and not pathology, as products of social psychological processes. As such, Kreko argues that “Societal conspiracy theories should be distinguished from paranoic delusions: The perceived plot is directed against a collective as a nation. A group, or a culture, while a paranoid person is afraid of conspiracies personally against him – or herself”; adding “Conspiracy theories are, unlike mental disorders such as schizophrenia and paranoia, abundant in modern societies” (64). In this view on collective motivated cognition framework, belief in conspiracy theories “help draw a line between the in-group and the out-group” and conspiracy theories “emerge above and below in the social-political hierarchy, can motivate actions for changing the status quo, exercise control over the powerful, or, on the contrary, justify oppression and aggression against the lower status groups and cement social hierarchies” (66).

Much of the empirical research too, as we have seen, is suffering from a similar tendency found in the philosophical debate, namely that, lacking a unified theoretical framework, research is identifying different elements of conspiracy theories and those who believe, or are committed to them, in a way that provide rivalry accounts rather than complementary. From the research literature then, thus far, we can identify three central motivations for belief in conspiracy theories that emerge, which I will call group cohesion, cognitive desires and truth seeking (also epistemic aims). Next, I discuss these in turn.

1. **Four Dimensions**

Generally, people want to believe what is true. But, as sociology, psychology and economics tell us, in addition, beliefs often fulfil important psychological and functional needs of the individual or group. As a result of motivated reasoning, people often adopt beliefs that others in their group have, to maintain group cohesiveness, their desire for positive relationships and a feeling of *esprit de corps*. Further, there may be other cognitive needs that cause biases during the judgments phase, such as confirmation bias or a need for closure and magical thinking (Hahn and Harris, 2014). At the extremes, then, there are arguably people who only seek the truth, people who only value group cohesion, and people who are only motivated to, for example, hold on to and confirm their biased world view, or other cognitive reasons that may contribute to a distortion of objective reality. Most beliefs in conspiracy theories can be placed somewhere in-between the extremes, motivated by group cohesion or cognitive needs, but not at the complete expense of adopting obviously false and absurd beliefs, or vice versa. For a group or individual in which group cohesion matters more, there is an interest to adopt a position further from the out-group, in order to establish a clear contrast between the in-groups’ beliefs and the out-groups’, in the interest of increasing group cohesion. Such a belief may deviate extensively and require ad hoc hypothesis to be sustainable.

The dimensions apply to belief in conspiracy theories as a special case. At the extreme points, a belief in a conspiracy theory at time *t* may be motivated by either truth seeking, group cohesion, or cognitive need. Thus, there are conspiracy theorists ­– those who believe or subscribe to conspiracy theories – who are only in it for the truth, and have been led to the position that there is one or more ongoing conspiracies through careful weighing of the evidence; or those who do so due to wishful thinking, biasing effects of outcome utility, or other cognitive errors, which may arise at any stage of judgment formation. Some conspiracy theorists only believe or commit to conspiracy theories because their group does, thereby signalling membership in and loyalty to the group. In order to track the content of a conspiracy theory in this framework, the fourth dimension, which is not a kind of motivation for belief, reflects the level of content-anomie. In sociology, Durkheim (1933) used the term *anomie* to refer to a group or individuals’ measurable status of social dysfunction, disorganization, group alienation and demoralization. Anomie is found in Marx’s original idea of the central role of alienation in his social theory (Seeman 1991). In this context I use content-anomie to refer to conspiracy theories as being high or low on the content-anomie scale. That is, a conspiracy theory high on content anomie, much like the phenomena of anomie in sociology, will be socially isolated from most other views that people have, or subscribe to. The norms of societies beliefs, as I refer to them here, is a relation to what is considered the norm in a given context at a given time, *t*. A particular conspiracy theory then, may be closer or further from what is a particular social norm of beliefs at *t*. The particular conspiracy theory with high or low content-anomie, indicates the deviation of such a theory from the norm. The framework thus allows for localization and allocation of particular conspiracy theories based on motivation for belief, doxastic or non-doxastic, as truth seeking, group cohesion and cognitive needs, and how they relate to other theories that are considered societal norm.

We may picture the different dimensions of belief in conspiracy theories described above using a diagram with the strength of the motive to seek the truth on the x-axis, strength of the motive to seek group coherence on the y-axis, and the strength of the motive to fill other cognitive needs that are non-epistemic on the z-axis. The status of a conspiracy theory held by a group or individual is represented by points in the diagram, depending on the relative strength of the motives, to believe in a particular conspiracy theory at time, *t*. The fourth dimension of content-anomie is represented by colors, blue, green-yellow and red corresponding to low, medium and high level for any given conspiracy theory.

Empirical work is needed to place the various conspiracy theories and to determine where they tend to cluster, which conspiracy theories are closer to the median, and which are further away on the extremes. We might want to know what the relations are between these dimensions. In the subsequent section I turn to this question in more detail. Starting with what singles out group cohesion, and then turn to the characteristics related to truth seeking and cognitive desire.



Figure 1. An illustration of how a diagram of what locating the conspiracy theories in the three-dimensional diagram may look.

* 1. **Group Cohesion and Content-Anomie**

Some symptoms of group-think and a desire for group cohesion are identified by Irving Janis (1982; 2020) as a collective effort to rationalize, and a pressure to conform, against those members who disagree with the group, this being indicative of disloyalty. Self-censorship occurs in that members do not voice dissenting or contrary views to the group consensus creating a false perception that members have achieved consensus; silence is considered consent. To believe (or to commit to) a conspiracy theory then, motivated by group cohesion, sometimes is to signal and communicate one’s own membership, and at other times it may be to keep group-cohesion by distancing from the social norm of a particular context at *t*. As we have seen, political science has linked belief in conspiracy theories to political propaganda, and political extremism. Biddlestone, Cichocka, Žeželj, and Bilewicz (2020: 220-221) found that “portraying certain enemy groups as conspiring can be used in propaganda to mobilise war efforts and to engage society in collective goals.”. Although conspiracy theories of this kind are more often associated with right-wing political leanings, others found that the political leaning associated with such beliefs (whether right or left-wing) will depend on the particular conspiracy theory (Radnitz and Underwood, 2015). It may also be what mainstream media or others in one’s group (who are perhaps motivated by other desires) have come to believe, and if you have a wish to not deviate from that group, to fit in well and even strengthen the cohesion, you come to self-censor your contrary views. A person then, less interested by the truth of the matter may come to adapt the groups beliefs regarding a particular conspiracy theory. For a group or individual in which group cohesion matters more, there is an interest to adopt a position further from the position of the out-group, in order to establish a clear contrast between the in-groups’ beliefs and the out-groups’, in order to increase group cohesion still further. Most people will probably be motivated by group cohesion to some degree, but not at the total expense of the truth, or embracing something obviously false.

Consider the following case: Consider the following case: Sarah found herself in lower Manhattan on that dreadful day of the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers. What she observed was undoubtedly in a great need of an explanation for Sarah to be able to make sense of the seemingly senseless events. From watching the nightly news, she soon comes to believe the official explanation that Al-Qaeda had conspired in secret to commit the terrorist attacks. After considering the evidence that most journalist present her with, and what she knows of the historical context, Sarah accepts this explanation and most of the people in her in-group do too. Betty, on the other hand, has little interest in world-politics. But she knows about the 9/11 attacks, and she believes the same conspiracy theory explanation as Sarah, but only because most people in her in-group do. She has not considered the evidence, nor is she interested to entertain any other alternative explanation. She has little to no truth-seeking motivation for her belief in this conspiracy. She would not change her belief, even if she was presented with evidence to the contrary, since that would signal to her in-group that she is what they call “a crazy conspiracy theorist” (Harambam and Aupers 2017).

* 1. **Cognitive needs and truth seeking**

The empirical research has further show that there are many other psychological reasons besides from group cohesion that motivate a belief in a conspiracy theory. Sometimes these are caused by some cognitive or reasoning errors. Some conspiracy theories are such that people who, for some reason lack control and are intolerant to uncertainty and thus develop a distorted view of reality and embrace a conspiracy theory in order to feel more in control of their environment. Cognitive biases are also a main factor in the literature that has been correlated with belief in conspiracy theories. And so, compared to the motivation of maintaining group cohesion, a person may be motivated by wishful thinking, or a need for cognitive closure and come to believe certain conspiracy theories. These may range from common cognitive errors, to more rare and extreme disorders and psychiatry illnesses (Bortolotti, Ichino, and Mameli 2021).

Brotherton (2016) writes “We are all natural born conspiracy theorist”, and considering the particularist argument that most people that are historically or politically in tuned believe some conspiracy theory, makes it clear that conspiracy theorizing cannot only be a pathological illness, but rather part of normal cognition. Arguable, few reasonable persons would deny that conspiracies have been part of human societies for as long as we know, and continue to be. As a result, our cognitive abilities have evolved to detect such mischief in our midst (van Prooijen and Van Vugt 2018). Such abilities may be affected by various other functions of the human belief formation process, and cognitive needs may influence perception. There are those that are primarily motivated by epistemic aims, and who believe in a conspiracy theory simply (or mostly) to understand the world. A conspiracy theory could be the best and most probable explanation. Such an epistemically motivated person is determined to find out what the truth is, without having to question their own personal self-interests or feelings. As we have seen, the truth may not always be the most beneficial for a person to believe or commit to. In fact, it might make a person worse off, for example someone could prefer to live with a lie rather than knowing that their significant other is being unfaithful. These types of cognitive desires do not apply to the epistemically motivated person, who is more concerned with a search for truth, putting other elements aside, sometimes at the expense of personal relationships or suffering the mental toll of giving up one’s prior beliefs when ample evidence points to the contrary.

Consider the case of Eddy, an employee at the National Security Agency, who comes to believe that there are secrete and criminal activity conducted amongst the top officials, amounting to, what Eddy believes amounts to a conspiracy against citizens interests. Eddy, being primarily epistemically motivated at time *t*, came to have a belief that most people in his society do not have, (the conspiracy has high content-anomie at *t*). This could be a typical sort of motivation for conspiracy theories that are perhaps revealed by whistleblowers and journalist, who are less motivated by group cohesion, and more so on getting the story right. However, again it is entirely an empirical question of which are and which are not.

Consider further that John, who believes, much like Eddy, that the government is conspiring and spying on people. Further, John believes as part of a conspiracy theory that the government uses doves as drones to track him. John does not require any justification for his delusions and hallucinations, and his belief is far from both what his collogues and family, and the rest of societies norm of beliefs are. Johns’ belief seems motivated by his mental illness, and his diagnoses of grandiose delusions and schizophrenia rather than epistemic.[[8]](#footnote-8) Only empirical data will be able to give an indication if many whom believe the same conspiracy theory as John are perhaps motivated by the same factors as he is, and analysis of the diagram will reveal what the patterns are for this conspiracy theory, if there are any.

1. **Discussion**

In *Is a Unified Account of Conspiracy Theories Possible?* Huneman and Vorms (2018: 266) propose a critical assessment of conspiracy theory as a coherent object of investigation of various research approaches, such as psychology, epistemology and sociology. The account offers a framework on the sociological and cognitive basis for such belief. By focusing on conspiracy theories epistemological flaws, a critical dimension of conspiracy theory is missing, leading them to write that “Conspiracy theories are not theories, they are not an epistemologically coherent and unique set of views, they are not likely to fall under the same criteria of irrationality” and conclude that “The divide between rationality-based approaches and critique of irrationality as mirrored by conspiracy theorists, seems here to stay”. Even though I have argued that the divide is not entirely unavoidable, I am in agreement with the authors that it may prove to be that “assessing the rationality of conspiracist epistemology, and even reconstructing reasons for beliefs, cannot be done independently of a specific social structure empirically assessed”. The framework I have presented may well be a step in the direction of a unification in that it takes such social structures into account as well as individuals’ psychology and cognition.

Although other accounts have not necessarily aimed to provide a unified account, a comparison could be helpful to understand the many questions and misconceptions that I believe this framework can accommodate. One such account is found in “Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories (Ichino and Räikkä 2021) which propose a model that accounts for belief in conspiracy theories as non-doxastic, meaning people might not really believe in their truth or likelihood, but nevertheless support them. Their account examines the psychological mechanisms that may underly such non-doxastic support for conspiracy theories, and argue that (1) people may lend their support because they merely *hope* that the theories, they endorse are true, and (2) that by supporting conspiracy theories people communicate support to the group they want to belong to. The account is illuminating, and in many ways (1) and (2) are similar to aspects of the dimensions that I call group-cohesion and cognitive desires in this framework. It provides an explanation for why some strategies like increasing cognitive diversity ­– which is based on a doxastic assumption – may not work. Further, I believe one of the more valuable contributions of this account is that it shows that one must first make sure what kind of conspiracy theory we are dealing with, albeit their model is limited to the distinction of doxastic and non-doxastic conspiracy theories.

The account narrows the concept of conspiracy theories in a problematic way for our purposes, namely by taking conspiracy theories to be “actual or alleged conspiracies or plots [that] conflicts with the received explanation of the said event, providing an alternative to the “official view [and] offers insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation”, adding “an explanation that refers to a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory only if the relevant epistemic authorities, more or less unanimously, find the conspiracy claim strikingly implausible” (249-250). Much hinges on the assumption that there is such an epistemic authority on conspiracy theories or even that we would be able to identify who those are, which has proven to be a complex matter with currently no authorities view in the literature (Tsapos 2024; Dentith 2018). This definition of conspiracy theory thus limits the understanding of conspiracy beliefs and the applicability of the model in ways that the framework I have presented here does not. As the philosophical debate reveals, such a definition can only provide an account for a subgroup of conspiracy theories, namely those that are contrary to the official view. An adequate framework of conspiracy theories, satisfying the purposes I have defined here, should have an interest to take the particularist arguments seriously in order to avoid the issues that arise for the generalist. We should expect a unifying framework to accommodate for the doxastic and non-doxastic conspiracy theories of both official and unofficial conspiracy theories.

Another interesting model, provided by Grimes’ (2016) and (2021), aims to account for the common intuition that large scale conspiracy theories are more or less doomed to be exposed after a certain amount of time. The idea is that since humans, especially if there are many involved in a secret plot, are presumably just not capable of keeping it secrete or hidden forever. Although my framework does not provide the same mathematical sophistication as Grimes’ account does, it does capture this intuition in a modest, but perhaps more useful way. If we are able to identify where most such grand conspiracy theories are located in the diagram, we may soon learn why people are moved to adopt such a belief. And based on what the data would reveal we can make judgments as to the epistemic status of those beliefs and perhaps how it may change after *t*; by determining the motive for the believe in grand conspiracies, we might be able to infer something about their tenability.

Other accounts, such as Wood and Grey (2019), have sought to explain the inconsistencies that the empirical research produce. They seek to explain the divergent results regarding the positive correlation between right-wing authoritarianism and conspiracy belief, while other studies have found no such association between the two. Their study is an attempt to clarify the divergent results “by separating anti-establishment conspiracy theories, which challenge the existing social order, from pro-establishment CTs, which seek to justify and reinforce it against external threats”.

Other accounts further point at a discrepancy in the literature that raise paradoxical conclusions. For example, according to van Prooijen (2022) believing conspiracy theories is associated with deteriorated social relationships, while also being associated with support for populist and politically extreme movements. van Prooijen suggest that the paradox that arises from these findings – namely why so many endorse conspiracy theories if they are largely harmful for perceivers and their environment – can be understood in terms of the subsequent psychological benefits of their endorsements, both individual and group benefits. A unified account as I have presented here may dissolve the idea that these are paradoxes and inconsistent to begin with.

1. **Conclusion**

I have argued that the academic study of conspiracy theories and belief in them would benefit from a framework that could unify seemingly rivalry accounts, and answer questions such as why some conspiracy theories are seemingly used as propaganda, but are also reasonable explanations of historical and political events; and why it is, or indeed *if* it is, that most people in a community believe some conspiracy theory, while paranoid and schizophrenics believe others. Meanwhile, the framework is not normative in the sense that it does not say much about the normative conclusions we may draw from conspiracy theories. My account is a descriptive one, suggesting that there may be deeper, more fundamental structures of conspiracy belief and their correlations with conspiracy theories to be uncovered through empirical research.

I have argued that thus far, other accounts have focused on a sub-class of conspiracy theories, and are therefore found wanting. The particularist accounts do not fall in to this category, and the proposed framework in this paper fits best with the particularist account, focusing on the particularities of any given conspiracy theory. Instead of starting with a generalization, I have argued that the research will show if there are generalizations of conspiracy theories by where they tend to cluster and if there are any patterns, we can analyzable the correlations, instead of the reverse. In addition, by identified motivating factors for belief in a conspiracy theory we be able to find which conspiracy theories are problematic, perhaps even harmful, and what motives correlate most strongly with belief in them. This framework is a possible way forward for empirical research to identify the many dimensions of conspiracy belief.

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1. I take conspiracy theory to be a theory that explains an event as the result of a conspiracy against the interest of others (for other definitions see Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 2007; Dentith, 2018; Hagen, 2022; Tsapos, 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Being motivated by truth seeking is distinct from other practical motivations, and does not imply that it is truth-tracking. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Not to be confused with the person being alienated, but rather how social including or excluding (relative to some community) believing or subscribing to a particular conspiracy theory is, in relation to other more socially inclusive theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Tsapos (2023) for a discussion of other definitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Others with similar definitions are Goertzel (1994), Wood and Douglas (2013) Douglas and Sutton (2008) Wood and Gray (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Belief in conspiracy theories that are contrary to the official explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Krekó (2015) focus’ on conspiracy theories that are popular, malevolent, and what seem to be highly improbable in light of logical investigations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although even delusions may be responsive to evidence see Flores (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)