What Is Interesting about Conspiracy Theories?

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Abstract

Considering the recent explosion of literature across disciplines on the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy belief, the question of what is interesting about studying conspiracy theories might seem self-evident. Perhaps it is the very thing researchers are set to answer. Either way, what is not clear is that scholars, when they use the term 'conspiracy theory', are in fact interested in the same phenomenon; often conflating conspiracy theories with belief in conspiracy. Studying conspiracy theories before determining what we are interested to investigate is putting the cart before the horse. I argue that our interest will inform our research project, and determine the conceptualization of the term 'conspiracy theory', which in turn taints our interpretation of the contemporary exploratory research on the subject. If the interest is political, we might favor a pejorative definition; but if it is scientific, I argue we should favor a non-value laden, objective definition.

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Introduction

Considering the recent explosion of literature across disciplines on the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy belief, the question of what is interesting about studying conspiracy theories might seem self-evident. Perhaps it is the very thing researchers are set to answer. Either way, what is not clear is that scholars, when they use the term 'conspiracy theory', are in fact interested in the same phenomenon; often conflating conspiracy theories with belief in conspiracy. In philosophy the definition is debated, and a divide between two different intuitions has emerged. The divide is between those who consider conspiracy theories to be explanations of some event referencing a conspiracy as a salient cause – with some minor variations, such as the conspirators having malevolent intentions, or that it is a theory contrary to some official explanation (Keeley, 1999;

Pigden, 2007; Dentith, 2018b; Hagen, 2022). Then, there are those that take conspiracy theories to be mere fiction and false stories, akin to fake news, rumors and disinformation, which cannot be investigated in accordance with good research practice (Räikkä, 2023; Cassam, 2023; Napolitano and Reuter, 2021). Typically, the term should correspond to, and reflect the common language usage of conspiracy theories, which is argued to have a pejorative connotation. A defender of such a theory is irrational, pathological, and no matter the evidence they are presented with they will not update accordingly (Cassam, 2019; Boudry, 2021; Napolitano, 2021; Napolitano and Reuter, 2021).

Some philosophers have argued that there is a worry when taking the pejorative definition, namely that it undermines the fact that true conspiracies do happen (Coady, 2007, Dentith and Basham 2016). The worry of underrating – that real conspiracies may remain unnoticed due to undermining the fact that conspiracies happen by taking a pejorative definition – is, according to Räikkä (2023), unfounded. Räikkä argues that accepting a definition that is in line with the common language usage, one that reflects the pejorative connotation, "does not mean that individual conspiracy theories could not be investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices." The reason one can accept a pejorative definition without the worry of underrating, Räikkä argues, is that the relevant professionals, who are supposed to research conspiracy theories, are not affected by it. According to Räikkä (2023, 66), a professional researcher who knows that a hypothesis is understood to be implausible is "not influenced by this fact in their research practices and procedures". But rather, the researcher remains open to the possibility of investigating the hypothesis if, and "because there are some legitimate reasons to do so". Thus, a conspiracy theory is still an explanation that, at a very minimum, the relevant researchers can investigate if there are reasons to do so. However, the worry I am interested in here, is not the consequence the definition may have on democracies and the openness of societies, but instead the effect it has on the research, and the upshot from the field lacking a stable theoretical framework. I argue the interests in essentially different phenomenon is currently causing confusion in the literature.

In this paper I weigh the two leading intuitions in philosophy and highlight the consequences for research purposes. I analyze the position I label *Fake Conspiracy Theories*, that does not take conspiracy theories to be explanations, but rather as some pejorative; and I argue that relativizing the term will make it useless for objective research purposes (Wagner-Eggger et al., 2023). I then consider *Genuine Conspiracy Theories*, the position that conspiracy theories are explanations of events (either true or false), and find that such a definition is operationalizable, and lends itself to research questions informed by social epistemology, social cognition, argumentation- and decision theory, evolutionary biology, among others (Tsapos, forthcoming; Wrangham, 2019; Duetz, 2022). But first, I will provide a limited overview of the current state of the empirical research on conspiracy theories, as predominantly found in the social science and psychology literature.

The State of the Art

Many research projects initially take some version of the simple definition – that conspiracy theories are "explanations for important events that involve secret plots by powerful and malevolent groups" (Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017)[1] – as their working definition of conspiracy theories. Notably, theories that fall under this definition are not necessarily false (Moulding et al., 2016), although they are often focused on conspiracy theories that are contrary to the official explanation[2] (Douglas and Sutton, 2011; Douglas et al., 2016). However, researchers often tend to take their primary interest in the people who believe in conspiracy theories, rather than the epistemological status of the theories themselves (van Prooijen, 2022).

[1] Others with similar definitions are Goertzel (1994); Wood and Douglas (2013); Douglas and Sutton (2008); Wood and Gray (2019).

[2] Defining the official explanation is not unproblematic, and is itself ambiguous, often calling into question just which official explanation we are comparing to. However, this discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

These studies investigate correlations of personality traits, political orientation and socioeconomical features of conspiracy theorists, individuals who believe some particular conspiracy theories. 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, 2017, 113). Individuals' characteristics, personality traits, cognitive errors and pathologies, such as narcissism, illusory pattern perception, magical thinking and paranoia are found to correlate with believe in conspiracy theories (Bortolotti, Ichino, and Mameli 2021; Dyrendal, Kennair and Bendixen, 2021). Some studies don't exclude conspiracy theories as part of normal human psychology, arguing that such beliefs are built on necessary human capacities and political reasoning (Brotherton, 2016). Much research has focused on the political spectrum and identified politically right leaning individuals correlating with belief in conspiracy theories (Wood and Gray, 2019; Cosentino, 2020; Kalil et al., 2021); others have found that such beliefs are prevalent on both the left and right extremes of the political scale (Radnitz and Underwood, 2017; Enders, Smallpage and Lupton, 2020); others link populism in mainstream politics with conspiracy theories (Pirro and Taggart, 2023). The reason for such seemingly sprawling results is not clear. However, there is a lack of a coherent theoretical framework, which is a possible explanation for the many conclusions drawn from the data (Tsapos, forthcoming; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018).

The difference of interest from the epistemic status of conspiracy theories in the philosophical debate, and the interest of the individuals who believe or subscribe to conspiracy theories found in social science and psychology, further elicits the need for a scientific theory for conspiracy theory research. The psychology of conspiracy theories is not a question of which conspiracy theories are true or false – it is a question who does or does not believe in them (van Prooijen, 2018; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). But what exactly is it that people do or do not believe in? In other words, what are 'conspiracy theories' as a class that van Prooijen and his collogues are interested to study people's beliefs in? These questions are fundamental and effect

both the conclusions from exploratory data and future study design. It brings us back to square one – back to the philosophical debate about the term 'conspiracy theory', and what it designates (or picks out in the world). Next, I will analyze the position of *Fake conspiracy theories* and compare it to *Genuine conspiracy theories*.

Fake conspiracy theories

If conspiracy theories are theories about conspiracies, and the nightly news and history books are full of them, then pretty much everyone (who believes these theories) is a conspiracy theorist (Pigden, 1995). But if it is the case that we are all conspiracy theorist, it doesn't make much sense to say, as the research suggests, that people who believe in conspiracy theories are, for example, less educated and lack critical thinking skills, are more likely to be narcissistic and suffer from paranoid ideation (van Prooijen, 2017; Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Biddlestone, 2022). Compared to whom? Cassam (2020: 5) points out that if this is what we mean by conspiracy theories then "the psychology of 'conspiracy theories' is starting to look like a total waste of time". Tsapos (2023) has identified this as the problem of theoretical fruitfulness. It would be like defining a pyromaniac as someone who has ever lit a fire, or intelligence in a way that makes everyone intelligent. As Joseph Uscinski puts it: '… since everyone believes at least one conspiracy theory, the term is meaningless' (Uscinski, 2020, 34). So, what are researchers taking about if not about theories about individuals collaborating in secret to carry out usually some suspect, malevolent deeds?

Proponents of *Fake conspiracy theories* have suggested some alternative conceptualizations, which doesn't consider conspiracy theories to be *just* explanations of some events. One approach, for example, suggests that the first step is to consult the folk language use of the term, and conform to it. Napolitano and Reuter (2021) present empirical data from a corpus analysis revealing that the predominant use of the term is pejorative and evaluative. Step two, then, is to determine how – informed by *some* language's common usage of the term – to operationalize the term. Of course, such common language usage may vary and change over time and across context and culture

(Husting and Orr, 2007). Nevertheless, researchers claim to have identified certain common features that the term refers to.

One dominant account is Giulia Napolitano's (2021), who much like van Prooijen and the psychologist, turns her interest to the individuals who believe conspiracy theories. Napolitano explains that "contrary to those who argue that conspiracy theories are just explanations of events that involve conspiracies", she maintains that "conspiracy theories are not theories (or explanations) at all. Instead," she continues, "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" (Napolitano, 2021: 82-83). According to Napolitano, then, the identifying feature that is observed in people who defend conspiracy theories, is that "no matter what evidence we present them against their theory, they'll find a way to dismiss it". Thus, a pejorative definition of 'conspiracy theory' pertains to conspiracy theories as somehow faulty reasoning, an attitude of the believer rather than a feature of the theory itself.[3] For example, according to Napolitano's account, those who believe conspiracy theories don't update their belief according to the evidence, and the believer's belief is evidence "insulated". As such, it makes conspiracy theories epistemically problematic. That evidence insulated belief is, according to Napolitano, "a belief that is immune to being disconfirmed by the kind of evidence that is available in normal circumstances" (87-88). I take Napolitano's definition of 'conspiracy theory' as referring to the phenomenon of being psychologically resistant to changing one's beliefs when presented with information to the

[3] Cassam (2020) argues that we should define conspiracy theories as right-wing propaganda. He writes that conspiracy theories are "a conscious and deliberate strategy designed to advance a political cause", in particular "to advance right-wing political causes" (2020, 7 and 9). Thus, the intention of the person(s) putting forth the conspiracy theory is in focus in Cassam's account. However, as a pejorative definition it will have the same consequence as Napolitano's and other *Fake conspiracy theory* definitions (for a wider critic on Cassam's account see Tsapos (2023); Hagen (2022); Dentith (2022).

contrary. A closer analysis of the definition of the term will help determine its theoretical usefulness.

Napolitano states that 'conspiracy theory' refers to *a particular way of holding a belief in the existence of a conspiracy.*[4] The definition is not unambiguous. One reading of her definition verbatim et literatim, says something like (a) "*S* holds a belief in a particular way – a self-insulating way – and there exists a conspiracy". This reading of 'conspiracy theory' would apply to the following case: if *S* believes in a self-insulating way that the cup of water in front of her contains water, while there exists some conspiracy at the university campus, then *S's* belief that there is water in her cup is a conspiracy theory. This reading of Napolitano's definition is clearly absurd, which suggests a more charitable interpretation; such as (b) "S holds a belief about a conspiracy in a particular (a self-insulating) way". Thus, an example of (b) is: if *S* believes in a self-insulating way that the cup of water in front of her contains poisoned water, and she believes that her collogues conspired to place the cup on her desk to kill her, then *S's* belief that there is poisoned water in her cup is a conspiracy theory. The distinguishing factor between (b) and the simple definition – that a conspiracy theory is an explanation of an event by referencing a malicious conspiracy as the salient cause – is that according to (b) the focus is on the belief and that it is held in a particular way, it is evidence insulated.

However, this particular way to hold a belief is more commonly known as dogmatic belief. The research literature on dogmatism is well-established and rich, containing far too much to discuss in detail here. But a succinct way of defining dogmatis is, according to Rokeach and Fruchter (1956) that it refers to "total systems of beliefs and disbeliefs which are closed or resist change". In *The nature and meaning of dogmatism* (1954) Rokeach defines, among many others, one feature of dogmatism, which is for all practical purposes, the same as Napolitano's feature of

[4] There is an obvious category mistake between conspiracy theory and conspiracy belief, which has been identified by Duetz (2023).

conspiracy theory, namely holding on to a belief in such a way that any new information against it is resisted. According to Rokeach, the greater the dogmatism the greater the denial of events contradicting or threatening one's belief system (e.g., on grounds of "face absurdity" that the true facts are not accessible, that the only available sources of information are biased because they are seen to emanate from the disbelief system, and so on). Further, the problem of dogmatism is not necessarily restricted to the political and religious spheres. It can be observed in other realms of intellectual and cultural activity—in philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences. There are numerous scales for measuring dogmatism for use in various studies, further cementing its theoretical validity as identifying a distinct concept (Troldahl and Powell, 1965). I submit that it is the dogmatic characteristic of the belief Napolitano describes that is interesting, and the term 'conspiracy theory' is superfluous. If there is some additional explanatory capacity, or explanatory value of the term 'conspiracy theory' as defined by Napolitano, it remains to be shown.

A further concern for Napolitano's account is that by limiting her conception to only the problems of self-insulated conspiracy beliefs, as argued by Duetz (2022), her account automatically disregards other problematic aspects of the epistemology of conspiracy theories. *Fake conspiracy theories* more broadly then, will be limited in research that is relative to whatever is pejorative at a particular time and context, arguably not a desirable research program.

Genuine conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories as explanations are more promising. They can be false or true at a given time, ultimately however, it is an empirical question (at least in theory). Whether they are all false or all true is a contingent feature, rather than a necessary one. If all conspiracy theories prove to be false, it would not call for a reevaluation and reconceptualization of the term (for research purposes), since it would be a category mistake to assume that something contingently false is necessarily

false. The ontology of conspiracy theories as explanations thus shapes and informs the empirical research.

This does not imply that they are scientific theories. Although, just like scientific explanations and historical explanations they are also based on observations; and much like historical explanations, they are based in the context of history (past events) and focus on the motives of social agents (Jacott et al., 2013). Historical explanations are often based on perception, reason and emotions. A person's perception of different events depends on the state in which her mind is, at that particular point in time.[5] A person who is brought up with one particular set of values will have a different perception from one who has been brought up elsewhere with another set of values. Alper et al., (2022: 610), for example, showed that corruption moderates how political orientation predicts conspiracy beliefs. Further, they argue that "this is because corruption increases perceived plausibility of conspiracies, and everyone across the political spectrum becomes similarly likely to adopt a conspiracy mentality". One may perceive conspiracy theories to be more or less true, depending on various psychological factors, emotions and environmental factors. Thus, conspiracy theories as explanations allows for pragmatical considerations, the notion of argumentation and social cognition among other useful and applicable ways to study the phenomena.

Conspiracy theories as *Genuine conspiracy theories* – as explanations – also provide us with insight from an evolutionary biological perspective, and how our theories measure up with what is being learned in areas such as evolutionary biology, psychology, and neuroscience. Consider Wrangham (2019)'s language-based conspiracy hypothesis. The hypothesis provides a possible explanation for the evolution of reduced reactive aggression in human self-domestication. The hypothesis, in short, says that the human ability to conspire to kill off alpha males is responsible for reactive aggression (impulsive, non-proactive aggression) having been selected against, and as

[5] For example, see Cohen, (2000). *Karl Marx's theory of history: a defence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

a result declined in evolutionary time. To have the ability to conduct these plans – conspiracies to execute alpha males who used reactive aggression to attempt to dominate any challenges to his social power – the killers (the conspirators) must have shared explicit intentions with each other, a capacity unique to humans (Tomasello, 2016). The evolutionary language-based conspiracy hypothesis can provide explanation to why certain circumstances, and not others, lead to heightened conspiracy theory beliefs, for example when faced with a lack of control (Whitson and Galinsky, 2008). It can provide insight to the correlations found between people who experience (a fear of) social exclusion, and stigmatization and why they come to believe conspiracy theories (Schnepf et al., 2021; Lantian et al., 2018). It may also provide possible explanations for why and how conspiracy theories are and can be useful for social groups to mobilise, since it was useful in getting rid of the perceived "aggressive bullies" (Wrangham, 2019; Debnath et al., 2023; Tsapos, forthcoming). A pejorative definition suggested by Napolitano (2021) would not be able to explain the language-based conspiracy hypothesis on evolutionary pressure for human self-domestication.

There are many other possible interesting features to investigate if the simple definition is available to us. van Prooijen, Spadaro and Wang (2022) found that conspiracy theories have the ability to "erode the fabric of society by harming people's interpersonal, within-group, and between-group relationships" by causing distrust and suspicion of institutions. As such, to determine and understand the unique features of conspiracy theories (if any) we must be able to compare them to other explanations that do not include a conspiracy. There is also the moral evaluative aspects of conspiracy theories, which can best be studied with a scientific, value-neutral definition; in which case the broader questions and methods from social cognition and social epistemology are available to us and can provide interesting insights, by correlating belief in conspiracy theories with trust, and how trust affects our beliefs about the world (Levy, 2023).

Conclusion

I have considered the two main contenders in the philosophical debate for a definition and conceptualization of the term 'conspiracy theory', *Fake* and *Genuine conspiracy theories*. An overview of the empirical research literature shows that various socio-economic and personality factors correlate with conspiracy theory belief. Just how we interpret this data, and how the studies are designed will depend on, and be reflected by the interest we have in conspiracy theories as a phenomenon, which in turn calls for defining the term itself to correspond to our interest. I have argued that if we take conspiracy theories to be pejorative, the position of *Fake conspiracy theories* as suggested by philosophers such as Napolitano, Reuter, Räikkä and Cassam among other, it will fail to be of much empirical value. The pejorative definitions provided thus far falls short, and do not distinguish 'conspiracy theory' from other already well-established concepts, making the concept of conspiracy theory superfluous. However, if our interest is to operationalize the term, having a scientific theory for 'conspiracy theory' (not just a description of the contemporary use of the term), to explain and interpret objective research about conspiracy theories and belief in them as a distinct phenomenon, conspiracy theories as explanations are more promising. Thus, academic research should steer away from what is currently causing confusion and relativization of the subject, and head towards a scientific and objective research program about conspiracy theories and belief in them.

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