

Social Epistemology

A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsep20>

Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?

Melina Tsapos

To cite this article: Melina Tsapos (2023): Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?, Social Epistemology, DOI: [10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695](https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172695>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Feb 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Who is a Conspiracy Theorist?

Melina Tsapos 

Philosophy, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The simplest and most natural definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ leads us to the conclusion that we are all conspiracy theorists. Yet, I claim that most of us would not self-identify as such. In this paper I call this the problem of self-identification. Since virtually everyone emerges as a conspiracy theorist, the term is essentially theoretically fruitless. It would be like defining intelligence in a way that makes everyone intelligent. This raises the problem for theoretical fruitfulness, i.e. the problem of how to define the concept in a theoretically fruitful way. I suggest that these problems are currently causing confusion in the literature and present us with a dilemma, the *conspiracy definition dilemma*. I will present an analysis of the literature and what are on my reconstruction the solutions on offer, and argue that none is satisfactory. Either a) the solution will solve the problem of self-identification or b) it will potentially provide a theoretical fruitful definition, but no account does both.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 December 2022
Accepted 22 January 2023

KEYWORDS

Conspiracy theory;
conspiracy theorists;
explication; conceptual
engineering

1. Introduction

Obviously, conspiracy theories are nothing new, and neither are conspiracy theorists. I wasn’t alive when the conspiracy theories during the Second World War flourished, nor when the conspiracy theories about communists spread in the Cold War era. But there hasn’t been a shortage of contemporary conspiracy theories since then either, nor a shortage of people who believe in them, such as the numerous conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks, not to mention the official story about a small group in Afghanistan secretly plotting the events, which is a conspiracy theory itself.

Presuming that we know what ‘conspiracy theory’ means, the examples above should be fairly unproblematic to accept as such. But in fact, they are not. One thing that might not have gone unnoticed is that I included the official story of the 9/11 Attacks. Some may be surprised by this. Others might even take offense if they are called a conspiracy theorist for believing the official story or explanation for the event; and this is at the heart of the problem I wish to discuss in this paper. In the following section, I will describe the simple definition of ‘conspiracy theory’, as found in most dictionaries and reiterated by prominent philosophers, and present arguments for why we are virtually all conspiracy theorists. I shall then go on to present two problems that emerge from this counter-intuitive conclusion. Next, I show that existing conceptions cannot solve both. One must choose to solve one or the other, thus giving rise to a dilemma, which I call *the conspiracy definition dilemma*. I finally conclude that what path we choose will ultimately depend on our interest in the matter.

2. Two Problems for the Simple Account

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary provides us with the following ordinary language definition of conspiracy theory: ‘a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators’ (Merriam-Webster 2021a). Similar definitions are found in philosophy (Pigden 1995; Dentith 2021), and I will refer to the family of such accounts as providing a simple definition of conspiracy theory; *Simple CT* for short:

Simple CT: T is a conspiracy theory if and only if T is a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances where a conspiracy is cited as a salient cause.¹

Further, the same dictionary defines conspiracy theorist as ‘a person who proposes or believes in a conspiracy theory’, (2021b) which is in line with Pigden’s definition of the same concept as ‘someone who subscribes to a conspiracy theory’ (2006, 222). Using Pigden’s terminology, I will call this *Simple C-ST* for short:

Simple C-ST: P is a conspiracy theorist if and only if P subscribes to a conspiracy theory.²

I will call the combination of Simple CT and the Simple C-ST the *Simple Account*. According to the simple account, those of us who believe that an event occurred due to a conspiracy, including the 9/11 Attacks and the Watergate Scandal, would be conspiracy theorists. One could even argue – as Pigden does – that everybody turns out to be a conspiracy theorist:

Premise I: Unless you believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist (since history and the news are choc-a-block- with conspiracies).

Premise II: If you do believe that the reports of history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist (since you presumably believe that somebody has conspired to fake them).

Conclusion: You are a conspiracy theorist (2016, 18).

I shall call this the *Counter Intuitive Conclusion*, or CIC.³

The problem now arises that although we are all, on the one hand, conspiracy theorists on the simple account, arguably most of us would not cheerfully self-identify as such. Anecdotally, I have tried this on many different crowds, and I have found very few who would answer the question ‘Are you a conspiracy theorist?’ in the affirmative. Some empirical support for this claim can be found in Harambani and Aupers (2017). This is the *Problem of Self-Identification*,⁴ or PSI for short:

PSI: If

- (i) we assume the simple account and
- (ii) we grant the CIC argument, and
- (iii) we agree most of us would not self-identify as a conspiracy theorist.

Then all of us are conspiracy theorists, but few would identify themselves as such.

A second problem follows, arising from the fact that because everyone is a conspiracy theorist, the construct is essentially theoretically useless.⁵ 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’ (2020, 34). I call this the *Problem of Theoretical Fruitfulness*, or PTF for short.

PTF raises the questions of how empirical investigation into conspiracy theorists in psychology and political science is even possible (see for instance, van Prooijen 2018; Brotherton 2015). Specifically, if all of us are conspiracy theorists, how could psychologists compare the psychological traits of conspiracy theorists from non-conspiracy theorists (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham 2010)? How can it be argued that educational levels have a measurable effect on the likelihood of being a conspiracy theorist (van Prooijen 2017)? How can we conduct research that concludes that people who experience illusory pattern perceptions due to lack of control are more

likely to believe in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018)? It becomes difficult to see how a psychologist like van Prooijen can study ‘who does and doesn’t believe in [conspiracy theories]’ in a meaningful way (2018, 8). The problem here is that if the simple account is correct, we cannot pick out conspiracy theorists to study if the class of who we study includes almost everyone. The factors and predispositions social scientists’ study are restricted to a class of person; they appear to be factors or predispositions all of us share under the simple account.

Before moving on to the next question, let us clarify what a theoretically fruitful concept is. There are different traditions in concept formation. According to a recent reference work (Cordes and Siegwart 2021), Carnap’s (1950) exposition remains the main reference point for work on scientific concept formation (‘explication’) and much later work is in his spirit (Gerring 1999; Koch 2019; Brun 2017). Among Carnap’s criteria, the requirement of fruitfulness plays a key role, where a fruitful concept is one that is ‘useful for the formulation of many universal statements (empirical laws in the case of a nonlogical concept, logical theorem in the case of a logical concept)’ (1950, 7). Among his further criteria are similarity to the pre-systematic concept, exactness and simplicity. A further important principle, identified by Gerring, is that of differentiation. Differentiation urges us to ask ‘how differentiated are the instances and the attributes (from other most-similar concepts)?’ (1999, 367). As Gerring explains, ‘[a] concept’s differentiation derives from the clarity of its borders within a field of similar terms’, so that ‘a poorly bounded concept has definitional borders which overlap neighboring concepts’. (1999, 376) Hanna Pitkin illustrates the importance of this principle in carving-nature-at-the-joints, with the color green. She writes: ‘the meaning of an expression is delaminated by what might have been said instead, but wasn’t. Green leaves off where yellow and blue begin, so the meaning of “green” is delimited by the meanings of “yellow” and “blue”’ (1972, 11).

The simple account raises the problem, on the one hand, that most of us come out as conspiracy theorists but few would readily identify as such (PSI), and on the other, that theoretical fruitfulness is jeopardized if the class of who we study includes almost everyone (PTF). So, with this in mind, in the next section we will take a closer look at the state of the art. We will review the solutions to PSI and PTF currently available in the literature, something which might involve some reconstruction on my part, as the problems have not previously been stated in precisely these terms.

3. The Currently Available Solutions

In the literature there are two main ways to solve the problems posed by PSI and PTF. The first is to (a) complicate the account of Simple CT, while keeping Simple C-ST fixed. In other words, we either add to or reconstruct the definition of a conspiracy theory as it stands. The second alternative is to (b) engineer the account or definition of Simple C-ST while keeping Simple CT fixed. An additional solution would be to do both, but that would arguably be excessive; simplicity is to be preferred here. As Carnap pointed out, a certain degree of conservatism is a virtue in reconstructive enterprises to preserve a connection to the original concept. At least, these are the options that should be investigated before more radical approaches are considered.

There are currently many accounts in the literature as to what a conspiracy theory is and who then is a conspiracy theorist, but as it turns out, many are similar in kind and can be usefully aggregated into a few main types, or at least so I will argue. In the final section, I will give arguments for why other accounts not covered here are also unlikely to avoid the dilemma that I am driving at.

3.1. Reconstructing Simple CT

Starting with Simple CT, one way to reconstruct the concept of a conspiracy theory is to add the qualification that the explanation has to be different from the official view or accepted narrative of the event under consideration. Another variant of this is to qualify that the explanation is held by other people, but not by the one using the concept. I begin with a typical example of the first strategy.

Consider the following definition in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Conspiracy theory, an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events as the result of the actions of a small, powerful group. Such explanations reject the accepted narrative surrounding those events; indeed, the official version may be seen as further proof of the conspiracy (Reid 2021).

Simplifying, the main idea may be stated as follows:

Not-Official CT: T is a conspiracy theory if and only if T is a conspiracy theory according to Simple CT, and T does not agree with the officially accepted narrative.⁶

This is an account that is potentially fruitful because not everyone is a conspiracy theorist in this sense, which was previously stated is a minimum requirement for a theoretically fruitful concept. In the light of the discussion above about what a good concept is, we can clarify how Not-official CT specifically satisfies the PTF. If conspiracy theories are explanations that are not the accepted account of events, and a conspiracy theorist is someone who believes in such a theory (by Simple C-ST), that would indeed be potentially fruitful to take into account in an experimental design. Hypothetically we could find correlations between a feature of a subject and a belief in a conspiracy theory in the sense of Not-official CT. Such a definition may qualify as a universal statement or a universal law in Carnap's sense. For the sake of argument, we can grant that exactness and differentiation are also satisfied to a sufficient degree. However, the definition will not simultaneously solve PSI, since it does not resolve why most people are unwilling to self-identify as conspiracy theorists. Under the Not-Official CT definition, nothing prevents one, at least in principle, from professing that they disagree with the accepted narrative.

Another example of the same type of solution is to focus on the term 'theory' in 'conspiracy theory' and note that this term is often used to signal doubt, as when someone says 'but it is just a theory'. Accordingly, van Prooijen argues that once a conspiracy theory is part of the history books and is accepted by the majority, it becomes a proven conspiracy, and we can no longer call it a conspiracy theory (2018). In contrast, the definition of theory in a scientific context is simply a set of propositions, whether established or not, such as 'the big bang theory' or 'quantum field theory'. However, I argue that if we consider the 'just a theory' interpretation as referring to a non-established set of facts, this becomes yet another version of Not-official CT⁷ and as such potentially solves PTF but not PSI.

The second type of reconstruction is what I call the Partisan CT. Used as an umbrella term, Partisan CT is similar to Not-official CT in that it reconstructs Simple CT by referring to a standard held; but in the case of Not-official CT the standard is the official narrative. In this case the standard is oppositional to one's own views: a conspiracy theory is what other people in opposition believe. We can find several arguments that construct the term conspiracy theory so that, by definition, only other people than oneself subscribe to it. Hence, the central difference between Partisan CT and Not-official CT is that the former is speaker-relative. It can be stated like this:

Partisan CT: T is a conspiracy theory relative to S (the speaker), if and only if T is a conspiracy theory according to Simple CT and S* subscribes to T, S does not subscribe to T, and S* is in S's outgroup.

This definition, unlike Not-official CT, does provide us with a solution for PSI. In other words, Partisan CT solves the self-identification problem since it becomes incoherent to self-ascribe as a conspiracy theorist by definition. After all, no one is in his or her outgroup. However, it fails to solve PTF. I will use Cassam's (2019) account as an example of a Partisan CT in my argument to this conclusion, although I believe that a more general criticism can be extrapolated from what I say about Cassam's account, without depending on any of the particulars of that account.

The main component that Cassam's account adds to Simple CT is that conspiracy theories are 'first and foremost forms of political propaganda' and their 'real function is to promote a political agenda'. (2019, 6–7) Cassam further claims that they are 'contrarian by nature' (2019, 19), by being contrary to the official view (if there is one) and by being always contrarian. Note, however, that defining the

term ‘conspiracy theory’ in this way presupposes a standard of assessment regarding what is or isn’t contrarian. On one reading, Cassam’s definition presupposes a standard that is used by Cassam and his social group, in which case the account becomes an ‘out-group’ account, falling under Partisan CT. For example, Cassam’s conceptualization classifies conspiracy theories to be, as he writes, ‘part of a predominantly [...] right-wing political tradition’ (2019, 78–79). In this case, the account runs the risk of potentially lacking any predictive validity, and could very well turn out to be empirically unproductive; subscribing to a conspiracy theory in the sense of Partisan CT would suggest little to nothing about a person, amounting to little more than someone else classifying you as such.

3.2. *Reconstructing Simple C-ST*

The term ‘conspiracy theorist’ has varied uses. When it is used in the most general sense, to indicate that an individual believes in a conspiracy theory (Simple C-ST), the term is rather meaningless if a conspiracy theory is defined according to Simple CT, as shown above. Another use could be to refer to people who investigate, further expand upon or even invent conspiracy theories. Some use the term to label individuals who use conspiracy theories for personal or political gain. In contrast, van Prooijen proposes that ‘conspiracy theories are rooted in a subjective psychological state that has been inherent to human condition since the start of humanity’ (2018, 22). Societal crises, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, wars, revolutions, financial crisis, disease epidemics, and the like, and the fear and uncertainty that such events make people more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. On this view, conspiracy theories are rooted in people’s desire to understand and make sense of the harmful events they perceive in society. A conspiracy theorist is, accordingly, someone with a mindset searching for explanations, the suggestion being that it is associated with epistemic motivation ‘to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity by forming quick judgments’ (Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska 2017, 109), also referred to as a need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). I call this reconstruction of Simple C-ST Sense-making C-ST, which could be stated as follows:

Sense-making C-ST: S is a conspiracy theorist if and only if S is experiencing an event, E, which causes S to desire to understand and make sense of E in terms of a conspiracy.

According to van Prooijen, if the underlying sense-making function of conspiracy and supernatural beliefs is similar it follows that endorsing one of these beliefs should be diagnostic for the likelihood of endorsing another of these beliefs’ (2018, 37). Thus, we might want to add that S has the desire to understand more than one event in terms of a conspiracy to the definition of Sense-making C-ST, but it will make no difference for our argument here.

Sense-making C-ST potentially provides theoretical fruitfulness⁸, since it can produce interesting and meaningful research about the circumstances under which a person typically believes in conspiracy theories. It is a concept that can at least be empirically tested. On the other hand, I do not see how it would provide us with any insight into solving PSI. A person might very well self-identify as a conspiracy theorist per Sense-making C-ST, in which case we have not made any progress explaining why most of us would hesitate (even refuse) to do so. There is nothing inherently suspect about trying to make sense of events in terms of a conspiracy.

Yet another type of account of a conspiracy theorist concerns a person who does not update or retract the belief in the conspiracy theory when new belief-contravening evidence presents itself (Uscinski 2020; van Prooijen 2018; Cassam 2019; Popper, 1945). The argument is that conspiracy theories are non-falsifiable, not inherently, but because lack of evidence for the conspiracy is taken as evidence in its support. Therefore, according to the conspiracy theorist, there is no evidence that would disprove their claims. A conspiracy theorist can never be disproven. As Uscinski notes, the belief is such that evidence does not stop the ‘committed conspiracy theorist from moving the goal post’ (2020, 27). We can state this concept as follows:

Moving goal-post C-ST: *S* is a conspiracy theorist if and only if no evidence can ever disprove *S*'s belief in a conspiracy theory.

Where does it leave us with regards to PSI? Naturally, most of us are unwilling to admit that, no matter the evidence presented, we would resist giving up our beliefs. The sociologist Klintman (2019) discusses this unwillingness from an evolutionary perspective in connection with his theory of knowledge resistance, arguing that it is 'in all of us' (see also Olsson 2021, 220). Based on these considerations, it seems unlikely that anybody would self-identify as Moving goal-post C-ST, in which case we have an account that solves PSI.

According to Dentith, it could be interesting to study such beliefs. Whilst Dentith admits that there might not be any such conspiracy theorists, writing that '[i]t is not obvious *all* conspiracy theorists are conspiracists, let alone that there really are many, if any, conspiracists' (2018, 338), the general worry remains: it seems there is an overlap with already well-established concepts in the science community, such as cognitive dissonance and cognitive biases. The notion of cognitive dissonance was first studied by the psychologist Leon Festinger and his colleagues (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956). The investigation arose from an observational study of a cult, which believed that a flood would destroy the earth. The members, particularly the very committed ones, gave up their homes and jobs to be ready when the destruction occurred. Festinger was interested to find out what happened to them when the flood failed to materialize. While some fringe members were more inclined to recognize their mistaken beliefs, other members were more inclined to re-interpret the evidence, so that they would never be proven wrong. Festinger came to use the term cognitive dissonance and studied it for a range of different phenomena (smoking, raising children, racism, political affiliation, and much more) (Festinger 1957).

In addition to cognitive dissonance, dogmatism and delusional belief could perhaps also figure as related, and already well-established, psychological concepts. For example, delusional beliefs are defined in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders as 'based on incorrect inference about external reality' and 'firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary' (Bortolotti 2020, 1). Hence, the Moving goal-post C-ST conception could also be substituted, at least in part, by the concept of delusional belief. I am not suggesting that this is an exhaustive list of all possible concepts that may play a similar role that is intended for the concept of the conspiracy theorist but possibly some of the more prominent examples.

Potentially, then, we could replace the concept of Moving goal-post C-ST with an already existing one. However, a requirement for a concept to be theoretically fruitful, as we have stated earlier, is differentiation. And this conceptualization would, of course, imply that the principle of differentiation is being violated. If the concept of a conspiracy theorist according to Moving goal-post C-ST cannot be differentiated from other already established terms, the definition runs the risk of being superfluous. A possible objection here would be that the differentiating factor is that we are only talking about delusional beliefs that specifically concern conspiracy theories. But then the question whether anything holds for this subcategory that does not hold for the category itself. If not, then the subcategory does not add anything in terms of theoretical fruitfulness.

There is one last account we will consider briefly in this analysis. It is that of a conspiracy theorist who views everything that happens in the world through a filter of one grand evil conspiracy (or greater pattern of evil conspiracies). This account has primarily been advocated by the political scientist Michael Barkun. He describes a conspiracy theorist as someone who view[s] history as controlled by massive, demonic forces' (2013, 3). This reconstruction of Simple C-ST can be stated as:

Dark-filter C-ST: *S* is a conspiracy theorist if and only if *S* has a world view in which nothing happens by accident, everything being part of a grand design by powerful people with malevolent intent, and *S* sees patterns of evil in everything and everywhere.

According to Barkun, 'the essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil', (2013, 2) which results in a worldview characterized by this belief. The definition for how the

conspiracy theorist worldview is manifested is stated in three main principles: 1) nothing happens by accident; 2) nothing is as it seems; and 3) everything is connected. Barkun explains further that ‘because the conspiracists’ world has no room for accident, pattern is believed to be everywhere, albeit hidden from plain view. Hence the conspiracy theorist must engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections (2013, 4).

Defining the conspiracy theorist as somebody who has a certain characteristic affecting all aspects of his or her worldview makes it potentially difficult to operationalize whether a given subject falls under the concept. One could also question whether there are such subjects in the first place. For similar reasons, Pigden (1995) argued, in response to Popper (1945), whose conceptualisation of a conspiracy theorist closely corresponded to that provided by Dark-filter C-ST, that ‘it is a theory no sane person maintains’ (1995, 3). For these reasons the concept is unlikely to be theoretically fruitful and, for obvious reasons, it also fails to explain anything useful regarding the self-identification problem.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that the simplest definition of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ leads us to conclude that we are all conspiracy theorists. Yet, nobody or very few of us would readily self-identify as such and the question also arises how such a concept could be theoretically fruitful. I have shown that these considerations present us with the conspiracy definition dilemma, which remains unsolved after analyzing the current literature and the solutions available. The solutions on offer will either solve the problem of self-identification or the problem of theoretical fruitfulness, but no account does both.

It might be thought that it was only to be expected that no account solves both the self-identification problem and the empirical fruitfulness problem, since every account either construes conspiracy theory or conspiracy theorist as a derogative term or not. In the former case, the self-identification problem is solved, but the fruitfulness problem is not. In the latter, the fruitfulness problem is at least potentially solved, but the self-identification problem is not. Perhaps one would reason that the right distinction would be between a value-laden and a descriptive concept. This objection is indeed a serious one since it potentially trivializes one point I wish to make in this paper; namely, that the insolvability of the conspiracy definition dilemma reflects a more fundamental conflict in our thinking. However, I don’t believe the objection is valid.

For even a non-derogative account of conspiracy theory can solve the self-identification problem, as the Partisan CT account demonstrates. This account construes conspiracy theories as something that others hold on to, not oneself and one’s ingroup. This is by itself not a derogative account in the sense of expression of low opinion. There is no value term in the definition.⁹ It is another thing that considering someone to be in one’s outgroup is often *correlated* with a discriminatory characteristic, but there is no necessary connection between the two. If this is true, it shows that solving the self-identification problem need not involve invoking a derogative definition of conspiracy theory or theorist.

Rather, the deeper cause of the dilemma can be described as follows. The more neutral a term is and the more operationalized we make it when we try to carve nature at its joints, the easier it is to identify someone as a conspiracy theorist. And the more difficult it will be to refuse to self-identify as one if the conditions apply. Conversely, the more the definition contains vague or subjective or ideological terms, the more difficult it becomes to determine who falls under the concept, and correspondingly the more resistant people will be to using the term for self-identification.

So, what should we do? If we wish to use the terms in a rhetorical sense, we would like to have an account that solves the self-identification problem. Only then will it be possible to consistently use the term exclusively for our political or ideological opponents. If, by contrast, our interests are mainly scientific, we will be more interested in solving the problem of theoretical fruitfulness. In order to do empirical work, we need empirically fruitful concepts.¹⁰ Finally, I believe that my analysis suggests that efforts by social scientists to define conspiracy theory and theorist as an empirically fruitful concept have thus far not been entirely successful. Prominent accounts seem to either coincide with or collapse into

already well-established concepts within cognitive psychology, thus failing the differentiation test for being a valuable addition to our conceptual toolbox. However, I do not exclude the possibility of other conceptualizations that are both theoretically fruitful and suitably differentiable. Future work will tell.

Notes

1. Simple CT, as stated here, follows the philosophical tradition, which typically does not include the condition of 'powerful conspirators' (see Hagen 2018; Dentith 2016, 2018); although some proponents of this definition do accept certain conditions, for example that the conspirators are 'morally suspect', 'nefarious' or 'powerful individuals' (Keeley 2007; Pigden 2006).
2. I assume, minimally, that a person subscribing to or believing in a conspiracy theory has some level of commitment to it (Sartwell 1991, 158). For a non-doxastic account see Ichino and Rääkkä (2020).
3. An exemption would be a person completely uninterested or purblind to current affairs or history.
4. To self-identify as a conspiracy theorist is simply picking oneself out as such. Hence, I am not using the term in the sociological sense of group identity. Other terms would be possible instead, such as self-attribution, but for simplicity I made this choice of term.
5. In this essay I'm not discussing the practical usefulness of definitions such as usefulness for the promotion of social justice.
6. Here I follow Coady and define the official stories (or narrative) as 'a version of events propagated by an institution which has power to influence what is widely believed' (Coady 2003, 208). This includes, but is not limited to governments; other sources include media and the academy. For an extensive discussion on the difference between official stories and alternative narratives, see Hagen (2018).
7. For an elaboration of this point see Duetz (this issue).
8. Here I assume for the sake of the argument that not everyone would qualify as a conspiracy theorist on Sense-Making C-ST so that the minimal requirement on theoretical fruitfulness is satisfied.
9. A person may for example identify with their family, religious group, political party and so on. In social psychology ingroup and outgroup is not viewed as a normative distinction. According to the minimal group paradigm, the psychological membership of one's ingroup is associated with a variety of phenomenon, which can include ingroup favoritism to achieve positive distinctiveness, which do not necessarily include any derogatory or discriminatory characteristics towards the outgroup. For a more detailed discussion see Tajfel (1970); Tajfel and Billig (1971); and Tajfel et al. (1974).
10. For other discussions in this issue around the conceptualisation of both 'conspiracy theory' and 'conspiracy theories' see Duetz (forthcoming), Keeley (forthcoming), Pfeifer (forthcoming), Pigden (forthcoming), and Shields (forthcoming).

Acknowledgments

I want to thank M Dentith, Julia Duetz, Axel Ekström, and Will Mittendorf for their comments on an earlier version of the paper. And an extra big thank you to Erik J. Olsson for all the wonderful conversations that has helped shape this paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Melina Tsapos is a doctoral student at Lund University, Department of Theoretical Philosophy. Tsapos's philosophical interests are mainly in epistemology (knowledge and beliefs) and the philosophy of mind. Tsapos's research focuses on conspiracy theories. With a background in cognitive science Tsapos is particularly interested in cognitive architectures and how we can study beliefs within the predictive processing (and the embodied cognition) framework. Tsapos also has an interest in how empirical research is currently conducted around conspiracy theories, and the explication of the term.

ORCID

Melina Tsapos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6779-9732>

References

- Barkun, M. 2013. *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt3fh35v>
- Bortolotti, L. 2020. *The Epistemic Innocence of Irrational Beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863984.001.0001>
- Brotherton, R. 2015. *Suspicious Minds: Why*. Bloomsbury, UK: Bloomsbury Sigma.
- Brun, G. 2017. "Conceptual Re-Engineering: From Explication to Reflective Equilibrium." *Synthese* 197 (3): 925–954. doi:10.1007/s11229-017-1596-4.
- Carnap, R. 1950. *Logical Foundations of Probability*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cassam, Q. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Coady, D. 2003. "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories." *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17 (2): 197–209. doi:10.5840/ijap200317210.
- Cordes, M., and G. Siegwart. "Explication." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed 12 November 2021. <https://iep.utm.edu/explicat/>.
- Dentith, M R. X. 2016. "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation." *Social Epistemology* 30 (5–6): 572–591. doi:10.1080/02691728.2016.1172362.
- Dentith, M R. X. 2018. "The Problem of Conspiracism." *Argumenta* 3 (2): 327–343.
- Dentith, M R. X. 2021. "Debunking Conspiracy Theories." *Synthese* 198 (10): 9897–9911. doi:10.1007/s11229-020-02694-0.
- Duetz, J. Forthcoming. "What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a 'Theory'?" *Social Epistemology*.
- Festinger, L. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Festinger, L., H. W. Riecken, and S. Schachter. 1956. *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gerring, J. 1999. "What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences." *Polity* 31 (3): 57–393. doi:10.2307/3235246.
- Hagen, K. 2018. "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style: Do Conspiracy Theories Posit Implausibly Vast and Evil Conspiracies?" *Social Epistemology* 32 (1): 24–40. doi:10.1080/02691728.2017.1352625.
- Harambam, J., and S. Aupers. 2017. "I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist: Relational Identifications in the Dutch Conspiracy Milieu." *Cultural Sociology* 11 (1): 113–129. doi:10.1177/1749975516661959.
- Ichino, A., and J. Räikkä. 2020. "Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories." *Argumenta*. doi:10.14275/2465-2334/20200.
- Keeley, B. L. 2007. "God as the Ultimate Conspiracy Theorist." *Episteme* 4 (2): 135–149. doi:10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.135.
- Keeley, B. L. Forthcoming. "Conspiracy Theory and (Or As) Folk Psychology." *Social Epistemology*.
- Klinton, M. 2019. *Knowledge Resistance: How We Avoid Insight from Others*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Koch, S. 2019. "Carnapian Explications, Experimental Philosophy, and Fruitful Concepts." *Inquiry* 62 (6): 700–717. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2019.1567381.
- Kruglanski, A. W., and D. M. Webster. 1996. "Motivated Closing of the Mind: 'Seizing' and 'Freezing'." *Psychological Review* 103: 263–283. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.103.2.263.
- Marchlewska, M., A. Cichocka, and M. Kossowska. 2017. "Addicted to Answers: Need for Cognitive Closure and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Beliefs." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2): 109–117. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2308.
- Merriam-Webster. 2021a. "Conspiracy Theory". <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theories>.
- Merriam-Webster. 2021b. "Conspiracy Theorist". <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theorist>.
- Olsson, E. J. 2021. *Kunskapsteori En Historisk och Systematisk Introduktion*. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.
- Pfeifer, N. Forthcoming. "Towards a Conceptual Framework for Conspiracy Theory Theories." *Social Epistemology*.
- Pigden, C. 1995. "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25 (1): 3–34. doi:10.1177/004839319502500101.
- Pigden, C. 2006. "'Complots of Mischief.'" In *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, edited by C. Coady, 139–166. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Pigden, C. 2016. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?" In *A Companion to Applied Philosophy*, edited by K. Lippert-Rasmussen, K. Brownlee, and D. Coady, Chapter 9. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Pigden, C. Forthcoming. "'Conspiracy Theory' as a Tonkish Term - the Runabout Inference-Ticket from Truth to Falsehood." *Social Epistemology*.
- Pitkin, H. F. 1972. *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press.
- Popper, K. R. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton University Press.
- Reid, S. A. 2021. "Conspiracy Theory." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 27. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory>.
- Sartwell, C. 1991. "Knowledge is Merely True Belief." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (2): 157–165.
- Shields, M. Forthcoming. "Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Domination, and the Case of Conspiracy Theories." *Social Epistemology*.
- Swami, V., T. Chamorro-Premuzic, and A. Furnham. 2010. "Unanswered Questions: A Preliminary Investigation of Personality and Individual Difference Predictors of 9/11 Conspiracy Beliefs." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 24 (6): 749–761. doi:10.1002/acp.1583.

- Tajfel, H. 1970. "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination." *Scientific American* 223 (5): 96–102. doi:[10.1038/scientificamerican1170-96](https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1170-96).
- Tajfel, H. 1974. "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour." *Social Science Information* 13 (2): 65–93. doi:[10.1177/053901847401300204](https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204).
- Tajfel, H., M. G. Billig, R. P. Bundy, and C. Flament. 1971. "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behavior." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1 (2): 149–178. doi:[10.1002/ejsp.2420010202](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420010202).
- Uscinski, J, E. 2020. *Conspiracy Theories, a Primer*. The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- van Prooijen, J. W. 2017. "Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1): 50–58. doi:[10.1002/acp.3301](https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3301).
- van Prooijen, J. W. 2018. *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- van Prooijen, J. W., and K. Douglas. 2018. "Connecting the Dots: Illusory Pattern Perception Predicts Belief in Conspiracies and the Supernatural." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (3): 320–335. doi:[10.1002/ejsp.2331](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2331).