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Trends in Research

A Review of Conspiracy Theory Research: Definitions, Trends, and Directions for Future Research

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Abstract: The profusion of conspiracy theories in recent social and political discourse is alarming. As a response to this increasingly concerning problem, there is a rapidly growing multidisciplinary literature on conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking. In this article, I review the state of the scholarship on conspiracy theories and its related concepts. I begin with a definition of conspiracy theories and key terms related to their communication and belief. Then, the article turns to the research on the spread, correlates, and consequences of conspiratorial beliefs, highlighting important findings and trends in research. Lastly, I discuss areas where research is lacking and future scholarly efforts should be placed. Altogether, this text provides a much-needed assessment and sorting of a rapidly evolving field of research that spans across several disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, conspiracy beliefs, conspiratorial thinking

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Introduction

The profusion of conspiracy theories in recent social and political discourse is alarming. Indeed, recent survey data suggests that more than 71 per cent of Americans have first-hand knowledge of at least one conspiracy theory related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Schaeffer, 2020). Similarly, 21 per cent believe that a secret organization rules the world, 23 per cent are confident the September 11th terror attacks were an inside job, and 27 per cent agree that the government is hiding aliens in Area 51 (statista, 2019). These false beliefs are problematic, especially when they influence behaviour like adherence to public health guidelines during a global pandemic and undermine trust in key democratic institutions such as elections (Romer and Jamieson, 2020; Mari et al., 2022).

As a response to the increasingly concerning threat that conspiracy beliefs pose to democracy, there has been significant efforts made to build a multidisciplinary literature on conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking. Indeed, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have examined the topic through political (Sutton and Douglas, 2020), psychological (Douglas et al., 2017), historical (Knight, 2003), and cognitive (Radnitz and Underwood, 2017) lenses to name but a few. These scholarly efforts have extensively focused on defining conspiracy theories, identifying their correlates and consequences, as well as understanding how they are communicated and spread.

At this point in the development of this academic literature, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect on the state of the research as well as the debates that have emerged. To put it simply, scholars have been building the pieces of the puzzle one by one. Now, a synthesis is required to put these pieces together, locate areas that may have conflicting parts, and find out where some sections are missing. This is a crucial undertaking to reorganize the research agenda and ensure its evolution is optimized in the future.

In this article, I review the state of the scholarship on conspiracy theories and its related concepts. I identify three goals for this piece: 1) to understand how key terms are defined; 2) to highlight and make sense of the key findings of the literature; and 3) to identify areas where less research has been done and where scholarly efforts should focus going forward. Altogether, this text provides a much-needed assessment and sorting of a rapidly evolving field of research that spans across several disciplinary boundaries.

Defining Key Concepts

At the centre of the study of conspiracy theories is the question of definition. What do we mean by the term *conspiracy theory*? Broadly speaking, a conspiracy theory is an attempt to make sense of notable events by placing responsibility on a secret plot perpetrated by an influential individual or group (Coady, 2019; Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theories therefore seek to explain significant social and political events through secret schemes orchestrated by influential agents (Douglas et al., 2019; Byford, 2011). For example, Covid-19 conspiracies postulated that wealthy individuals at the head of pharmaceutical companies plotted to create and release the virus in order to increase their profits through vaccine development (Douglas, 2021; Romer and Jamieson, 2020). In this specific case, conspiracy believers tried to make sense of a

significant event (a global pandemic) by blaming a secret group of powerful individuals (pharmaceutical executives).

This example brings us to another term which warrants a definition: *conspiracy beliefs*. While a conspiracy theory relates to the content of a specific conspirational explanation, conspiracy belief refers to the belief or acceptance of said theory (Imhoff et al., 2022; Frenken and Imhoff, 2021). Conspiracy beliefs are therefore central to our understanding of conspiracy theories since they are the core value used to measure their plausibility and reach. For instance, 37 per cent of Canadians believe that there is a secret group of people working to replace the population with immigrants and 13 per cent of believe that Microsoft is using microchips to track human behaviour (Anderson and Coletto, 2022). Simply put, conspiracy beliefs relate to individual adherence to conspiratorial explanations. They are the action of believing one or many conspiracy theory (Douglas et al., 2019).

In addition to the concepts defined above, it is necessary to elaborate on the notion of *conspiratorial thinking*. Sometimes referred to as conspiracy mindset or conspiracy mentality, the concept of conspiratorial thinking refers to the idea that some individuals are predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2019; Imhoff et al., 2022). To put it simply, the term conspiratorial thinking was introduced to explain the predisposition of certain people to favour conspiratorial explanations (Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013; Enders et al., 2020). Individuals with high levels of conspiratorial thinking are therefore more likely to adhere to conspiracy theories of all sorts. Recent research clearly distinguishes between specific conspiracy beliefs and conspiratorial thinking, stating that a general conspiracy mindset is more stable and less malleable than specific conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2022; Frenken and Imhoff, 2021; Enders et al., 2021). According to Imhoff et al. (2022: 3), "conspiracy mentality is typically thought of as an enduring individual disposition to interpret the world and events therein, specific conspiracy theories arise in response to a specific event unfolding and seek to provide an explanation." In other words, some individuals may believe in a specific conspiracy theory due to contextual and extrinsic factors while others believe in conspiracies because they are intrinsically more susceptible to believe in them.

Trends in Conspiracy Theory Research

Having defined the core concepts of the literature, I now turn to the three main trends in conspiracy theory research: the spread/communication of conspiracies, the correlates of conspiracy beliefs, and the consequences of believing in conspiracy theories.

Communication and Spread of Conspiracy Theories

Research on the spread of conspiracy theories focuses on two key factors: the communicators and the platforms of communication. Those who actively engage in the propagation of conspiracy theories are identified as conspiracy theorists (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Researchers consider these theorists to be the source of much of the discussion around specific conspiracy theories. These actors are the primary propagators of conspiratorial messaging on social media platforms and news media (Mahl et al., 2022; Mahl et al., 2021; Goreis and Kothgassner, 2020). Notable examples of conspiracy theorists include political

figures such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, but also news anchors like Alex Jones and Tucker Carlson.

When it comes to the means of communication, recent research highlights the significance of news media and online platforms in creating communities where users are exposed to conspiracies (Cinelli et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2019; Stecula and Pickup, 2021; Hollander, 2018). The reach of news media—particularly from partisan news sources—facilitates the spread of conspiracies among partisans (Hollander, 2018). Conspiracy theorists can rely on partisan news anchors to offer them a platform from which to communicate with potential conspiracy believers. In countries with highly polarized news organizations such as the United States (i.e., Fox News, Rebel News, etc.), news platforms allow conspiracies to spread rapidly to an already conspiracy-prone audience (Hollander, 2018).

The consumption of information related to conspiracy theories on social media is widespread due to the open nature of much of these platforms. Studies show that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit have adopted content moderation policies which segregate the information environment and creates echo chambers where users are exposed to content that consolidates their conspiratorial beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2022; Mahl et al., 2021). This phenomenon of 'echo platforms' is recent and deserves further consideration in the literature on conspiracy theories. Research in this area of conspiratorial communication is limited in breadth, focusing on the main social media platforms present in consolidated democracies. More research therefore needs to be done looking at other social media outlets such as Parler, Rumble, Telegraph, VK, and WeChat. This is especially true considering the salience of conspiracy theories on these platforms (Ray, 2021; Jennings et al., 2021).

Who Believes in Conspiracies?

The bulk of the literature on conspiracy theories has focused on the reasons why individuals adhere to these conspiratorial explanations (Uscinski, 2018). Over time, three categories of correlates emerged: psychological explanations, political factors, and cultural determinants.

Psychological explanations of conspiracy beliefs focus on individual difference factors and personality factors. A recent meta-analysis of personality correlates identifies several individual psychological factors as determinants of conspiracy beliefs. Overall, individuals who possess narcissistic or anti-social traits, have low self-esteem, are religious or spiritual, and those who suffer from paranoia or schizotypy are the most likely to adhere to conspiracy theories (Stasielowicz, 2022; Enders et al., 2022). Correlates of conspiratorial thinking also include cognitive factors (Dagnall et al., 2015). The need for cognitive closure, for instance, has been found to be an important predictor of belief in conspiracy theories (Leman and Cinnirella, 2013). Individuals who have a higher need for cognitive closure will be more likely to use conspiracy theories to explain events and satisfy their closure needs (Umam et al., 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2018). Low cognitive skills have also been attributed to higher conspiracy beliefs, with analytical thinking and deliberation exercises reducing individual adherence to conspiratorial explanations (Swami et al., 2014; Bago et al., 2022; van Prooijen, 2017).

In terms of the political factors which contribute to conspiracy beliefs, political ideology and partisanship stand out as the most studied. In the political arena, conspiracies can easily be weaponized to discredit the opposition or explain the failures of co-partisans (Enders and Smallpage, 2019). The "Big Lie" conspiracy theory—which posits that the 2020 US Presidential Election was 'stolen' and that Donald Trump is the rightful winner—is a great example of the utilization of conspiracy theories to account for political losses (Norris et al., 2020; Enders et al., 2022; Edelson et al., 2017). Ideology can also make the difference when being exposed to conspiratorial claims. Individuals with strong ideological dispositions will be more likely to develop conspiracy beliefs for conspiracy theories that support their ideology (Miller et al., 2016). Recent research shows that individuals situated at ideological extremes are most susceptible to conspiratorial explanations, with those on the extreme right leading the way in terms of conspiracy beliefs (Sutton and Douglas, 2020; Van Prooijen et al., 2015). Other political factors include populist attitudes and anti-establishment sentiments (Enders et al., 2022; Balta et al., 2022). These attitudes are especially important for beliefs in political conspiracy theories such as the "Big Lie" or the assassination of John F. Kennedy (McHoskey, 1995).

The third category considers the role of culture in framing conspiracy beliefs. Research in this area is still in its nascent stages, but initial studies indicate that cultural factors play a crucial role in the development of individual conspiracy beliefs (see Adam- Troian et al., 2021). The effect of these factors is observable in the correlation between certain cultural values and conspiracy beliefs. Collectivism, masculinity, and powerdistance values are related to greater beliefs in conspiracy theories (Hornsey and Pearson, 2022; Adam-Troian et al., 2021; van Prooijen and Song, 2021). Some research has also delved into the role of political culture and collective paranoia in explaining conspiracy beliefs (Oliver and Wood, 2014). The US, for instance, is found to have a political culture which promotes a paranoid-style of politics and increases beliefs in conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Norris et al., 2020).

The Consequences of Conspiracy Beliefs and Conspiratorial Thinking

Believing in conspiracy theories can have several potential consequences. In recent years, researchers have considered the consequences of conspiracies related to the Covid-19 pandemic on subsequent attitudes and behaviours. Most importantly, belief in Covid-19 conspiracies affected individual adherence to public health guidelines as well as support for non-approved remedies such as hydroxychloroquine (Allington et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2022; Bertin et al., 2020; Romer and Jamieson, 2020). Moreover, support for Covid-19 conspiracy theories is related to vaccine hesitancy and discriminatory attitudes towards vaccinated individuals (He et al., 2020; Roberto et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2021).

While the Covid-19 pandemic has occupied a large place in the research on the effects of conspiracy theories, several scholars have also looked at the potential consequences of conspiracy beliefs in general. For instance, believing in political conspiracy theories has been found to negatively affect institutional trust and overall attitudes towards democracy (Mari et al., 2022; Pummerer et al., 2022). With that being said, there is an apparent lack of research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs on political behaviour. Researchers have yet to explore the

effects of believing in conspiracy theories on key variables such as political participation, civil disobedience, and vote choice.

Directions for Future Research

The literature on conspiracy theory is relatively recent, with most of the articles published on the topic having been written in the last 15 years (Douglas et al., 2019; Goreis and Voracek, 2019; Stasielowicz, 2022). As a result, many questions have yet to be addressed. In this section, I identify four areas of development for future research.

First, I find very little comparative research on conspiracy theories. Of the available comparative literature, most rely on this methodology to answer generalist questions. A recently published article has explored cross-national differences in conspiracy beliefs, but focused exclusively on North American and European cases (see Walter and Drochon, 2022). This further highlights the fact that the literature is primarily US-focused (or Western-focused). Comparative research could be useful in answering several questions regarding the contextual factors which may influence conspiracy beliefs. For instance, are there cultures which foster greater conspiratorial thinking? Some early research suggests that conspiracy theories may be dependent—to a certain extent—on the cultural context of its followers (van Prooijen and Song, 2021; Hornsey and Pearson, 2022). Specifically, van Prooijen and Song (2021) find that vertical collectivist values favour the development of beliefs in intergroup conspiracy beliefs (i.e., the idea that foreign states are interfering in one's own state). Future research should expand on this literature by looking at the cultural determinants of conspiracy theories in cross-national perspective. Do culture specific characteristics shape the way in which conspiracy theories emerge? For example, can we expect differences in the development and popularity of conspiracy theories based on individual vs. collective cultures. It could be expected that societies with strong individualist values will see the emergence of more conspiracy theories than those with strong collectivist values, but that the latter cultures will see a faster and larger spread of conspiracies. These questions and hypotheses certainly deserve further consideration.

Second, there is a lack of research on conspiracy theories outside of consolidated Western democracies. Existing studies looking at conspiratorial thinking in the Middle East and elsewhere are outdated and were not based on the most recent empirical and epistemological developments (see Zonis and Joseph, 1994). As a result, it is desirable that future research consider conspiracy theories in non-Western case studies as well as through a global cross-national perspective. Doing so would broaden the scope of the conspiracy theory literature as well as create a more inclusive international and interdisciplinary scholarship.

Third, researchers need to push further their inquiries into the consequences of conspiracy beliefs and conspiratorial thinking. As it stands, the research focuses on the effects of such beliefs in the context of specific events (i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic). Political scientists must bridge the current divide between the political behaviour and conspiracy theory literatures (see Thórisdóttir et al., 2020). Recent research has begun exploring the role of conspiracy theories in motivating violence at the individual and collective levels (Vegetti and Littvay, 2022; Hebel-Sela et al., 2022; Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020; Rousis et al., 2022). In fact, Vegetti

and Littvay (2022) find that conspiracy beliefs are related to attitudes towards political violence. Scholars should pay more attention to how conspiracy beliefs may influence politically-relevant behaviour such as voting, protesting, and political violence. Conspiracy theories attacking elections may have significant impacts on turnout, acting as a demobilizing force for their believers. Similarly, it can be expected that election-related conspiracies lead to increased desire to protest (violently of peacefully) electoral results. These hypotheses are extremely relevant to the current political situation of many countries (i.e., the United States and Brazil) and should be considered in future research.

Moreover, research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs has focused almost exclusively on behavioural or attitudinal effects. As Douglas et al. (2017) point out, more research should be done to examine the individual psychological consequences of conspiracy beliefs. Such beliefs may very well have positive repercussions on individuals by satisfying key psychological motives (Douglas et al., 2017). On this topic, it is clear that there are important relationships and hypotheses that have yet to be explored.

Lastly, more efforts should be made to diversify the methodological approaches used in conspiracy theory research. The use of longitudinal surveys could be particularly useful in understanding the evolution of conspiracy beliefs as well as the potential for existing conspiracy beliefs to motivate future adherence to conspiracy theories. A longitudinal approach could also be helpful to examine the role of socialization in the spread of conspiracy beliefs. Existing longitudinal studies focus on specific medical or psychological phenomena that cannot be generalized to the conspiracy theory literature as a whole (Coelho et al., 2022; Liekefett et al., 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2022).

Additional approaches which should be considered include qualitative research methods such as interviews, ethnography, and content analyses. Such methods would be beneficial in grasping mechanisms that are less easily observable through quantitative methods. Examples of these mechanisms include the creation of conspiracy theories as well as the role of communities in spreading conspiracies. For instance, ethnographic field research could explore the community-based factors which promote conspiracy beliefs. Interview-based studies could provide much-needed outlooks into the role, motivations, and techniques of conspiracy theorists from various backgrounds. Meanwhile, content analyses could explore trends in the topics of conspiracy theories. In sum, the literature would benefit from a diversification of its methodological approaches.

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