PHILOSOPHICAL
PSYCHOLOGY

Philosophical Psychology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cphp20

Normativity in studying conspiracy theory belief: Seven guidelines

Rik Peels, Nora Kindermann & Chris Ranalli

To cite this article: Rik Peels, Nora Kindermann & Chris Ranalli (2023) Normativity in studying conspiracy theory belief: Seven guidelines, Philosophical Psychology, 36:6, 1125-1159, DOI: 10.1080/09515089.2023.2191644

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2191644

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

Published online: 22 Mar 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1442

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cphp20

PHILOSOPHICAL PSYCHOLOGY
2023, VOL. 36, NO. 6, 1125–1159
https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2191644

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Check for updates

Normativity in studying conspiracy theory belief: Seven guidelines

Rik Peels, Nora Kindermann and Chris Ranalli

Philosophy Department, and Faculty of Religion & Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to provide clear guidelines for researchers studying conspiracy theory belief. It examines the meta-linguistic question about how we should conceptualize 'conspiracy theory' and its relationship to the evaluative question of how we should evaluate beliefs in conspiracy theories, addressing normative issues surrounding the meaning, use, and conceptualization of 'conspiracy theory', as well as how these issues might impact how researchers study conspiracy theories or beliefs in them It argues that four norms, the Empirical Accuracy Norm, the Linguistic Norm, the Social Norm, and the Academic Fecundity Norm, underlie debates about how we should conceptualize or define 'conspiracy theory'. We zoom in on the linguistic norm, as it has been treated as more fundamental than the other norms. We then scrutinize the argument that normative conceptualizations prematurely settle the question of how conspiracy theories and belief in them should be evaluated, and argue that it fails. Subsequently, we turn to the risks normative conceptualizations pose when it comes to certain assumptions and biases in the study of conspiracy theory belief. Finally, we explore where this leaves us regarding the meta-linguistic and evaluative questions, and formulate seven guidelines for studying conspiracy theory belief, whether it be theoretical, historical, or empirical.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 April 2022
Accepted 9 March 2023

KEYWORDS
Conspiracy theory; normativity; neutral conception of conspiracy theory; normative conception of conspiracy theory; guidelines

> A conspiracy theory? That's why we're all here? (Mister Crowley in *Gotham*)

1. Introduction

Our world is full of conspiracy theories: John F. Kennedy was murdered by the FBI, 9/11 was an inside job, and the alleged mass murder in Bucha (Ukraine) was not committed by the Russians but staged by Ukrainian

CONTACT Rik Peels h.d.peels@vu.nl Philosophy Department, and Faculty of Religion & Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, Amsterdam 1081 HV, The Netherlands

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

actors. Some scholars would controversially add examples of alleged conspiracy theories that are widely believed, such as the Wannsee Conference that secretly planned the Holocaust and the Watergate scandal. It is controversial how we should conceptualize or evaluate such conspiracy theories and belief in them, how their conceptualization and evaluation relate, and how these phenomena should be approached in various contexts. One can ask whether the concept of conspiracy theory (belief) should be understood neutrally or whether it should encode a normative evaluation. Should we understand "conspiracy theory" to mean any theory that features a conspiracy? Should we study belief in the theory about the Watergate conspiracy as an instance of a conspiracy theory belief? Or should the concept just mean false, irrationally held, or unwarranted theories that cite conspiracies?

One the one hand, such considerations center around the role certain norms and normative assessments do and should play in *conceptualizing* conspiracy theory and beliefs in them. This is the *metalinguistic question*: "How should 'conspiracy theory' be conceptualized or defined?" (e.g., should it be defined normatively, or rather non-normatively or "neutrally"). The answer to this question might influence the selection of cases to study, and, consequently, the generalizations researchers make about conspiracy theories or beliefs in them. For instance, a normatively negative conceptualization would rule out belief in Watergate or the Wannsee Conference, as there is plenty of evidence for these conspiracies and there is nothing immoral about believing them, while a normatively neutral conceptualization may well rule them in. This makes relevant the question whether and why a conceptualization should be normative or not, which concept to use in which context, or how phenomena should be approached or evaluated in certain contexts.

On the other hand, such considerations make relevant the question how we should *evaluate* conspiracy theory (belief). This is the *evaluative question*: "How should we evaluate beliefs in conspiracy theories?" Are they generally implausible, irrational, or problematic in some other way? Thus far, these questions have been practically treated as inseparable in the field of conspiracy theory research. It has been assumed that normative conceptualizations lead to generalizing (negative) normative evaluations, while non-normative conceptualizations lead to case-by-case evaluations of conspiracy theories and the belief therein. In this paper we aim to disentangle these questions, and clarify how they relate. This is the first objective of this paper.

Our second objective here is to help researchers deal with some important normative issues that arise in the study of conspiracy theorizing, such as whether or not to normatively conceptualize conspiracy theory belief and how to evaluate such beliefs. We not only seek to spell out some of the consequences of using normative conceptualizations, but also to provide clear guidelines for those who study conspiracy theory (belief), whether such study be theoretical, empirical, or historical.

We will encounter various *kinds* of normativity: epistemic, moral, and prudential. Each of these is the object of extensive scrutiny and endless controversy, but let us roughly characterize them as follows. Epistemic normativity concerns normativity regarding truth, falsehood, knowledge, and understanding – what we should do to gain or keep knowledge, understanding, or true beliefs, and to avoid false beliefs, ignorance, or misunderstanding. Moral normativity concerns rightness and wrongness. Prudential normativity concerns what is good, useful, or fruitful for oneself or others, given one's practical interests. We will see examples of each below.

Let us also make a comment on *terminology* here. We assume that "conspiracy theory" minimally means something like "a theory which posits a conspiracy as a salient cause of an event". This is the minimalist conceptualization. As we shall see in detail below, many researchers have suggested that conspiracy theories have further features, such as unlikelihood or being believed due to the exercise of epistemic vices. In order not to steer the discussion in a particular direction, we will not aim to settle on a sufficient (extra) condition here and leave it at what is minimally required. We will also use "belief in conspiracy theory" as a placeholder for a variety of mental states: *belief* in conspiracy theory, *acceptance* of conspiracy theory, *trusting* conspiracy theory, high *confidence* in their likelihood and so forth. That is our focus rather than the processes of studying, considering, or entertaining conspiracy theories, since criticism is often primarily directed at the former rather than the latter.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of how normativity plays a role in conceptualizing conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief, and organizes the debate on how to conceptualize conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief in line with four norms underlying that debate – the empirical accuracy, linguistic, social, and academic fecundity norms. Section 3 then scrutinizes the linguistic norm that, as we argue, has been treated as more fundamental than the other norms in deciding whether one should conceptualize conspiracy theory (belief) normatively or not. Section 4 scrutinizes a different approach to resolving that question, namely the argument that normative conceptualizations prematurely settle the question of how conspiracy theories and the belief in them should be evaluated. After first distinguishing different kinds of normativity that are at play in evaluating conspiracy theory belief, we argue that this argument against normative conceptualizations is mistaken. In section 5, we turn to the risks normative conceptualizations pose when it comes to certain assumptions and biases in the study of conspiracy theory or beliefs in them. In section 6, we conclude by reflecting on where the discussion leaves us with regard to the metalinguistic and evaluative questions. We then formulate seven guidelines that help to deal with the thorny issue of normativity in the study of conspiracy theory (belief).

2. Normativity in conceptualizing conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief

Let us first explore how normativity plays a role in conceptualizing conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief. Although *non-normative* conceptualizations are still the norm, reflecting a growing consensus in the philosophy of conspiracy theory (see, for instance, the work of Basham, Coady, Dentith, Keeley, and Pigden), nowadays we increasingly find normative conceptualizations (in the recent work of Cassam, Harris, and Napolitano and Reuter, for instance).[1]

Of course, it matters *exactly what* is conceptualized. Some authors conceptualize phrases like "unwarranted conspiracy theories" (e.g., Keeley, 1999). It is hardly surprising that such conceptualizations are normatively laden. Our primary purpose here, however, is to map the debate on the question of whether we should conceptualize *conspiracy theory* and *conspiracy theory belief* normatively or not. On the one hand, there are those who think that the concepts of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief are normative and that normative evaluations should be built into their conceptualizations. On the other hand, there are those who opt for a purportedly neutral conceptualization of these concepts.[2]

Most prominently, *epistemic* normativity is built into such considerations, properties such as irrationality or lack of justification. In other cases, it has to do with the allegedly epistemically deficient character traits (epistemic vices) of the conspiracy thinker, such as dogmatism and gullibility (see, e.g., J.W. Van Prooijen, 2019).

Quassim Cassam distinguishes what he calls "Conspiracy Theory" with capitals, such as QAnon or David Icke's Reptilian Thesis, from regular "conspiracy theories" written with lower case, such as the Watergate scandal – and conceptualizes the former in terms of considerations like "unlikely to be true", "implausible by design", "based on conjecture rather than knowledge, educated (or not so educated) guesswork rather than solid evidence", and "speculative, contrarian, esoteric, amateurish and premodern" (Cassam, 2019, 7, 16, 28). These are all negative epistemic statuses. We find similar conceptualizations of "conspiracy theorizing" in terms of irrationality beyond philosophy as well (e.g., Aaronovitch, 2009; Barkun, 2003). Jeffrey Bale, an international studies scholar, speaks of conspiracy theories as "elaborate fantasies" (Bale, 2007, p. 48). "Fantasy" is clearly a negative epistemic term – except, of course, when the idea or theory in question is not meant to track truth, but conspiracy theories clearly are meant to do so. Other epistemically negative characterizations that we find, for example in the field of history, are ones in terms of the lack of knowledge and an epistemic gap caused by secrecy and silence (Pagán, 2004, p. 109; Pagán, 2012, p. 5). As observed by Juha Räikkä (2018), social psychologists have negatively conceptualized conspiracy theories as well, namely as false beliefs (e.g., Swami et al., 2014) or as "unproven, often rather fanciful alternatives to mainstream accounts" (Douglas & Sutton, 2011, p. 544).

We also find conceptualizations in terms of *epistemic vices*, such as narrow-mindedness and dogmatism. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) conceptualize conspiracy theories in terms of a tendency for faulty inferences and crippled epistemologies. Psychologists like Jan-Willem van Prooijen argue that belief in conspiracy theories is fundamentally a matter of the believer's gullibility (J.W. Van Prooijen, 2019). Similarly, M. Giulia Napolitano argues that what is typical of conspiracy theory believers, and what makes conspiracy theory belief epistemically problematic, is their *evidential insulation*, which she understands as a feature of the believer's attitude rather than of the theory. Conspiracy theory believers are resistant to disconfirming evidence: "It seems to be the case that, no matter what evidence we present to them against their theory, they'll find a way to dismiss it. I take this to be a central characteristic of conspiracy theories; they give rise to this dismissive epistemic behavior." (Napolitano, 2021, p. 83) Even though Keith Harris thinks it is unlikely that conspiracy believers exemplify to a greater degree the standard epistemic vices, such as narrow-mindedness, than those who reject such theories, he does argue that conspiracy theory belief is often due to problematic epistemic character traits or maybe a meta-vice that consists of things like the exercise of probabilistic fallacies (like the conjunction fallacy), fallacious extensions of modus tollens, and inconsistency in intellectual attention (Harris, 2018).

Other theorists have sought to avoid normative conceptualizations of conspiracy theory. Indeed, this has been standard practice in the philosophy of conspiracy theories. Take what the philosopher Marc Pauly says: "The term 'conspiracy theory' refers to a theory or explanation that features a conspiracy among a group of agents as a central ingredient." (Pauly, 2020) This conceptualization contains no normative elements. Likewise, Dentith (2019) conceptualizes conspiracy theory as "just a theory about a conspiracy; to wit, a theory about two or more people working together in secret toward some end" (Dentith 2019, 2244).[3] Similar conceptualizations can be found in the work of Basham (2016, pp. 6–7; 2018, 272–3), Coady, 2018, 195), and Pigden (2006, p. 157).

Now, what are the reasons provided for and against using normative conceptualizations? And which norms underlie these reasons? In a recent contribution to this debate from the perspective of conceptual engineering, Napolitano and Reuter (2021) make clear that there is a need to clearly articulate and make explicit the norms, goods, and values that often implicitly underpin arguments for or against normative conceptualizations. Following up on their work, we spell out the norms, values, and goods underlying the ongoing debate about whether we should conceptualize conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief normatively or not. We think that on the basis of the current debate we ought to distinguish at least four norms. Conceptualizations of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief should be (i) **empirically accurate**, (ii) **linguistically adequate**, that is, adequate in reflecting ordinary language use, (iii) **socially-politically adequate**, that is, helpful in bringing about social and political goods, and (iv) **academically fruitful**, reflecting a norm of fecundity.[4]

2.1. Empirical accuracy

First, one might argue that it is simply *true* that conspiracy theorizing is irrational (or bad, etc.), and that therefore we must come up with conceptualizations that mirror this fact. The norm guiding this kind of conceptualization is epistemic: we want our concepts to be empirically *accurate*; to empirically accurately represent the phenomenon. The thought here is that if the replicated science demonstrates, say, that "conspiracy theory" is represented normatively, as supported by psychological research, for example, then that's a good reason to conceptualize "conspiracy theory" normatively (see, e.g., Napolitano & Reuter, 2021, study 1b).

Some philosophers, such as Dentith (2014), Basham (2018a), and Pigden (1995) have argued against this sort of view by drawing our attention to the fact that conspiracies and theories about them are recurrent and believing them need not be irrational. Therefore, we must conceptualize "conspiracy theory" *neutrally*, at least neutrally from an epistemic point of view. This means that the conceptualization of "conspiracy theory" should not feature negative epistemic concepts, like "unjustified", "improbable", or "false".[5] These are paradigmatic normative epistemic concepts, and *negative* because they denote the absence of epistemically good-making qualities (e.g., justification, truth) or else the presence of epistemically bad-making qualities (e.g., truth-unreliability, incoherence). In turn, they will push back on the idea that how we conceptualize "conspiracy theory" should reflect how people represent it, much in the way how "cat" is conceptualized for scientific purposes (within zoology) need not reflect how we ordinarily conceptualize "cat".

Now, at any rate there are different intuitions as to whether conspiracy theories really are generally irrational or not. Indeed, as we'll see in §4, there are different conceptions of "rationality" and proposed requirements on rational belief. In order to break through this stalemate, other goods, values and norms have been evoked to argue either for or against normative conceptualizations.

Before we broach that issue, however, there is a more fundamental question we need to consider first. Even if we were to grant that conspiracy theory belief is inevitably irrational, must all the facts about a phenomenon – including normative ones – necessarily be built into its conceptualization? Normative analyses might be necessary for more or less exhaustive descriptions. But arguably, building a normative truth into a conceptualization is required *only if* this truth is necessary for distinguishing this phenomenon from another.

Napolitano (2021) pursues this kind of argument in favor of a normative conceptualization of "conspiracy theory": that we need to build a negative epistemic feature into our conceptualization to adequately identify conspiracy theorizing and properly distinguish it from, say, scientific theorizing that involves a conspiracy. One possible drawback of this kind of negative normative conceptualization, however, is that it might exclude interesting cases of conspiracy theory belief by definition, as it is only their *being self-insulated*—rather than *being about conspiracies*—which makes them (or belief in them) distinctive. The trouble here is not that such a conceptualization could not demarcate conspiracy theory (belief) from other kinds of theory (or belief) that are self-insulating, but that it might guide our attention away from beliefs in conspiracy theories which lack that feature but are interesting for other reasons (and, indeed, by definition: for focusing on "conspiracy theory belief" would just be a matter of focusing on self-insulating beliefs in conspiracies).[6]

Whether we should build the alleged truth that conspiracy theory belief is irrational into the conceptualization of the phenomenon might depend on other goods as well. For example, how well it enables us to understand or engage with conspiracy theorists, which in turn might influence the realization of certain social or political goals. Or how well it aligns with our ordinary language use, which, as will become clearer below, might also influence the realization of certain social or political goals. Different conceptualizations also make salient different research questions which, in turn, bears on academic fruitfulness (cf. Anderson, 1995).

2.2. Linguistic adequacy

Let us now turn to arguments evoking the second norm: our concepts should adequately reflect or capture ordinary language use to avoid the risk of talking about different subjects (Napolitano & Reuter, 2021; Räikkä, 2018).[7] Some argue that we should conceptualize conspiracy theory normatively because the dominant meaning of our ordinary language use of "conspiracy theory" is already normative (e.g., Cassam, 2019). Others, however, have argued that the meaning of our ordinary language use of "conspiracy theory" is normatively neutral in that it is purely descriptive, failing to encode normative elements, and that therefore we should conceptualize "conspiracy theory" non-normatively (e.g., Coady, 2003; Keeley, 1999, or Pigden, 2006; see Räikkä, 2018 and Napolitano Reuter 2021 for an overview). Some philosophers have recognized that the ordinary language use of "conspiracy theory" is ambiguous and that we should *engineer* the concepts of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief to get rid of this ambiguity. On this view, theorists should provide a conceptualization with only a descriptive or neutral meaning (i.e., not implying any normative assessment of conspiracy theories) (e.g., Coady, 2007, 2018a, 2018b; Basham & Dentith, 2016; see Napolitano & Reuter, 2021 for an overview). The underlying idea here seems to be that we can better achieve certain other goods or values besides aligning with ordinary linguistic use by engineering the concept. As Dentith (2022) puts it, normative conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" can have "unfortunate social consequences", like steering the public away from investigating political conspiracies (Dentith, 2022, p. 243). Alternatively, it has been argued that we should engineer the concept so that it approximates the dominant ordinary language use, on which it is allegedly normative (Napolitano & Reuter, 2021).

Different intuitions and evidence about ordinary language use are thereby evoked in this debate. Those arguing for normative conceptualizations can point to the evidence that the dominant meaning of "conspiracy theory" in the ordinary language is normative. Those arguing against the normative conceptualizations can point to the evidence that the ordinary language meaning of "conspiracy theory" is at least ambiguous between a normative and non-normative descriptive meaning, and that, granting its ordinary meaning with normative content, we should otherwise aim to redefine the concept so that is aligns better with social and political goals, like being unusable as a "label" to shut down debate (see Dentith & Orr, 2018). Besides discussing how the concept "conspiracy theory" is used in ordinary language use, one can also discuss how much weight should be attached to the ordinary language meaning. We return to this question in section 3, connecting it to issues concerning academic fruitfulness and achieving political or social goods.

2.3. Bringing about social and political goods

The third norm says that our concepts of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief should help us achieve various political and social goods in connection with the study of conspiracy theory. Note that arguments for the view that certain (non-)normative conceptualizations are better or worse in bringing about certain political and social goods mostly rely on certain views of the ordinary language meaning of "conspiracy theory". For example, some argue that our academic interest in conspiracy theories is owed to them being problematic of harmful. As academics, we want to study these phenomena *qua problematic phenomena* and therefore we should stick to the normative meaning of our ordinary language use. Napolitano and Reuter (2021, p. 85), for example, has argued that we want to study "the phenomenon of people believing outlandish theories about conspiracies in a way that seems to resist falsification". And to do so, we need normative conceptualizations. Cassam (2019, p. 4) makes a similar argument: we want to adequately address and respond to these *problematic* phenomena. As Brotherton (2015) remarks, "when people call something a conspiracy theory, they're usually not talking about just any old conspiracy" (Brotherton, 2015, p. 62; cited in Cassam, 2019). So, we might think that in order to study what's so interesting about conspiracy theories, we need a conception that allows us to grasp the harms done by conspiracy theories.

In contrast, Dentith (2014, p. 33) has argued that we can recognize and study pathological belief in conspiracy theories without tarring the entire class of conspiracy theory belief. Another argument for conceptualizing conspiracy theory normatively is that the negative evaluative ordinary language use fulfills an important social and political function, and the academic discourse should not undermine that function. Basham (2018a, pp. 39–40) understands Stokes (2016) as making such an argument: the term "conspiracy theory" has a *censorial meaning*, and that this censorial meaning fulfills a positive function and should not be undermined.

Those opposing a normative conceptualization have also cited political reasons: that negative normative conceptions of conspiracy theory, so the argument goes, can be politically exclusionary, delegitimize political opposition, and lead to political silencing and the shutting down of debates (Basham & Dentith, 2016; Dentith, 2014, 2022). Whether this is indeed the case of course depends on the actual ordinary language meaning of the term, a matter to which we return in section 3.

2.4. Academic fruitfulness

The final norm is that our concepts should be *academically fruitful*. Such fecundity can be understood in several ways, but one important way is about the concept's power to contribute to a theory's development, improving and extending it by being usable for different methods, or by delivering testable hypotheses and predictions (Ivani, 2019). For this Fecundity Norm, as we can call it, the central question is whether a normative or a non-normative conceptualization better suits our academic aims, such as collecting a large amount of data about conspiracy theory belief and conspiracy theory believers, delivering testable hypotheses, collecting representative data, and so on. Ivani (2019) has argued, for instance, that normative analyses in evolutionary psychology exclude certain relevant alternative research questions. Turning to the literature on conspiracy theories, according to proponents of a normative conceptualization, in order to encourage the investigation of actual conspiracies (for example in historical research or political science), we should distinguish between the normative concept conspiracy theory and a descriptive concept, whatever label we use to refer to it (e.g., Bale, 2007; Napolitano & Reuter, 2021). The idea is that the pejorative stigma about conspiracy theories has withheld researchers from seriously investigating theories concerning conspiracies (e.g., Bale, 2007). Interestingly, Dentith (2014) voices a similar worry but concludes that we should re-engineer our conception of conspiracy theory to be neutral. As will be discussed in section 4, there are more aspects to the academic fruitfulness of concepts that have not been discussed and that link questions of academic fruitfulness to questions about political and social goods, and ordinary language use as well.

Let us take stock: we have shown that four norms are often evoked to argue for either normative or non-normative conceptualizations of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief. We have also suggested that in considering these norms and the weight we give to them, we must implicitly or explicitly consider the other norms in this set and their relative weights. However, even when considered jointly, they might not yield a clear verdict about whether conspiracy theory (belief) should be conceptualized normatively. In the next section, we scrutinize whether the linguistic norm adequacy has or should be treated as more fundamental than the other norms in deciding whether one should conceptualize conspiracy theory (belief) normatively.

3. Ordinary language use in conceptualizing ‘conspiracy theory’

Let us now turn to the phrases “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theory belief” in ordinary usage and public contexts. This is relevant because, as we have shown, the meaning of “conspiracy theory” in ordinary language use has been used as a reason to argue for and against normative conceptualizations. In this section we first scrutinize whether the use of the term is already normative. We then turn to evaluate what weight should be given to the evidence that the term is used normatively, when it comes to the question of normative conceptualizations.

3.1. Evidence on ordinary language use

It is important to emphasize that the very *use* of the term “conspiracy theory” may already involve a certain kind of normativity, independently of normativity in conceptualizing or studying conspiracy theories (see Douglas et al., 2021, p. 29). Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent note: "[j] ust the term *conspiracy theory* is loaded. To label a theory as a conspiracy theory or someone a conspiracy theorist may place him or her on uneven terrain. He or she may meet with greater skepticism or appear beyond the bounds of reason" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 29). Likewise, Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen tell us that "when we employ the term 'conspiracy theory' in actual language use, we are implicitly assuming and implying that the claims advanced by the theory are not true" (Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017, p. 144).

Similar assumptions concerning the negative connotation of the label are shared by others who argue that the label functions to disqualify arguments and narrow the range of acceptable opinion (e.g., Coady, 2018a, 2018b), and trivialize such explanations for events regardless of their quality (Husting & Orr, 2007). Others add that these labels characterize believers as irrational (DeHaven-Smith, 2013) or paranoid (Bratich, 2008), and that these labels come with significant negative connotations and convey an undesirable image of the believer (Harambam & Aupers, 2017).[8] Several empirical studies indeed show that the label has negative connotations in ordinary or public usage. For instance, people are scared to be stigmatized when holding conspiracy theories (e.g., Nera et al., 2020). Other studies show that this fear is justified: conspiracy believers are perceived as, among other things, more gullible, stupid, naïve, manipulative, dishonest, and suffering from mental disorder (Klein et al., 2015). Conspiracy theory belief is associated with fear of social exclusion (Lantian et al., 2018). A qualitative study by Harambam and Aupers (2017) details the resistance of conspiracy believers to the label "conspiracy theorists". Douglas et al. (2021) found that it is prior belief (or the ranking of plausibility) of a statement that affects whether people call something a "conspiracy theory". And people seem to be more willing to attribute "conspiracy theory" to less plausible than to more plausible claims. What this suggests is that "conspiracy theory" itself *is* often used normatively in ordinary parlance, specifically, as a way of *criticizing* the belief or the believer.[9]

Napolitano and Reuter reach a similar conclusion. In several studies they show that (i) negative epistemic evaluations, and (ii) more generally negative (including moral) evaluations are encoded in the semantic features of the term "conspiracy theory". However, they also note that the meaning of "conspiracy theory" in its ordinary usage is not entirely unambiguous. About one third of their research population "seem to entertain a notion of conspiracy theory that is primarily descriptive", i.e., non-normative (Napolitano and Reuter 2021, 18). The evidence thus suggests that the ordinary and public meanings of "conspiracy theory" and related expressions are normative.

3.2. The normative weight of ordinary language use

The weight given to ordinary use in the discussion on whether we should conceptualize conspiracy theory normatively or not prompts three questions that have not yet been given due consideration: (1) What conclusions about the concept's normativity does the current data allow? (2) How rigorous is the data that we have on the meaning of "conspiracy theory" in ordinary language use? (3) Are there risks in giving too much weight to the meaning of "conspiracy theory" in ordinary language use?

We start with the first question. On the basis of the above, some suggest that the ordinary use of the term expresses a negative epistemic and moral evaluation of certain beliefs and maybe believers as well. This data raises the question, though, whether "conspiracy theory" expresses an essentially negative normative concept. An essentially negative normative concept is one in which it is part of the term's semantics that it encodes negative normative properties, like implausibility, lack of justification, or some other bad-making feature. Plausible examples include "evil" and "stupid".

Unfortunately, the normative *use* vs. *meaning* connection is not so straightforward. Neutral descriptive terms can sometimes express normative content depending on the speaker and their context of use. For example, "atheist", a descriptive term for someone who believes that God does not exist, can express derogation but also pride (see, e.g., Bullivant, 2013), depending on who the speaker/recipients are and their context of use. Replicated survey evidence points to the idea that whether certain descriptive words denigrate (or not) depends on contextual factors, like speaker's intention, and the social identities of the speakers and their audience (Almagro et al., 2022). This suggests that some descriptive neutral concepts can function normatively depending on the intentions of the speaker and their social context. That is, their *meaning* might be descriptive whilst their *usage* in certain contexts is normative.

Perhaps, then, some concepts are only *contextually normative*. For example, calling someone "a woman" in certain contexts expresses an evaluation, eliciting a negative or positive stereotype. This might happen when a chauvinist worries that their mechanic is a woman ("A woman?!"), or is pleased that his dance partner is a woman ("thank goodness: a woman this time!"). Although "woman" might not be essentially normative, or feature negative normative semantic relations (like "should be subordinate to men")—at least, this is a controversial issue – it is uncontroversial that it functions in various contexts normatively.[10] "Conspiracy theory" might work similarly. Perhaps it is only contextually normative, such as when, for example, a politician says "that's just a conspiracy theory" as a way to discredit some proposal,[11] whereas its primary function is non-normative in, say, an academic context. If this kind of semantics for "Conspiracy theory" is correct, it suggests that there is no clear sense to the idea that there is one "ordinary meaning" of the concept, but different meanings the term might capture depending on the context of use.

In addition, it is easy to imagine that whether a concept denigrates or praises in a certain context can change over time, or that a term that denigrates is actively reappropriated to praise. Take as an example the concept of fundamentalism which, in ordinary or political discourses is often used to negatively evaluate (e.g., as irrational or dogmatic belief). Despite this denigrative meaning, a recent feminist writer has reappropriated the term by calling her feminist position "feminist fundamentalism" (Case, 2011). It is not unthinkable that, especially in an increasingly polarized political setting, conspiracy theorists reappropriate the term for themselves, thereby challenging and maybe changing the denigrative meaning.

Turning to the second question, we encounter a more worrying difficulty for understanding conspiracy theory as an essentially negative normative concept: we know very little about the meaning of the term in other contexts (e.g., in non-Germanic and Romance-language speaking contexts). Napolitano and Reuter (2021, p. 18) acknowledge that "the results of [their] studies cannot be easily generalized to other cultures, languages, and other times." Thus, the current consensus on the evaluative meaning of the term might be temporarily and geographically bound. That raises the question whether and why we should accept or engineer the concept on the basis of how it is frequently used in quotidian contexts in Western, liberal democracies.[12] Without linguistic research on non-English cognates of "conspiracy theory", we can't infer that if the meaning of "conspiracy theory" has some problematic normative feature F – and that F is a sufficient reason for re-engineering its meaning, given other assumptions – then its non-English cognates should also be re-engineered. That's because they might lack F, or perform other functions that "conspiracy theory" does not perform.

Lastly, turning to the third question, there is also the possibility that the uses they analyzed are restricted to a certain class of English language users. Both Douglas (2021) and Napolitano and Reuter (2021) do not use a representative study of English language users. Among other things, all subjects were recruited digitally (Amazon's Mechanical Turk, Prolific, and comments on Reddit), excluding people without access to Internet, and all subjects were native speakers, excluding people for whom English was a second or third language. It is especially difficult to gain access to participants who strongly endorse conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2021, p. 13). By engineering the concept on (potentially) non-representative data, one runs the risk of prioritizing the language use of certain speakers over others. This raises the question why we should prioritize the normative language uses of certain people or groups over others, and of course whose evaluative language use we should prioritize and why. We note that this suggestion is consistent with the idea that the semantics of "conspiracy theory" should be partly a function of its quotidian use. However, a more *representative* set of speakers who are competent language users ought (prima facie) to be the basis for explicating what "conspiracy theory" means.

Based on limits regarding our knowledge of the inter- and intracultural ordinary language use(s) of the term "conspiracy theory" and its cognates, it is not straightforward how much relative weight the linguistic norm should have in settling the question whether or not to conceptualize the notion of conspiracy theory (belief) normatively.

We now turn to another attempt to resolve the question whether the notion of conspiracy theory (belief) should be conceptualized normatively. Proponents of non-normative conceptualizations argue that normative conceptualizations prematurely settle the question of how conspiracy theory beliefs should be evaluated. In the next section, we show that this view is mistaken, further disentangling the metalinguistic question about how we should conceptualize conspiracy theory and beliefs in them from the evaluative question concerning how we should evaluate them.

4. Normativity in evaluating conspiracy theory beliefs

We've seen how normativity affects choices in conceptualizing conspiracy theory and beliefs in them but how should we think about normativity for our *evaluations* of conspiracy theory beliefs? We estimate that by far "epistemic evaluation" is the most frequent kind of evaluation of conspiracy theory belief that we find in the literature. Epistemic evaluation denotes evaluations of beliefs or other attitudes in reference to truth and evidence, but also normative properties like justification or epistemic rationality, and epistemic virtue. This section focuses on the relationship between normative epistemic conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" and epistemic evaluations of conspiracy theory belief and brings to light the relationship between epistemic and non-epistemic normative evaluations as well.

4.1. Epistemic normativity

Much of the debate on the epistemic evaluation of conspiracy theory belief has centered around the generalism/particularism distinction. As Dentith (2022) recently puts it, Generalists hold that "generally, we have grounds for something like a prima facie suspicion of conspiracy theories", while Particularists argue that "we should evaluate individual or particular conspiracy theories on their evidential merits (or demerits)" (Dentith, 2022, p. 2). Generalists, then, say that we should generally epistemically evaluate conspiracy theory beliefs negatively as, e.g., irrational or unjustified – or at least approach them with suspicion – while Particularists deny this.

How should we epistemically evaluate conspiracy theory beliefs? Although a Generalist tendency pervades much of mainstream discourse and aligns with ordinary ways of thinking about conspiracy theories (Napolitano & Reuter, 2021), many in the philosophy of conspiracy theory argue that it's "an obvious dead end" (Hagen, 2022b, p. 198). Why? The core thought is that if "conspiracy theory" just means 'a theory which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause'—i.e., the minimal conceptualization is correct – then there's nothing per se epistemically problematic about believing a conspiracy theory. To think otherwise is to think that one's findings – and more to the point, one's epistemic evaluations – about a restricted set of conspiracy theories tells us something interesting about conspiracy theories generally, when it doesn't. At best, *certain* conspiracy theories are epistemically defective, and thereby justify suspicion (Dentith, 2022).

For example, one might think that certain kinds of conspiracy theories are by their nature irrational because of their implausible commitments (e.g., Reptilian aliens, shapeshifters, demons). Interestingly, some Particularists think that it is rational for us to be *suspicious* of certain *kinds* of conspiracy theories. For example, Dentith (2022) says that "fantastical" conspiracy beliefs seem irrational (cf. Basham and Räïkkä 2018). These are beliefs in conspiracy theories like the Illuminati, New World Order, or Reptilian theory, which posit extremely powerful, sometimes supernatural entities conspiring behind nearly all major social events (see Barkun, 2003). There is room, then, for restricting one's Particularism (or Generalism) toward certain conspiracy theory-types.

Even so, the thought is that it's not rational for us – researchers, academics, politicians, or indeed the public – to evaluate conspiracy theory beliefs, *as a class*, as generally irrational. Rather, we ought to evaluate each conspiracy theory against the available evidence. So, those of us attracted to this idea might agree with the letter of Particularism but hold, along with Dentith's (2022), that we are justified in "treating the claim as unwarranted" on their own – that, for example, we can act as if fantastical conspiracy theories are unwarranted – and not that it *must* be irrational to believe them (see Dentith, 2022, p. 6).

What we want to do here, however, is closely examine the normative relationship between normative epistemic *conceptualizations* of "conspiracy theory" and normative epistemic *evaluations* of conspiracy theory beliefs. The reason why is that there is an intuitive worry for researchers that operating with a normative epistemic conceptualization of "conspiracy theory" means that one must also be a Generalist about the epistemic evaluation of conspiracy theory beliefs. If this is right, then it would be grounds to reject such normative conceptualizations, since Particularism is plausible.[13] Moreover, it might risk bias and unwarranted generalizations (which we'll explore in section 5).

We think that the normative relationship between conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" and the epistemic evaluation of beliefs in conspiracy theories is not so straightforward, however. The metalinguistic and evaluative questions are not that closely tethered to one another. This is, roughly, because the normative epistemic features encoded in the conceptualization of conspiracy theory need not be the same as (or entail, or presuppose) the relevant epistemic features of conspiracy theory beliefs under scrutiny. Exploring why this is will help us to better appreciate the relationship between conceptual normativity and epistemic normativity and how they interact in the case of studying conspiracy theory.

4.2. Normative conceptualizations vs. normative evaluations

As we noted earlier, philosophers of conspiracy theories tend to think that conspiracy theory belief is not generally irrational (see Dentith, 2022, p. 243). Their arguments tend to rely on the minimalist conceptualization of "conspiracy theory".

For example, Pigden (2006) argues that many of us already believe conspiracy theories: simply believing that someone conspired to bring about an event is sufficient (see also Coady, 2007). The presupposition here is that in so doing we are not irrational. Others defend conspiracy theory belief from implausible analysis. Hagen (2018a), for example, examines the social psychology of conspiracy theory belief in this way. He argues: "If the researchers had picked a true but little known conspiracy theory as the test, the conspiracy theorist would have come out looking better", with the implication being that psychologists cherry-pick examples of *false* or *clearly unsupported* conspiracy theories (Hagen, 2018a, p. 9). This helps to make conspiracy theory belief look worse than it is (i.e., irrational). Likewise, Basham (2018b) argues that the social psychology conflates participant's suspicions (however strong) with settled beliefs, and that only the settled beliefs would be irrational.[14]

As we can see, there is a general strategy here. The strategy is to lean on the minimalist conceptualization of "conspiracy theory" and adopt a "innocent until proven guilty" stance, so that insofar as conspiracy theory beliefs are defensible against attacks – like the various true conspiracy theory beliefs are – that's enough to show that conspiracy theory belief is not, *by its nature*, irrational. Others, however, argue that conspiracy theory belief is sometimes rational and not merely that it's not irrational. For example, Dentith (2016) argues that conspiracy theory belief is sometimes a case of inference to the best explanation, where the conspiracy theory is the best explanation. This suggests that conspiracy theory belief is sometimes rational.[15]

Now one might think that these strategies stand or fall with the minimalist conceptualization of conspiracy theory. If "conspiracy theory" ought to be understood normatively – and specifically with negative epistemic concepts – then these defenses will fail. Is that right? We think not.

Our argument draws on examples of negative normative conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" which are compatible with positive epistemic appraisals of certain individual conspiracy theory beliefs. Importantly, we don't appeal to the minimalist conceptualization, but to normative conceptualizations. In turn, we argue that a negative normative conceptualization of "conspiracy theory" does not by itself recommend believing that any individual conspiracy theory belief is irrational.

To see why, let's adopt Cassam's conceptualization first, according to which "a conspiracy theory is defined as a theory about a conspiracy" that is "implausible by design" (Cassam, 2019, pp. 10–13). Nevertheless, the fact that a person's belief in a particular conspiracy theory (CT) entails, analytically, that CT is implausible, it doesn't follow that the person's *belief* in CT is irrational. This is because *implausible theories might be rationally believed.* After all, one could have sufficient evidence to believe that what is (in fact) an implausible theory is true.

For example, consider the case of biologist Tyrone Hayes, who in the early 90's researched the effects of herbicides, like atrazine, discovering that it impedes the sexual development of frogs. Hayes began to believe that employees of a large agribusiness, Syngenta, were following him to conferences, and that they were gathering evidence against his findings. Hayes' belief turned out to be true (Aviv, 2014; Dalton, 2010). Once Syngenta's internal correspondence was released, after a class-action lawsuit against the company, it revealed that Syngenta had indeed been spying on him, planning to attack his scientific credibility. Indeed, Hayes had evidence for his belief, based on his experiences. But obviously Hayes' belief would *seem implausible* to others. Imagine him saying to his friends or colleagues "I'm being followed. A major agribusiness is conspiring to hamper my research and destroy my credibility". This sounds like a paranoid conspiracy theory. Nevertheless, we can say, consistently with Cassam's normative conceptualization, that Hayes' theory was a conspiracy theory (and so his belief in his theory was a conspiracy theory belief)—and thereby implausible, granting Cassam's conceptualization – but one that Hayes' had mounted sufficient evidence to justify believing. That is to say, the theory was implausible on its face, but it was rational to believe it; sometimes we ought to believe what is implausible.

Now we'll explore a second case. In this case, we'll work with an even normatively stronger conceptualization. For example, consider

Aaronovitch's (2009) and Brotherton's et al. (2013) conceptualization of conspiracy theory as "the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable" (Brotherton et al., 2013, p. 1). This is a normatively strong conceptualization because it builds in that non-conspiracy explanations are by their nature *more probable*. And this feature suggests that it wouldn't be rational for one to believe the less probable explanation. However, their conceptualization entails that Hayes' conspiracy belief amounts to an unnecessary (read: unjustified) assumption of conspiracy only if there were more probable explanations of what Hayes' was describing. But there weren't more probable explanations. Hayes' conspiracy theory was indeed *the most probable explanation* on his evidence. Hence, even on a normatively strong conceptualization of conspiracy theory, like Aaronvitch's and Brotherton's et al, it still doesn't follow that we ought to evaluate conspiracy theory beliefs as generally unjustified or irrational.

Although some negative normative conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" (both weak and strong) do not entail that conspiracy theory beliefs are irrational, sometimes the negative normative conceptualization already embeds the relevant negative epistemic evaluation. Cassam's (2019) conceptualization didn't do this, but others might. We'll consider two strong toy cases:

> False Theory: x is conspiracy theory only if x is a false theory which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause of an event.
>
> Unjustified Theory: x is a conspiracy theory only if x is an unjustified theory which cites a conspiracy as a salient cause of an event.

Although we might be tempted to think that False Theory implies that CT beliefs are generally irrational, that strictly doesn't follow. Our earlier discussion on internalism/externalism and defeasibility helps us to see why. If internalism is true, false beliefs can easily become justified. It's just a matter of what the agent's experiences are, or what's subjectively probable given their mental states, which factors in their beliefs about who's trustworthy, what the world is generally like, and so forth. Indeed, many past scientific theories were justifiable, but false. Other cases are easy to come by in the social sciences.

But couldn't there be conceptualizations so strong that negative epistemic evaluations are logically implied by the conceptualization? *Yes*. Unjustified Theory is such a case. It entails (by definition) that any belief in any conspiracy theory is unjustified. But why build-in *that* strong of an epistemic feature into the conceptualization of "conspiracy theory"?[16]

Some researchers have reserved this kind of strong conceptualization of "conspiracy theory" for *types* of conspiracy theory, rather than conspiracy theory as a unified class. Most famously, Keeley (1999) argues that there is a type of conspiracy theory, *unwarranted conspiracy theories*, which require an unjustified amount of distrust in the institutions that exist to generate relevant evidence. In particular, that believing an unwarranted conspiracy theory would commit us to an unjustified "pervasive skepticism of people and public institutions" (Keeley, 1999, pp. 122–123).

Similarly, Barkun (2003) discusses *superconspiracy theories*, which tie nearly all major social events together: there is one fundamental conspiracy at work (Barkun, 2003, p. 6). Barkun thinks that superconspiracy theories are by their nature unfalsifiable, which would make them recalcitrant to counter-evidence (Barkun, 2003, p. 69). The thought is that these types of conspiracy theories are unjustified by their nature.[17]

Importantly, however, these caveats don't imply that conspiracy theory belief *in general* is irrational. It turns on which *types* of conspiracy theories we are evaluating. Researchers should thus distinguish between the varieties of conspiracy theory-types in their studies: (i) the unwarranted conspiracy theories, which require severe distrust of institutions that provide evidence, (ii) the superconspiracy theories, which are by their nature all-encompassing and unfalsifiable, from (iii) any other relevant type of conspiracy theory worthy of scientific inquiry, like, e.g., fantastical conspiracy theories (cf. Dentith, 2022).

4.3. Non-epistemic normativity

We saw that the relationship between normative epistemic conceptualizations of "conspiracy theory" and epistemic evaluations of conspiracy theory beliefs is nuanced. Indeed, evaluating conspiracy theory belief is nuanced in a broader sense: we might evaluate a belief as epistemically irrational, but prudentially rational and morally harmless. So, we now want to explore non-epistemic normativity in evaluating conspiracy theory belief.

Sometimes, we judge that a conspiracy theory believer is rational or irrational for believing their preferred conspiracy theory, but "rational" or "irrational" is itself ambiguous between an *epistemic* and a *prudential* reading. On the epistemic reading, it means that the belief is (not) fitting from a distinctively "epistemic point of view". What goes into the epistemic point of view is of course controversial. One might factor in only the agent's perspective about what's true or probable – as epistemic internalism does – or one might factor in features of the agent's cognition or environment, independently of their perspective, like what's objectively probable or truth-reliable – as epistemic externalism does. Depending on which of internalism/externalism is true, different conspiracy theory beliefs might be rational (or irrational). Internalism will likely permit more conspiracy theory beliefs to be rational, owing to the fact that what determines whether a person's belief is justified (or rational) turns only on their internal states (e.g., their experiences, beliefs, seemings). This will result in a more permissive set of justified conspiracy theory beliefs.[18] On the prudential reading, it means that the belief is unfitting for the agent's purposes or goals; that it does not help them to reach certain goals, like facilitating meaning in their life. These two kinds of rationality are sometimes mixed up when, for example, conspiracy theory researchers say that conspiracy theorists have good "epistemic motives" for forming conspiracy beliefs, like the motive to reduce uncertainty or to promote their curiosity, which can make it rational to seek to reach their goals (see, e.g., Douglas et al., 2017).

However, the fact that a belief is motivated by a desire to fulfill an epistemic goal does not mean that it is epistemically rational to have the belief, even if it satisfies the epistemic goal. This is because the belief might not, as internalism demands, fit the agent's evidence or, as externalism demands, be objectively probable. Rather, it suggests that the conspiracy theory belief is prudentially rational if, indeed, believing it helps the believer to accomplish their epistemic goal (like reducing uncertainty). The lesson here is that we should keep these two senses of "rationality" apart, then: epistemically rational belief, and epistemically motivated belief that is prudentially rational. When researchers describe a conspiracy theory belief as 'irrational'—or defend it from the charge of 'irrationality'—they might be talking past each other. One researcher might have epistemic rationality in mind, say, because the belief is not objectively likely, whereas the other has prudential rationality in mind, because it helps the believer to fulfill an epistemic (or non-epistemic) goal.

Some conspiracy theory beliefs might be evaluated as "epistemically innocent", following Bortolotti (2020), which are beliefs that help us secure epistemic goals but are nevertheless epistemically irrational. They are a subset of beliefs at the intersection of prudential rationality and epistemic irrationality. Such beliefs can't be innocent unless prudentially rational, however, so this takes us to the question: are conspiracy theory beliefs prudentially rational? One idea from social psychology is that conspiracy theory beliefs can have positive effects on the believer's subjective well-being. This suggests that conspiracy theory beliefs can thereby be prudentially rational because it can be good for the agent who has the belief. In particular, the empirical literature tells us that conspiracy theory beliefs are often formed in response to threats to one's well-being, like the experience of uncertainty, anxiety, or a lack of control (see, e.g., Douglas et al., 2017; Lantian et al. 2017). If conspiracy theory beliefs diminish these threats, that would be some reason to think that they are (in such cases) prudentially rational.

Recent empirical work gives some nuance to this idea, however. Certain kinds of conspiracy theory beliefs not only fail to diminish these threats, but accentuate them (Liekefett et al., 2021). This is the case for conspiracy beliefs about *political conspiracies*, such as the belief that secret organizations influence politics. In short, these kinds of conspiracy beliefs "actually make people feel worse" (Liekefett et al., 2021, p. 6). Cross-cultural studies reveal that certain sorts of conspiracy theory belief – like those referring to coronavirus conspiracies – are associated with increased feelings of depression (De Coninck et al., 2021). Liekefett's et al. (2021) longitudinal studies show that believing political conspiracy theories heightened conspiracy believers' anxiety, aversion to uncertainty, and experiences of existential threat (e.g., the experience of danger or insecurity). While this does not demonstrate that believing conspiracy theories is not sometimes prudentially rational, it does support the idea that at least the prudential rationality of *political* conspiracy theory beliefs is *not* connected to their ability to reduce threats to subjective well-being, since they increase those well-being diminishing experiences.

Perhaps this idea is problematized, however, by the fact that many people are "entertained" by conspiracy theories. Just to be explicit, as we said earlier we will focus on belief in conspiracy theories rather than entertaining them: we are talking here about *being entertained* by the conspiracy theories; one's enjoying them. This suggests that there is some prudential value to at least *considering* conspiracy theories because of the value of being entertained (see Van Prooijen, 2022; their results, however, show that the strength of the participant's belief in the presented conspiracy theory was correlated with being entertained by it). Of course, considering that *p* for, e.g., entertainment and considering that *p* seriously, as a contender for belief, are importantly different; the former doesn't suggest that the agent is likely to believe it. What's interesting about conspiracy theories, however – unlike clear cases of fiction or myth – is that mere exposure to certain conspiracy theories (like those about climate change) seems to decrease one's rival non-conspiracy theory beliefs about the same events (Van der Linden, 2015). This might lead us to think that certain conspiracy theory beliefs can have epistemically harmful consequences because of their consequences for our *other beliefs*. Even supposing that they're prudentially rational, if they lead us to revise true or justified non-conspiracy theory beliefs, that's an epistemically bad-making consequence. This is where concerns about prudential rationality and epistemic rationality meet. Still, focusing on prudential rationality alone, it remains to be seen whether the prudential value of experiencing entertainment when coming to believe certain conspiracy theories is sufficient to undermine the potential prudential disvalue of experiencing anxiety, increased aversion to uncertainty, and existential threat.[19]

These observations take us to *moral evaluations* of conspiracy theory beliefs. We can distinguish between at least three ways conspiracy theory beliefs might be morally evaluated: by focusing on the wrong-making features of other beliefs and attitudes *upstream* from them, *downstream* from them, and the beliefs themselves. Some ethicists think that what's morally good is whatever best promotes our subjective well-being. If conspiracy theory beliefs were especially good at promoting subjective well-being, this would make them ethically permissible. However, ethicists tend to avoid theorizing about the ethics of beliefs and focus instead on the ethical consequences of beliefs, specifically the (in-)actions they motivate.

Recently, social psychologists have focused on the potential upstream and downstream morally bad-making features of conspiracy theory beliefs. In the former case, the causal or statistical relationship between the two attitudes can make the conspiracy theory belief look "guilty by association". An example would be certain kinds of politically extremist beliefs (Farinelli, 2021). Here, it is not the conspiracy theory belief as such or its effects which are evaluated as harmful, but the fact that it born out of a something else – in this case, politically extremist attitudes – which are taken to be morally problematic.[20] In the latter case, the moral evaluation focuses on the consequences of conspiracy theory beliefs for agents' intentions or actions.

So, what are the potential moral harms of conspiracy theory beliefs? It's hard to say anything general here because the research targets, naturally enough, specific types of conspiracy beliefs (e.g., anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs, or political conspiracy theory beliefs). At least one example where it's perhaps clearer that there are potential moral harms on the offing is Corona virus conspiracy theory beliefs. Jolley and Douglas's earlier (Jolley et al., 2014) research shows that anti-vaccine conspiracy theory beliefs reduce the believer's intention to get vaccinated, which suggests morally harmful consequences for others, like intentionally or at least negligently putting others at risk. The moral judgment here targets practical consequences of the anti-vaccine conspiracy beliefs. Since the Corona virus pandemic, research on vaccine-uptake reduction and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories has obviously increased. The general trend is that believing a Corona virus conspiracy theory reduces one's intention to vaccinate and engage in preventive measures, like social distancing (see Biddlestone et al., 2022; Douglas, 2021). This suggests that specific kinds of conspiracy theory beliefs – like those pertaining to vaccines or the Corona virus specifically – might be morally harmful.

However, our discussion should be nuanced here because of the role that belief and intention play in our moral evaluations of actions and omissions. When people decide not to get vaccinated or not to wear face-masks due to their coronavirus conspiracy theory that the pandemic is, e.g., a hoax and that there is no deadly virus, from their point of view they are not endangering others. And so their *intention* is not to endanger others either. As a result, we cannot trace the potential harm here to problematic intentions. Nevertheless, we might say that their ignorance is a case of negligence – that the relevant evidence about risk is available to them but unjustifiably ignored – which makes them culpable and thus morally blameworthy.

Here again epistemic and non-epistemic normativity intersect. If a requirement of moral culpability is some epistemic condition – like being aware of the risks of one's inactions for others (Rudy-Hiller, 2022), or at least not being justified in believing that it lacks such risks – then the epistemic normativity of the coronavirus conspiracy theorist's belief matters for our moral evaluations of their actions. Returning to our earlier distinction, epistemic internalism enables conspiracy theory beliefs to be quite easily justified, depending on the agent's mental states (including who's trustworthy) and so we can imagine a coronavirus conspiracy theorist being justified in believing that there are no serious risks to others by not practicing what is (in fact) risk-reducing behaviors. So, internalism might allow the epistemic condition on moral culpability to be easily met. Externalism will make it considerably more difficult. Since Corona virus conspiracy theories don't reliably track the truth, they're likely unjustified; justification is, recall, a matter of objective probability or truth-reliability. In turn, coronavirus conspiracy theorists are more easily culpable for not practicing risk-reducing behaviors.

To summarize, then, we have argued that normative conceptualizations, not even certain strong normative conceptualizations, commit us to certain evaluations of conspiracy theory belief. So, the argument against normative conceptualizations which says that they prematurely settle the question of how conspiracy theory beliefs should be evaluated is unsound.[21]

Moreover, we distinguished between epistemic and pragmatic rationality as some researchers are liable to confuse them when, for example, the reason for belief is to satisfy an epistemic motive. We showed that it is possible to have good "epistemic motives" for conspiracy beliefs which are nevertheless epistemically irrational (but pragmatically rational).

That said, one might resuscitate the argument against normative conceptualizations another way. Perhaps they lead to the import of unwarranted assumptions and biases into *research*. We now turn to scrutinize this way of criticizing normative conceptualizations of conspiracy theory (belief).

5. Assumptions and biases in studying conspiracy theory

What is the role of assumptions and biases in the current study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory belief, and how might normative conceptualizations influence these? In this section, we zoom in on three problems, and evaluate how they possibly relate to a normative conceptualization: (1) the risk of biased researchers leading to biased research, (2) the risk that a focus on the lack of epistemic properties like truth and warrant in conspiracy theory research leads to suppression of other important research projects or insightful conclusions, and (3) the risk that normative conceptualization leads to unwarranted generalizations.

5.1. *Risk of biased researchers leading to biased research*

Let us start with evidence on the risk for biased research resulting from a negative picture of conspiracy theories or conspiracy theory believers. Butter and Knight (2019) observe that many researchers hold the assumption that conspiracy theories breach epistemic norms or originate from psychological problems; that they hold on to that view despite their own findings that contradicted that very conception.

Hagen (2018a) confirms these observations, arguing that the negative picture many scholars have of conspiracy theories leads to "lopsided and unfair treatment of conspiracy theorists in the social science literature" and how "one must worry that bias against conspiracy theories is influencing the results of social science scholarship, with one biased finding building upon another" (Hagen, 2018a, p. 324). Specifically, the worry is that social scientists' epistemic evaluations of conspiracy theory beliefs might bias their research practices. He says that: "[m]any scholars writing on conspiracy theories (. . .) seem to assume that conspiracy theories are neither true nor warranted" (Hagen, 2018a, p. 321), without providing specific examples or evidence for such claims. In critically reviewing three psychological studies that allegedly conclude that conspiracy theorists apply epistemically faulty or questionable practices, Hagen finds that none of them actually delivers robust evidence that warrants such a conclusion.

While these observations are important and worrying, it is not clear that there is a direct link between normative epistemic conceptualizations and (potentially) *implicit assumptions* about conspiracy theories and those who believe them. We already argued that normative epistemic conceptualizations – even quite strong ones – don't always favor certain epistemic evaluations of conspiracy theory beliefs. But the question for us now is whether such normative conceptualization might help to make explicit and transparent such problematic assumptions, or whether they uncritically normalize and enforce them.

Two things need to be noted here. First, if conspiracy theories indeed are problematic, then, one might argue, it is better to make this clear in order to prevent bias. The underlying rationale is that one can better reflect the correctness of normative judgment. Second, one can question whether a neutral conceptualization would prevent such biases from occurring as well. It seems possible that the normative ordinary language meaning is enough to introduce such bias, but we also don't know whether a neutral conceptualization would be effective at combating it. We will suggest how to deal with this matter in the guidelines in §6 below.

5.2. Risk of suppressing relevant research projects

We voiced the worry that focusing on the alleged irrationality of conspiracy theory (belief) might suppress other important research projects or insightful conclusions. By focusing on what is (allegedly) epistemically or psychologically at fault with believing conspiracy theories, or by portraying and approaching conspiracy theories as a defense mechanism or as responses to fear and anxieties (Harambam, 2020, p. 21), we might miss important insights (see Butter et al., 2020; Harambam, 2020).

For example, we risk misunderstanding the appeal of conspiracy theories from the perspective of those engaged in conspiracy theory belief. Here, *first-person explanations* might be ignored or even discounted. We might also fail to appreciate the diversity of conspiracy theories, and we might fail to analyze them in relation to their specific political, historical and social context (Harambam, 2020). If such research is in part inhibited by negative evaluative assumptions, and if such negative assumptions are exacerbated by normative conceptualization, one could argue (pace Cassam, 2019; Napolitano, 2021) that normative evaluations hinder research that can properly inform our reaction to conspiracy theories. What is at stake here, in other words, is the practical implications of evaluative assumptions in the actual practice of researching conspiracy theory belief, and how such evaluative assumptions interact with normative conceptualizations. The question is thus whether evaluative assumptions and normative conceptualizations impede "[a]n approach that is sensitive to the empirical richness of everyday life" (Harambam, 2020, p. 22).

5.3. Risk of unwarranted generalizations

Some researchers argue that many evaluative generalizations are based almost exclusively on U.S. American and (Western) European data (see Butter et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2018; Yablokov et al., 2020). It is not obvious that generalizations from such data hold for other historic periods and geographic regions. To give an example: Gray (2020) points out that highly specific circumstances give rise to conspiracy theories in the Middle East, such as sectarian divisions that lead to institutionalization of partisan politics, resulting in weak, corrupt and untransparent political systems. Besides, there is a rich history of conspiracies in the region, often involving foreign and sometimes former colonial powers. Consequently, in those regions "conspiracy theorists may be pointing to a genuine or real threat" (Sivan, 1985 referred to in Gray, 2020, p. 628). And conspiracy theories might be “important technologies because they signify failings and disappointments among actors and forces across all these dynamics” (Gray, 2020, p. 634).

Based on such observations, it is reasonable to assume that comparative and transnational approaches to conspiracy theories might make us reconsider certain normative judgments about conspiracy theories and conspiracy theory belief, such as that they result from “crippled epistemologies” (cf. Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009) or other epistemic faults, or that they always bring about negative consequences (Yablokov et al., 2020).

In this section, we scrutinized how normative conceptualizations might influence the research of conspiracy theory belief in potentially problematic ways. While there is reason to worry about the effects of potentially unwarranted assumptions and biases, it is not clear that such worries are exacerbated by normative conceptualizations. We now turn to see where the discussion so far leaves us with regard to the metalinguistic question about whether we should conceptualize conspiracy theory (belief) normatively or not.

6. Seven guidelines

In this paper we have provided insights into questions concerning normativity in the study of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theory belief. Specifically, we reviewed and evaluated attempts to settle the questions whether we should conceptualize the notion of conspiracy theory belief normatively. In doing so, we identified four norms underpinning the arguments for or against *conceptualizing* conspiracy theory (belief) normatively: the Empirical Accuracy, Linguistic, Social, and Fecundity Norms. We have also suggested that in considering these norms and their weight, we must implicitly or explicitly consider the other norms and their weight.

We then scrutinized the linguistic adequacy norm and argued that, on the basis of limits regarding our knowledge of the inter- and intracultural ordinary language use(s) of the term “conspiracy theory” and its cognates, it is not straightforward how much relative weight the linguistic adequacy norm should have. This limits how much we can appeal to the linguistic adequacy norm in settling the metalinguistic question.

Turning to the argument that normative conceptualizations prematurely settle the question of how conspiracy theory beliefs should be evaluated, and therefore should be rejected, we argued that many negative normative conceptualizations of “conspiracy theory” do *not* entail negative normative evaluations of the target conspiracy theory beliefs. This held for normative conceptualizations which encode concepts like “implausibility” or “less probable”, but potentially even “false”. Such conceptualizations do not settle the question, then, about whether certain individual conspiracy theory beliefs are epistemically irrational. This is important because it suggests that researchers' evaluations should zoom in on *individual conspiracy theory beliefs*, where this specificity goes beyond the *content* of someone's belief. After all, even fantastical conspiracy beliefs can be rational on standard conceptualizations of epistemic rationality. Researchers' evaluations should specifically focus on the person's epistemic circumstances – what defeaters might be salient in their context, what background knowledge they have, etc. —as well as the reasons for which they hold their belief, before casting an epistemic evaluation of the belief. These reflections suggest a radically *local* or agent-centered orientation toward our epistemic evaluations of conspiracy theory beliefs.

We then discussed whether there is a risk of normative conceptualizations introducing biases into research. We concluded that there is a risk that the dominant evaluative ordinary language use alone introduces such biases. We argued that by focusing on what is epistemically or psychologically at fault with believing conspiracy theories, we might miss important insights into and ways to adequately react to belief in conspiracy theories. This point is reinforced when considering the geographical and historical differences regarding conspiracy theory belief. However, we concluded that, while there is reason to worry about the effects of potentially unwarranted assumptions and biases, it is not clear that such worries are exacerbated by normative conceptualizations.

Where does this leave us with respect to the metalinguistic question? None of the arguments that we discussed definitively settles the matter. However, our discussion of the arguments do allow us to formulate seven guidelines that might help researchers in dealing with some important normative issues that arise in the study of conspiracy theory belief:

1. *Be aware that in some contexts, the attribution of "conspiracy theory" to a particular belief can already be normative, particularly in the public realm.*
   Of course, this is less so in academic discourse.
2. *When conceptualizing the notions conspiracy theory or conspiracy theory belief, take into consideration which goods and values you want to realize with that conceptualization.*
   Do you, for example, want your conceptualization to align with ordinary language use? And if so why, and whose language use are you thereby condoning and enforcing? What are the consequences for political and academic values?
3. *Make transparent your own understanding and assessment of conspiracy theory belief and the associated terminology.*
   This is especially important given the negative use of the term "conspiracy theory" in a variety of contexts. Being explicit about

this should help minimize the influence of unwarranted assumptions and biases in the study process. In this reflection, researchers should be aware of how “conspiracy theory” is used in ordinary language (in some contexts), and what evaluations are mostly expressed by the term.

4. *Carefully consider how negative normative associations of “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theory belief” can impact your research practices, such as case selection or the interpretation of data.*
5. *Be aware of the fact that normative conceptualizations might encode unwarranted generalizations and hinder a proper understanding of the phenomenon under research.*
6. *Explore whether the moral problems facing a particular case or type of conspiracy theorizing is upstream from the conspiracy belief (i.e., what leads to it is often morally problematic), downstream from it (i.e., what it leads to is often morally problematic), or due to a morally problematic feature of the attitude itself (i.e., harboring the attitude is dehumanizing or disrespectful).*
7. *When evaluating a conspiracy theory belief as “irrational” or “rational”, take care to clarify what kinds of normative evaluation it is by distinguishing between a moral, prudential, and epistemic evaluation.*

   This is especially important when the different kinds of epistemic normativity fail to overlap (e.g., an epistemically rational but objectively morally risky belief) or intersect (e.g., an epistemically irrational yet prudentially rational belief).

Of course, those who use non-normative conceptualizations may avoid some of these pitfalls by that very fact; yet it is no guarantee, which is why it is helpful to take them into account. Moreover, it is helpful for researchers to pay attention to the norms that they may have to violate by pursuing non-normative conceptualizations, such as the Linguistic adequacy norm.

Taking these guidelines into account will improve the academic debate and how our societies deal with conspiracy theorizing. Guideline 6, for instance, clarifies the locus of moral evaluation and thereby sheds light on how to deal with it in prevention or intervention. And guideline 7 helps to decrease verbal disputes and will hopefully reveal more common ground in different areas of conspiracy theory research, such as in epistemology, sociology, behavioral science, and social psychology.

Notes

1. Overall, however, non-normative (more neutral) conceptualizations have continued to be the norm, both in empirical and philosophical work. Proponents of non-normative conceptualizations are of course still defending their view against recent work by, e.g., Cassam (2019), Napolitano (2021), Napolitano and Reuter (2021). See also recent work by Duetz (2022), Hagen (2022a), and Shields (2022).
2. We speak of "purportedly neutral conceptualizations" here because also neutral minimalist conceptualizations may have normative consequences.
3. Joseph Uscinki's and Joseph Parent's definition is also *meant* to be neutral: "We define *conspiracy* as a secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 31). However, whether it succeeds in being neutral is a further issue, since it restricts the extension of "conspiracy theory" to theories about conspirators who plan to do something *illegal*, *violate rights*, *exercise power*, and so forth, which to many might seem problematic – that is, criticizable from a legal, moral, or political point of view. If that's right, then it is a normative definition.
4. A fifth norm would be that a conceptualization needs to be operationalizable. And that might raise worries for normative conceptualizations. One can operationalize what is by a certain group *considered*, *perceived*, or *felt* to be irrational or immoral, but that is of course different from its *actually being* irrational or immoral. On the other hand, there is some recent work at the intersection of philosophy and psychology that aims to operationalize normative notions, such as that of a cognitive vice (Meyer et al., 2021). Since this is a separate and challenging issue that deserves a paper of its own, we will not address it here.
5. Other arguments in the literature include that we should redefine "conspiracy theory" so that it loses its pejorative connotations. See Husting and Orr (2007) and Wood (2016). See Räikkä (2018, pp. 207–209) for brief critical overview. Another argument we find in the literature is that the definition is parsimonious. As Dentith and Orr (2018) put it, why bloat the definition with "extra baggage"? (Dentith & Orr, 2018, p. 434).
6. We thank an anonymous referee for their helpful suggestion here.
7. For this section, we heavily draw on the insightful overview provided by Napolitano and Reuter (2021), focusing on the role that conceptualizations of conspiracy theory should align with "ordinary language". For recent work on defining "conspiracy theory", see Douglas and Robbie (2023).
8. Here we rely on the literature review by Douglas et al. (2021).
9. It's important to acknowledge that the empirical literature is not unanimous about whether "conspiracy theory" typically functions to criticize, ridicule, or dismiss a belief or believer. For example, Michael Wood provides evidence that "labeling" a theory or belief a "conspiracy theory" did not impact its credibility. Wood conjectures that perhaps the participants already had beliefs about the theories mentioned in the modified Conspiracist Belief Scale, which asked about the likelihood of historical conspiracies (like MKULTRA). However, Wood also conjected those participants with "conspiracist world views" might be more amenable to speculative conspiracies (Wood, 2016, p. 698). We speculate these results could be compatible with the claim that "conspiracy theory" functions contextually to criticize through semantic-enrichment by salient pragmatic features of a context. What we mean is that one and the same user might use "conspiracy theory" to criticize in some contexts and

not others because of the pragmatic presuppositions of their context (e.g., in one context, she knows that the recipient is a conspiracy theorist; in another context, there's a social expectation on her to be suspicious of theories that cite conspiracies). Studies might try to recreate pragmatic features of contexts in a controlled testing-environment.

10. Some argue that "woman" has a contextually determined meaning. See Díaz-León (2016). Haslanger (2000) defines "woman" with normative content (by reference to oppression and subordinate positions because of certain presumed bodily features with a patriarchal society). She acknowledges that this definition is different from its everyday "ordinary" meaning.
11. For instance, Tony Blair said that public accusations about the U.S.'s decision to invade Iraq for oil is a "conspiracy theory" (see Tempest, 2003).
12. This does not mean that there is a lack of conspiracy theory research outside liberal democratic countries. We are rather noting the limitations of generalizing from the *linguistic research* on "conspiracy theory" and its cognates in Germanic and Romance languages to other languages. See Gray (2020) for an overview of conspiracy theory belief in the Middle East and Swami et al. (2020) for research on conspiracy theory in southeast Asia.
13. As we said, many in the literature find Particularism to be eminently plausible (see Hagen, 2022b, p. 27).
14. We note, however, that these responses are limited: as we argued, even fantastical conspiracy theory beliefs – which might look clearly unsupported at first blush – can be justified, at least on some standard views of epistemic rationality. It will depend on the relevant epistemic facts about the agent's case (e.g., their relationship to defeaters, background beliefs) plus the theory of rationality we're employing. Even cherry-picking theories that strike us as false doesn't mean that the participants *beliefs* (settled or partial) are unjustified anyway.
15. In addition to the application of internalism/externalism about epistemic normativity, that abductive inference is a kind of "rational process" doesn't mean that it always yields rational beliefs. It will depend on the epistemic status of the inputs (are those beliefs justified?) and whether the conspiracy theory is the better explanation.
16. To be sure, even Unjustified Theory allows for nuanced verdicts. If we understand Unjustified Theory as saying that any conspiracy theory belief is *prima facie* unjustified, this allows that it is still *ultima facie* justified. So, there's room for this extremely strong normative conceptualization to permit positive epistemic appraisals of conspiracy theory beliefs as well.
17. Barkun's superconspiracy theories are similar to Dentith's fantastical conspiracy theories, but arguably different. Consider the reptilian theory. It is a super conspiracy theory because it seeks to explain many other alleged conspiracies by reference to one grand conspiracy. It is fantastical because it posits nearly omnipotent supernatural-like beings. But these features can come apart: a conspiracy theory could be fantastical because it has an incredible ontology, but seeks to explain only one conspiracy event. Likewise, it could be super for having grand explanatory ambitions, with structural similarities to the reptilian theory, but its ontology is not incredible, referring only to things that are (say) quite mainstream.
18. For a recent work which draws insights from Bayesianism to explain how conspiracy theory beliefs could be epistemically rational, see Poth and Dolega (2023).
19. One explanation of the prudentially bad-making effects of conspiracy theory belief is that they foster a negative feedback loop. By way of comparison, consider people who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The goal of diminishing one's

experience of distress can motivate one with OCD to engage in activities which trigger their compulsions. For example, one might experience distressing thoughts which, in turn, leads one to increasingly focus on those thoughts, causing *more* distress (see Calkins et al., 2013).

20. There can also be non-causal associations, such as with people who are inclined to believe conspiracy theories *and* inclined to think that violence can be a justifiable form of protest against the government (see Douglas, 2021 citing Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The tempting thought is that conspiracy theory beliefs are "guilty by association". But this is dubious. All proponents of violence are also disposed to wear clothes, but *that* association is clearly innocuous. What seems to be implicit in these non-causal associations is that there is an *underlying tendency*—a *mind-set*, for example – which belies the conspiracy theory belief *and* pro-violence, political apathy, and so on. Here, we bracket moral evaluations of the so-called "conspiracy mind-set".
21. Although one might read this argument as friendly to Generalists about conspiracy theory belief, we think it aligns more closely with Particularism, because if we're right then the sorts of normative conceptualizations of conspiracy theory defended in the recent literature do *not* guarantee that any specific conspiracy theory belief is unjustified or irrational. Instead, even granting a normative conceptualization, one would need to investigate the specific circumstances of the target believer's attitude toward the specific conspiracy theory in question. In general, we need to disentangle the metalinguistic questions from the evaluative question, and that hasn't been sufficiently kept apart.

Acknowledgement

For their helpful comments and suggestions, we thank the three anonymous referees, Prof. Lisa Bortolotti, and Dr. Kengo Miyazono. We also thank the audience at the workshop 'The Social and Political Dimensions of Epistemic Risk II', held at the University of Seville, on 23 – 24 of June 2022.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Work on this articlewas made possible by the project EXTREME (Extreme Beliefs: The Epistemology and Ethics of Fundamentalism), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 851613) and from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

ORCID

Rik Peels http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8107-5992
Nora Kindermann http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9143-6800
Chris Ranalli http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5652-4829

References

Aaronovitch, D. (2009). *Voodoo histories: The Role of the conspiracy theory in shaping modern history*. Jonathan Cape).

Almagro, M., Hannikainen, I. R., & Villanueva, N. (2022). Whose words hurt? Contextual determinants of offensive speech. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, *48*(6), 937–953. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211026128

Anderson, E. (1995). Knowledge, human interests, and objectivity in feminist epistemology. *Philosophical Topics*, *23*(2), 27–58. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199523213

Aviv, R. (2014). A valuable reputation. The new yorker. *Annals of Science, Feb*, *10*, 2014.

Bale, J. M. (2007). Political paranoia v. political realism: On distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *41*(1), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220601118751

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. University of California Press.

Basham, L. (2016). The need for accountable witnesses: A reply to dentith. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, *5*(7), 6–13.

Basham, L. (2018a). *Conspiracy theory particularism, both epistemic and moral, versus Generalism* (M. R. X. Dentith ed). Rowman and Littlefield.

Basham, L. (2018b). Social scientists and pathologizing conspiracy theorizing. In M. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking conspiracy theories seriously* (pp. 95–107). Rowman and Littlefield.

Basham, L., & Dentith, M. R. X. (2016). Social science's conspiracy-theory panic: Now they want to cure everyone. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, *5*(10), 12–19.

Biddlestone, M., Ricky, G., Aleksandra, C., Karen, D., & Sutton, R. M. (2022). A systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of the motives associated with conspiracy beliefs. *PsyArxiv. Preprints*. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/rxjqc

Bjerg, O., & Presskorn-Thygesen, T. (2017). Conspiracy theory: Truth claim or language game? Theory. *Culture & Society*, *34*(1), 137–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416657880

Bortolotti, L. (2020). *The epistemic innocence of irrational beliefs*. Oxford University Press.

Bratich, J. Z. (2008). *Conspiracy panics: Political rationality and popular culture*. suny Press.

Brotherton, R. (2015). *Suspicious minds: Why*. Bloomsbury Sigma.

Brotherton, R., French, C., & Pickering, A. (2013). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: The generic conspiracist beliefs scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Bullivant, S. 2013. Defining 'Atheism. In S. Bullivant & M. RuseEds., *The oxford handbook of atheism*. online edn, Oxford Academic. (16 Dec. 2013) https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.013.001

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2019). The History of Conspiracy Theory Research. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiraacy theories and the people who believe them* (pp. 33–46). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Butter, M., Knight P. (2020). General Introduction. In M. Butter, & P. Knight (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 1–8). Routledge.

Calkins, A. W., Berman, N. C., & Wilhelm, S. (2013). Recent advances in research on cognition and emotion in OCD: A review. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, *15*(5), 357. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-013-0357-4

Case, M. A. (2011). Feminist fundamentalism as an individual and constitutional commitment. *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy, and the Law*, *19*(1), 549.

Cassam, Q. (2019). *Conspiracy Theories*. Polity Press).

Coady, D. (2003). Conspiracy theories and official stories. *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *17*(2), 197–209. https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap200317210

Coady, D. (2007). Are conspiracy theorists irrational? *Episteme*, *4*(2), 193–204. https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.193

Coady, D. (2018a). Cass Sunstein and Adrian vermeule on conspiracy theories. *Argumenta*, *3*(2), 291–302.

Coady, D. (2018b). Anti-rumour campaigns and Conspiracy-baiting as propaganda. In M. R. X. Dentith (Ed.), *Taking conspiracy theories seriously* (pp. 171–188). Rowman and Littlefield.

Dalton, R. (2010). E-mails spark ethics row. *Nature*, *466*(7309), 913. https://doi.org/10.1038/466913a

De Coninck, Frissen, T., David, D., Frissen, T., Matthijs, K., d'Haenens, L., Lits, G., Champagne-Poirier, O., Carignan, M. E., David, M. D., Pignard-Cheyne, L. N., Salerno, S., & Généreux, M. (2021). Beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19: Comparative perspectives on the role of anxiety, depression and exposure to and trust in information sources. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 646394. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646394

DeHaven-Smith, L. (2013). *Conspiracy theory in America*. University of Texas Press.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2014). *The philosophy of conspiracy theories*. Palgrave Macmillan).

Dentith, M. R. (2019). Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence. *Synthese*, *196*, 2243–2261.

Dentith, M. R. X. (2022). Suspicious conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, *200*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03602-4

Dentith, M. R. X., & Orr, M. (2018). Secrecy and Conspiracy. *Episteme*, *15*(4), 433–450. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2017.9

Díaz-León, E. (2016). Woman as a politically significant term: A solution to the puzzle. *Hypatia*, *31*(2), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12234

Douglas, K. M. (2021). Are conspiracy theories harmless? *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, *24*. https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.10

Douglas, K. M., & Robbie, M. S. (2023). What are conspiracy theories? A definitional approach to their correlates, consequences, and communication. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *74*(1), 271–298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2011). Does it take one to know? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *50*(3), 544–552. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02018.x

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Douglas, K. M., van Prooijen, J. -W., & Sutton, R. M. (2021). Is the label 'conspiracy theory' a cause or a consequence of disbelief in alternative narratives? *British Journal of Psychology*, *113*(3), 575–590. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12548

Duetz, J. (2022). Conspiracy theories are not beliefs. *Erkenntnis*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00620-z

Farinelli, F. (2021). *Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE*. European Commission.

Gray, M. (2020). Conspiracy theories in the middle east. In M. Butter, & P. Knight (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 624–637). Routledge .

Hagen, K. (2018a). Conspiracy theorists and monological belief systems. *Argumenta*, *3*(2), 303–326.

Hagen, K. (2022a). Are ‘conspiracy theories’ so unlikely to be true? A critique of quassim cassam’s concept of ‘conspiracy theories’. *Social Epistemology*, *36*(3), 329–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2021.2009930

Hagen, K. (2022b). Do conspiracies tend to fail? Philosophical reflections on a poorly supported academic meme. *Episteme*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2021.55

Harambam, J. (2020). *Contemporary conspiracy culture: Truth and knowledge in an era of epistemic instability*. Routledge).

Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2017). ‘I am not a conspiracy theorist’: Relational identifications in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. *Cultural Sociology*, *11*(1), 113–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975516661959

Harris, K. (2018). What’s epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorising? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, *84*, 235–257. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246118000619

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? *Noûs*, *34*(1), 31–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00201

Husting, G., & Orr, M. (2007). Dangerous machinery: “conspiracy theorist” as a transpersonal strategy of exclusion. *Symbolic Interaction*, *30*(2), 127–150. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.2.127

Ivani, S. (2019). What we (Should) Talk about when we talk about fruitfulness. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-018-0231-7

Jolley, D., Douglas, K. M., & Tripp, R. (2014). The effects of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions. *Plos One*, *9*(2), e89177. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0089177

Keeley, B. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *96*(3), 109. https://doi.org/10.2307/2564659

Klein, O., Van der Linden, N., Pantazi, M., & Kissine, M. (2015). Behind the screen conspirators: Paranoid social cognition in an online age. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psycholog y of conspiracy* (pp. 162–182). Routledge.

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). “I know things they don’t know!”: The role of need for uniqueness in belief in conspiracy theories. *Social psychology*, *48*(3), 160–173. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000306.

Lantian, A., Muller, D., Nurra, C., Klein, O., Berjot, S., & Pantazi, M. (2018). Stigmatized beliefs: Conspiracy theories, an- ticipated negative evaluation of the self, and fear of social exclusion. *European Journal of Social Psycholog Y*, *48*(7), 939–954. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2498

Liekefett, L., Christ, O., & Becker, J. C. (2021). Can conspiracy beliefs be beneficial? Longitudinal linkages between conspiracy beliefs, anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and existential threat. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, *49*(2), 014616722110609. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211060965

Meyer, M., Alfano, M., & de Bruin, B. (2021). The development and validation of the epistemic vice scale. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-021-00562-5

Napolitano, M. G. (2021). Conspiracy theories and evidential self-insulation. *The Epistemology of Fake News (2021)*, 82–106.

Napolitano, M. G., & Reuter, K. (2021). What is a conspiracy theory? *Erkenntnis*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-021-00441-6

Nera, K., Leveaux, S., & Klein, P. P. L. E. (2020). A “conspiracy theory” conspiracy? A mixed methods investigation of lay- people’s rejection (and acceptance) of a controversial label. *International Review of Social Psychology*, *33*(1), 13. https://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.401

Pagán, V. E. (2004). *Conspiracy narratives in roman history*. University of Texas Press.

Pagán, V. E. (2012). *Conspiracy theory in Latin literature*. University of Texas Press.

Pauly, M. (2020). Conspiracy theories. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Pigden, C. (1995). Popper revisited, or what is wrong with conspiracy theories? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *25*(1), 3–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/004839319502500101

Pigden, C. (2006). Complots of mischief. In D. Coady (Ed.), *Conspiracy theories: The philosophical debate* (pp. 139–166). Ashgate.

Poth, N., & Dolega, K. (2023). Bayesian belief protection: A study of belief in conspiracy theories. *Philosophical Psychology*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2168881

Räikkä, J. (2018). Conspiracies and conspiracy theories: An introduction. *Argumenta*, *6*, 1–12.

Räikkä, J., & Basham, L. (2018). 'Conspiracy Theory Phobia', In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (pp. 178–186). New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0011.

Robertson, D. G., Asprem, E., & Dyrendal, A. (2018). Introducing the Field: conspiracy theory in, about, and as religion. In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Handbook of conspiracy theory and contemporary religion* (pp. 1–18). Brill.

Rudy-Hiller, F. (2022). The epistemic condition for moral responsibility. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2022 Edition)*, E. N. Zalta & U. NodelmanEds., URL =, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/moral-responsibility-epistemic/

Shields, M. (2022). Rethinking conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, *200*(4), 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03811-x

Sivan, E. (1985). *Radical Islam: Medieval theology and modern politics*. Yale University Press).

Stokes, P. (2016). Between generalism and particularism about conspiracy theory: A response to basham and dentith. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, *5* (10), 34–39.

Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *17*(2), 202–227. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x

Swami, V., Voracek, M., Stieger, S., Tran, U. S., & Furnham, A. (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition*, *133*(3), 572–585. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2014.08.006

Swami, V., Zahari, H. S., & Barron, D. (2020). Conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 638–647). Routledge.

Tempest, M. (2003). Blair: Iraq oil claim is 'conspiracy theory'. The guardian. *(Wed*, *13*, 35. 15 Jan. 2003 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/jan/15/foreignpolicy.uk

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press).

Van der Linden, S. (2015). The conspiracy-effect: Exposure to conspiracy theories (about global warming) decreases pro-social behavior and science acceptance. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *87*, 171–173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.07.045

Van Prooijen, J.W. (2019). Belief in conspiracy theories: Gullibility or Rational Skepticism?. In J. P. Forgas, & R. Baumeister (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Gullibility* (1st ed, pp. 319–322). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429203787.

Van Prooijen, J-W., Ligthart, Joline, Rosema, Sabine, Xu, Yang. (2022). The entertainment value of conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology*, *113*(1), 25–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522

Wood, M. J. (2016). Some dare call it conspiracy: Labeling something a conspiracy theory does not reduce belief in it. *Political Psychology*, *37*(5), 695–705. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12285

Yablokov, I., Girard, P., Blanuša, N., & Rabo, A. (2020). Introduction. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 527–530). Routledge).