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RESEARCH

Doing Conspiracy Theory: Reconstructing the Social Production of a Specific Form of Social Critique

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Abstract

Despite growing scientific interest in conspiracy theories, their production as a collaborative social process has not been systematically researched and theorized. This article delineates this gap and proposes to address it by shifting focus from belief to *doing conspiracy theory*, to be analysed on five levels: (A) the socio-structural level, (B) conspiracy theory producing milieus, (C) conspiracy theory scenes, (D) conspiracy theory knowledge production in interactions, and (E) psychodynamics. The thus suggested research program has the potential to better our understanding of the current conjuncture of conspiracy theorizing, and to prove insightful for understanding the production of contentious political knowledge in general.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theory, Sociology of Knowledge, Qualitative Methods, Critique, Political Sociology

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In political conflicts over the past years, questions concerning the *reality status* of critique have assumed an important role: *fake news*, *alternative facts*, and the *post-truth era* are buzzwords underlining that contestation regarding the social construction of reality shapes political conflict and, vice versa, that constructions of reality are conditioned by political conflicts (Kajewski 2017; Kumkar 2022; Ylä-Anttila 2018). This heightened sensitivity towards questions of truth with regards to political ideology and critique has led to a noticeable surge in scientific literature on conspiracy theories – from sociology, political sciences, philosophy, psychology, and media studies –, and is also documented in the publication of handbooks on the subject in recent years (Butter and Knight 2020, 2023; Dyrendal et al. 2018).

While this shift from the margins to the centre of public attention has undoubtedly enhanced our understanding of the social logics of conspiracy theories, it also brought to the fore a number of unresolved questions and ambiguities that call us to rethink the perspective from which we approach conspiracy theorising and the production of contentious political knowledge more generally, as scholars working on conspiracy theories have highlighted.[1] In our understanding, two key areas that require further attention stem from earlier research's main focus on (questioning) the status of conspiracy theories as *theories* and on the psychological underpinnings of belief in such theories:[2] (i) Theoretical and empirical investigations into recent prominent examples of conspiracy theorising have pointed out that they cannot be understood as theorising in the traditional sense of the term: Scholars have argued that for instance Q-Anon exhibit characteristics akin to Alternate Reality Games (Davies 2022), or that their adherents are drawn towards these collaborative instances of political sense-making for their capacity to serve as a fictional engagement with what they perceive as fundamental truths, rather than for their purported factual accuracy (Young and Boucher 2022, Zeeuw and Gekker 2023). While it remains uncertain whether this reflects, like Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) suggest, a defining feature of a *new conspiracism* or whether it is the consequence of an increased sensitivity towards the processual logics of conspiracy theorizing due to its visibility on

1 The program and perspective presented in this article were developed in the context of the application for – and are currently implemented in – a tri-national mixed methods project by the authors. The project is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, partner agency): project number I 6577-G; German Research Foundation (DFG, lead agency): project number 522282012; and the Swiss National Fund (SNF, partner agency): project number 10001AE_216039 (https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/522282012?context=projekt&task=showDetail&id=522282012&). Since we, however, feel that this perspective will prove informative for investigating the genesis and reproduction of contentious political knowledge more generally, we considered it useful to present the theoretical program beforehand, inviting criticism and discussion of synergies with other approaches.

2 In a recent article, Cassam (2023) differentiates *psychology* and *ontology* of conspiracy as the main currents of research, which in many regards parallels our distinction.

social media, it nevertheless calls for *the development of a more nuanced perspective on these very processual logics.* (ii) Psychological studies have primarily focused on the individual susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, while literature and media studies have investigated the persuasive power of conspiracy theories, each examining the shared problem of why conspiracy theories are believed in the first place. Studies and debates in social theory have primarily focused on conspiracy theories as *theories*, defined as (more or less) systematic collections of assumptions about the world, and their role in shaping society's self-understanding (e.g., Barkun 2013; Byford 2011). Recent empirical studies, however, indicate that belief in conspiracy theories has not increased over the past decades (Uscinski et al. 2022), begging the question of how conspiracy theories emerged as such a prominent object of public scrutiny in recent years. From our perspective, this suggests the need for a shift in focus from *belief in* to *communication of* conspiracy theories – an aspect that has been noted as a research gap within psychological research on conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

Building on these emerging research questions, we propose conceptualizing conspiracy theorizing from a pragmatist perspective. Rather than focusing on what conspiracy theories *are* or why they are *believed*, we suggest shifting attention to *how they are done*, how they are produced, disseminated, and validated in social interaction. We aim to understand how conspiracy theories emerge as a body of knowledge from polycontextual processes and to develop a systematic research program that allows us to investigate it as such. This paper thus aims to achieve three objectives: (i) First, it outlines our conceptualisation of conspiracy theorising as a polycontextual process of social production and communication of knowledge, highlighting how this perspective calls for reconstructing the communicative function of conspiracy theorising across a range of different communicative contexts. (ii) It then introduces a five-level model as a research program for investigating the production of conspiracy theories, summarizing the current state of research along these levels and its respective gaps. (iii) Finally, the paper concludes with a sketch of potential entry points for integrating this research program into current debates about conspiracy theories and discusses how this framework might contribute to broader discussions on the production and consolidation of contentious political knowledge.

Doing conspiracy theory

By refraining from treating conspiracy theories either as *theories* or as beliefs that people hold, we do not dismiss the importance of these aspects or the substantial progress made in research in these fields in recent decades. Rather, we advocate for an epistemologically modest shift of perspective: While it is possible that conspiracy theories may indeed qualify as theories, and that a substantial part of

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the population does indeed believe in them, these factors are not a prerequisite for their unsettling impact on public discourse, because what people observe if they are irritated by conspiracy theories is not peoples' belief, but peoples' articulation of conspiracy theory belief. To understand current conspiracy theory discourse, it is therefore important to focus on this communication of conspiracy theories (online and offline) and how these processes of communication are observed by the public.

Following Boltanski's (2011, 2014) approach to pragmatically theorize conspiracy theories as a form of critical engagement with social complexity, we suggest conceiving the knowledge production of conspiracy theories as a form and social process of social critique, the origins and substance of which must be deciphered. Several historical and cultural studies (e.g. Butter 2014; Melley 2016; Olmsted 2011) have shown that conspiracy theories are neither a novel phenomenon nor geographically or culturally unique. Although there are historical spikes in conspiracy theorizing, these theory-based constructions of reality are part of a broader repertoire of self-perception and self-criticism in societies from antiquity until today.[3] Some scholars (e.g., Harambam 2020a; Miller 2002; van der Tak and Harambam 2024) have already pointed to the fact that conspiracy theories function as (coded) critiques of society as a whole or its institutions, and as a mode of conveying dissensus (Parmigiani 2021). As societies and global networks grow more complex and power structures more difficult to decipher, conspiracy theories not only aim at comprehending what is increasingly obscured, but also at criticizing and at times outright rejecting the core institutions of contemporary societies (Aupers 2012; Knight 2000, 2021). However, while these studies aptly highlight the objects and broader societal origins of these critiques, not much emphasis has been put on how social critique by way of conspiracy theories is collectively produced in specific social contexts, as well as how they relate to the actual belief in their contents – a relationship that sometimes seems to be problematised by the proponents of those theories themselves. As Knight (2021: 210) argues, "conspiracy belief increasingly inhabits a liminal space between conviction and doubt."

For interpreting conspiracy theory communication "symptomatically" as a form of "vernacular critique" and to engage with the everyday culture of conspiracism, as Birchall and Knight (2024) have recently called for, we argue for the need to reconstruct how this form of critique is pragmatically generated and to identify the social

3 And neither are they an exclusively *Western* phenomenon. However, the form and content, as well as the legitimacy status of conspiracy theorising, vary greatly in different socio-historic contexts. It should therefore be noted that the research program proposed in this article was developed mostly by referring to literature (and thinking of concrete cases) in contemporary Europe and North America. It could, however, by being deployed across varying socio-cultural contexts, also help to further illuminate said differences.

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factors that contribute to its communication. From this perspective, the production of this form of knowledge can be understood as a dual process: firstly, as a means of processing conflicts through the interpretation of reality and its socially critical appropriation, a process we conceive of as *doing conspiracy theory*, and, secondly, as the collaborative stabilization of structures of plausibility that support this critical mode of appropriation. Although we proceed from the assertion that conspiracy theory knowledge is, in most cases, at best *inaccurate* in terms of its content, the question of whether the factual validity of its articulated claims can be substantiated should be bracketed for the purposes of this analysis. Instead, the focus lies on how conspiracy theory knowledge *makes sense* within its respective communicative context: what do actors accomplish by articulating such knowledge, and what kind of impact does its articulation have? For the production and communication of conspiracy theory knowledge to be successful, the key factor is its utility in weaving itself into communication across very different, concrete social contexts, and that it connects these divergent communicative events by way of forming a socially validated body of knowledge.

This empirical and theoretical approach would pursue three interrelated objectives: 1) to reconstruct the polycontextual functions of *doing conspiracy theory* – that is to examine what problems are addressed in different communicative contexts through the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge; 2) to explore how the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge across these different contexts is interrelated, examining how their functions within these contexts may either inhibit or reinforce one another; and 3) to interpret the content of conspiracy theories as social critique, while acknowledging that the specific object of critique may vary considerably across contexts, even if their propositional content is quite similar.

We propose this perspective because, despite the extensive body of research on conspiracy theories, substantial empirical and theoretical questions remain unresolved. A more precise understanding is required of who adopts elements of conspiracy theory knowledge under what social conditions and against the backdrop of what biographical experiences, and how this knowledge circulates in what communicative contexts. To address these research gaps, which will be elaborated further below, we propose analysing the production of conspiracy theory knowledge from a pragmatist perspective, coupling sociological and socio-psychological approaches as well as critical sociology and sociology of critique (Boltanski et al. 2014). The general state of research strongly indicates that adopting this perspective would offer valuable empirical and theoretical insights. Specifically, this involves analysing the practice of doing conspiracy theory as a social, communicative process through a reconstructive mixed-methods approach.

We are aware of the ongoing conceptual debates around the term *conspiracy theory* – both on how to define it and if it is indeed a term that could and should be

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used as a scientific concept. However, we use it as a common-sense terminology functioning as a heuristic device, acknowledging that the term may ultimately have to be revised or abandoned over the course of the reconstruction. The definition proposed by Barkun (2013: 3) offers a useful systematization of this common-sense concept: "conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (for our purposes, the term *theory* would, of course, be substituted for *belief*). The term *conspiracy theory knowledge* refers to the totality of knowledge that contributes to the production of conspiracy theories as components or interpretational routines: e.g., particular modes of inquiry, like the "conspiratorial mode of interpretation" (Kumkar 2018a: 109-134) as a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970) stabilizing normative expectations against cognitive disappointment, "alternative facts" as communicative forms of refusing to validate pre-established factual knowledge (Kumkar 2023), self-images of heretic critics of hegemonic knowledge (Buchmayr 2019), and so on. We suggest analysing the practice of doing conspiracy theory as a socially situated practice of critique on different levels that are interconnected but not reducible to one another. While recent discussions have called for a deeper understanding of, for example, the political function of conspiracy theory (Cassam 2023) or the psychological motives behind conspiracy beliefs (Douglas and Sutton 2023), this need has been addressed only sporadically thus far and, most importantly, not in a systematic manner that differentiates between the contexts in which conspiracy theory knowledge is disseminated and articulated, even though nobody would dispute that for example the advent of digitalized communication has fundamentally changed the ways in which conspiracy theory communication is done.[4]

On the level of *social structure*, it is crucial to analyse how different dimensions of social inequality contribute to the communication of conspiracy theories. We therefore find it essential to understand the use of conspiracy theory knowledge in the interpretation of structural inequalities in society – including the gender order.[5] This requires a more nuanced analysis of which social groups engage in the dissemination of what kinds of conspiracy theories and how they process experiences of social inequality by means of doing conspiracy theory. On the level of *social milieus*, we argue that to understand its social core-constituencies (Kumkar 2018a, 2018b), we must understand the production of conspiracy theory knowledge as a practice rooted in conjunctive spaces of experience (Mannheim 1997) that are constitutive of

4 In this regard, we eagerly wait for the results of the ongoing CHANSE project "Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theory" (https://chanse.org/redact/).

5 Several studies have highlighted the significance of gender aspects and anti-feminist elements in contemporary conspiracy theories (Blum 2022; Dilling et al. 2022; Fleckenstein 2024; Murphey 2023).

a milieu: The content of conspiracy theories, on the one hand, serves as a metaphorical expression of implicit, experience-based knowledge. On the other hand, their production as a practice is shaped by the style of action and interpretation of these communities. On the level of *social scenes* and in the context of movement practice, we deem it necessary to trace how conspiracy theory knowledge is marketed and used politically and strategically (e.g., Cassam 2023; Douglas and Sutton 2023), what forms of customer and follower loyalty it engenders, and what elective affinities might exist between certain organisational practices and conspiracy theory knowledge. In this sense, it is essential to examine conspiracy theory knowledge in terms of its possible functions in distinct contexts of *interaction*. Like all political knowledge, conspiracy theory knowledge must prove itself in specific communicative situations to make a difference within those contexts. Finally, at the level of the *psychodynamics* of doing conspiracy theory, we emphasize the need to focus on the affective integration and adaptation of conspiracy theory knowledge. This will allow us to theorise the conspiracist mindset as a form of processing internal psychological conflicts, understanding how individuals emotionally and cognitively internalize and adapt conspiracy theories in response to personal as well as social challenges.

A praxeological multi-level approach to *doing conspiracy theory*: Five relevant communicative contexts

The research gap addressed by our programmatic proposal focuses on how conspiracy theory knowledge is co-produced and enacted in everyday life. Building on our observations of contemporary forms of doing conspiracy theory and on research on the topic, we propose a framework for understanding the different social levels on which the communication of conspiracy theory knowledge must prove its utility to be stabilized as a communicative genre. A note of caution beforehand: While it is highly plausible that the discourse on conspiracy theories as a social problem has led to conspiracy theories becoming "a distinct (sub)cultural phenomenon" (Birchall and Knight 2024) at least in Western societies, it is an empirically open question if this also corresponds to a real-existing, integrated subculture, or if it is rather to be considered a "pre-constructed object" (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 21f.) ascribed onto diverging milieus and practices. The different levels thus are both designed to identify coherence and divergence on the separate levels (can we really identify a delineable social group engaged in conspiracy theory production?) and between those levels (is the demographic group found to be engaged in conspiracy theory communication and production organized in political groups deploying conspiracy theory communication?). But in order to be able to meaningfully address this question, we identify five levels of analysis related to forms of communicative contexts in which conspiracy

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theory knowledge must *make sense* in order to stabilize itself – even if only episodically and or fragmentary:
(A) social structure,
(B) social milieus,
(C) different social scenes and organizations,
(D) interactions, and
(E) psychodynamics.

In the following, we outline the importance of inquiring into the production of conspiracy theory knowledge and summarize relevant findings from the literature on conspiracy theories at each of these levels. This serves to carve out the research gap we aim to address, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the current conjuncture of conspiracy theorizing.

A) Social Structure

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of how conspiracy theories are produced as communicatively shared knowledge, it is essential to determine *who participates in doing conspiracy theory*. However, most research on the social structure of the dissemination of conspiracy theories focuses on belief in conspiracy theories and how it is manufactured, thus neglecting the process of their collective communicative production: Much of the *socio-psychological research* on belief in conspiracy theories, that is largely relying on cross-sectional survey data, provides insights into the prevalence and demographic distribution of conspiracy beliefs, which are contingent on their operationalisation (Butter and Knight 2016; Smallpage et al. 2020). A key concept in this field is the so-called "conspiracy mentality" (Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff 2020; Moscovici 1987), which proposes a general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Notably, marginalized groups, especially those with low levels of education and low media literacy, display a higher propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Craft et al. 2018; Schließler et al. 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014). However, correlational studies between conspiracy mentality and gender remain inconclusive (Bruder et al. 2013; Darwin et al. 2011; Popoli and Longus 2021). In the context of German-speaking countries, research on protests against Covid-19 restrictions, which were heavily influenced by conspiracy theories (Forschungswerkstatt Corona-Proteste 2021; Nachtwey et al. 2020; Knasmüller et al. 2024; Koos 2021), suggests that a substantial proportion of those actively engaging in conspiracy practices have higher education degrees[6], and a majority

6 Recently, a study found that conspiracy beliefs are generally not confined to socially marginalized groups. A notable proportion of individuals with higher socio-economic status, as well as higher levels

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of the protest milieu identifies as female. This challenges the assumption that the socio-structural characteristics of conspiracy theory participation align with those of belief in conspiracy theories.

A systematic understanding of those differences is urgently needed both for scientific and political reasons. For scholarly reasons, a clearer picture of the social structure of doing conspiracy theory will facilitate assessing the generalizability of findings across all other levels. While research on the social structure of conspiracy beliefs suggest that political interventions should aim at improving media literacy. Conversely, findings that highlight the prevalence of communication of conspiracy theories in social groups that display rather high levels of media literacy call for the development of alternative approaches to mitigate the spread of conspiracy theories. Investigating this requires survey research focused on different practices of conspiracy theory communication, ideally in combination with more established items for surveying conspiracy theory mentality and political ideology.

B) Milieus

A notable blind spot in sociological research on conspiracy theories is the question of *why* certain social groups are more susceptible to believing in them than others (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020). Research suggests that conspiracy theory knowledge must be understood as embedded within broader patterns of interpreting the world (see Sutton and Douglas 2014; Swami et al. 2011). Belief in conspiracy theories appears to be associated with the *mindset* of those advocating political extremism (van Prooijen et al. 2015) and an individual's own openness to conspiring (Douglas and Sutton 2011). Moreover, an individual's general political orientation plays a crucial role in determining which specific conspiracy theories they are likely to embrace. Political orientation influences the types of conspiracy theories that resonate with individuals, as they are more inclined to adopt those that align with their existing beliefs and worldviews (Wood and Gray 2019). However, preliminary studies on the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Forschungswerkstatt Corona-Proteste 2021; Nachtwey et al. 2020) suggest that these intuitively plausible links do not necessarily correspond to common assumptions. For example, the overrepresentation of partisans of both the Green Party and the right-wing populist AfD in Germany or FPÖ in Austria among Covid-19 related protests can neither be accounted for in terms of a polarisation between the *old* and *new* middle classes or communitarians versus cosmopolitans nor between those that belong to the political right and left. This

of education, are concurrently prone to conspiracy beliefs, although they subscribe to different theories compared to those from less privileged social groups (Roscigno 2024).

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suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of how the practice of doing conspiracy theories is rooted in specific social milieus in a double sense. On the one hand, it is plausible to assume that communication of conspiracy theories allows for the processing of shared experiences and normative orientations which are constitutive of a milieu, as described in Mannheim's (1997) notion of a conjunctive space of experience. On the other hand, it is very likely that engaging in shared practices of conspiracy theory production itself is formative of shared experiences and normative orientations, thereby contributing to the formation of milieus. Understanding these dynamics would be valuable for addressing conspiracy theories, as identifying the experiences and critiques processed through conspiracy theory communication, and how their form ties in with milieu-specific styles of communication, could help identify functional equivalents – genres of critique that could serve as alternatives to conspiracy theories. Investigating this question requires a sensitive combination of survey research (see above), ethnographic observation, and reconstructive approaches for reconstructing the communicative logics of milieus, for example group discussions (Bohnsack 2014).

C) Social Scenes and Organizations

Studies have shown that conspiracy theory knowledge is clearly conveyed and disseminated in an organised manner: political parties and social movements incorporate such knowledge into their diagnostic framing, while conspiracy theory entrepreneurs establish networks and distribution structures to promote conspiracy theory literature and for marketing events such as workshops and lectures (Birchall 2021; Harambam 2020b; Harambam and Aupers 2021; Löwenthal 1949; Nefes 2017; Vennmann 2020). This underlines that the dissemination and consolidation of conspiracy theory knowledge cannot be adequately explained by focusing solely on the *susceptibility* of certain social groups to engage in doing conspiracy theory. A more nuanced understanding is required, which considers the (probably multiple) sources of validity and functions of conspiracy theory communication in organizational practices and the reproduction of social scenes. These include the forms of follower loyalty it elicits, the internal conflicts it helps to obscure, and how it shapes the communication dynamics between political organizations, their external allies, and their antagonists. The state of research with regards to this level of analysis is far less developed compared to levels A and B, but it already indicates a number of diverging functions of conspiracy theory communication: Politically, for example, the "Melodramatic Mode" (Melley 2021) of right wing conspiracy theories elicits urgency for political agitation, dovetailing with its affordance to support articulations of populist rhetorics of political antagonism (Kumkar 2024). At the same time, spreading conspiracy theory knowledge, often in tandem with selling products and an overall lifestyle, is a profitable business model (Birchall 2021), raising the question of how conspiracy

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theory entrepreneurs produce customer loyalty and keep the *suspense up*. Investigating this requires ethnographic research on conspiracy theory scenes and events, both online and offline.

D) Interactions

Everyday observations reveal that conspiracy theory knowledge is introduced, shared and creatively adapted in various forms of everyday interactions, such as internet forums (Deschrijver 2021; Kumkar 2023), messenger services (Duffy et al. 2020), and in social interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and strangers. The recent surge in self-help literature on how to communicate with loved ones who believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Neiwert 2020) highlights that conspiracy theories have become a common topic of discussion. Hence, it is essential to examine conspiracy theory knowledge in terms of its functions within distinct interactional contexts. Doing conspiracy theory must prove itself within these (in many aspects unique) contexts to become a feature of everyday communication. Therefore, we expect communicative everyday practices to differ according to these contextual frameworks. While it might serve as a marker for selective de-thematization, for example in discourse with colleagues at work, who, upon noticing signals of *secret knowledge*, might subtly change the topic of conversation, it may spark heated debates with friends or become a collaborative puzzle, or even facilitate social bonds where those *in the know* gather to share and discuss this knowledge. Not only must anyone actively engaging in conspiracy theory communication become at least somewhat adept at navigating these diverging communicative contexts (Green et al. 2023), but the diversity of those contexts, and the functionality of conspiracy theory within them, all contribute to the production of conspiracy theory knowledge as an object of observation as well. The material for interpreting the interactive, communicative function of conspiracy theory knowledge across those contexts can be generated by collecting online conversations (Kumkar 2023), by conducting group discussions with members of conspiracy theory communicating groups and milieus (Bohnsack 2014), and by conducting ethnographic research.

E) Psychodynamics

Finally, the production and communication of conspiracy theory also involves a psychological dimension. While psychology has been one of the disciplines most engaged with conspiracy beliefs in the past decade, the shift from questions of belief in to the production of conspiracy theory knowledge requires a different set of questions within this framework. Quantitative socio-psychological studies have highlighted the interrelation between, firstly, a sense of a loss of control and deprivation; secondly, certain psychological features (personality traits: Bowes et al. 2023; authoritarian syndrome: Schließler et al. 2020); and thirdly, a conspiracy mentality (Bruder

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et al. 2013; Moscovici 1987). While these socio-psychological findings do account for the social production of susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, they typically conceptualize *conspiracy mentality* as a stable personality trait or syndrome, essentially dividing people into those who are or are not prone to *believing* in conspiracy theories. We argue that these approaches fail to fully capture the dynamic nature of how and why specific conspiracy beliefs are adopted to address psychological conflicts. This process is more fluid than these models suggest, especially considering that doing conspiracy theory does not coincide with believing in conspiracy theories.

Psychoanalytically oriented socio-psychological research, particularly in studies on antisemitism, has shown that the fantasized images of powerful conspirators are based on projective processes, allowing individuals to resolve internal conflicts in a "crooked way" (Freud 1921), thus allowing them to mitigate biographical disruptions and to avoid experiences of powerlessness. These processes depend on and facilitate the formation of communities through shared ideologies (see Adorno et al. 1950; Brunner 2015; Chaudhary 2022 empirically: Knasmüller and Brunner 2022; Lohl 2021). However, these works have primarily focused on right-wing political worldviews (see Knasmüller et al. 2023 and Kalkstein and Dilling 2024 for first empirical explorations of the psychodynamic merit of conspiracy theory knowledge) and the ex-post functionality of conspiracy theory knowledge, rather than reconstructing the *process* of its affective integration and adoption. A psychoanalytically informed analysis of group interactions promises novel insights into the relationship between the collective production of conspiracy theory knowledge and psychodynamic dimensions. Additionally, there is an urgent need to further examine the gendered dimension of the adoption and production of conspiracy theory knowledge.

Analysing the production of conspiracy theory knowledge on these levels allows for pursuing three interconnected objectives: *Firstly*, this approach enables the reconstruction of the functions that conspiracy theory knowledge serves on different social levels. *Secondly*, it allows for the reconstruction of how conspiracy theory knowledge is established and stabilised as a distinct form of problem processing at these levels as opposed to alternative, functionally equivalent forms of problem processing. This includes identifying the lifeworld-related, situational, organisational, and socio-structural factors that contribute to the appeal of *doing conspiracy theory* as a mode of processing problems, ultimately fostering a more comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theory knowledge more generally. *Thirdly*, it enables the reconstruction of how conspiracy theory knowledge articulates a normative engagement with social developments – specifically, how *doing conspiracy theory* functions as a form of social critique. This entails understanding whether normative orientations expressed through conspiracy theories contradict the very function of that form of knowledge itself (for example, if the aim of the critique contradicts the desire it fulfils) (see Kumkar 2021).

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Conclusion

The current state of research strongly indicates that the change of perspective proposed in this paper offers significant empirical and theoretical insights. We will conclude this paper by briefly outlining the main contributions that this approach makes to the study on conspiracy theories and its broader implications for understanding the production of contentious political knowledge.

Theoretically, this approach will enrich and refine our understanding of conspiracy theories as practical, social accomplishments. Recent contributions have emphasized the need for a deeper ontological understanding of what conspiracy theories actually *are* (Douglas and Sutton 2023), while others have instead argued for abandoning the question of the ontology of conspiracy theories in favor of focusing on their political function – what conspiracy theories *do* (Cassam 2023). The perspective proposed in this paper allows us to understand conspiracy theories themselves as practices: something that must be *done* to have an impact on society. Doing conspiracy theory is inherently a collaborative, social endeavour that continuously involves multiple actors across diverging contexts. We expect this shift of perspective to be instructive also with regards to questions raised from rather traditional, well-established perspectives, because it allows us to grasp conspiracy theories as something that *is* different and *does* different things in different social contexts. Additionally, it allows us to consider the degree to which it is useful to nevertheless understand conspiracy theories as an integrated body of knowledge transcending these very contexts. Beyond the study of conspiracy theories, this approach could widen our understanding of how ideologies as bodies of political knowledge travel and function across diverging contexts. It sheds light on how changes in certain communicative contexts or the development of new communicative environments like social media, as arenas for self-documenting communication (Schwarz 2021), reshape the dynamics of political ideologies. If, for example, contemporary conspiracy theory communication functions really "without theory" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019) or if this is merely a misreading of its dispersed production and circulation (Birchall and Knight 2024) is an empirical question that might very well prove illuminating for a broader set of political ideologies and lay-theories.

Empirically, one key contribution of this approach is the understanding of how conspiracy theorizing is *done* across these different contexts – and by whom. We anticipate that findings will not only challenge existing knowledge about the social structure of beliefs in conspiracy theories but also reveal significant variations in the functions of conspiracy theory communication across different contexts and for different actors. Even more importantly, this perspective allows for a better understanding of how these diverse contexts are interconnected in the production of conspiracy theories: The experiences of which actors are processed in the content and form of these theories? How are they integrated into the organizational practices

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of movements promoting conspiracy theories or conspiracy theory entrepreneurs? And how does this relate to the psychodynamics of those engaging in the production and communication of conspiracy theories? The perceived spike in conspiracy theory communication over the last decades might suggest that these diverging functions neatly tie into each other. However, it is likely that they just as often generate tensions that must be moderated and mitigated to prevent the process of doing conspiracy theory from disintegrating. After all, on every level of analysis, it is reasonable to expect that the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge is by no means an exclusive way of fulfilling its respective function, begging the question of how the stabilization of conspiracy theory as a body of social knowledge is accomplished despite these potential pitfalls.

This will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the contingent nature of conspiracy theory production and, therefore, hopefully provide valuable insights for political engagement with conspiracy theories. By shifting the focus of inquiry from the issue of belief in conspiracy theory (which appears to be rather stable: Uscinski et al. 2022) to the communication of conspiracy theories (which fluctuates over time: Uscinski and Parent 2014), and by emphasizing the contingency involved in stabilizing conspiracy theory communication across different contexts, multiple possible points for intervention emerge. If conspiracy theories serve as metaphorically condensed forms of social critique, if they justify forms of grifting and are marketed both organizationally and economically, and if the production of conspiracy theories processes socio-psychological forms of suffering, then social and political intervention could be targeted at all these levels. Moreover, this perspective is likely to offer insights that go beyond the study of conspiracy theories. A global phenomenon such as backlash politics, for example, is not just a curious case of convergence of diverse issues and national contexts (Alter and Zürn 2020), but understanding it also involves the different social contexts in which the corresponding political knowledge is developed, communicated, and put into practice. Political sociology and practical political strategies in dealing with backlash politics would certainly benefit from understanding the synergies and conflicts of functions of backlash politics across these diverging communicative contexts.

Literature

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