Understanding Conspiracy Theories

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Scholarly efforts to understand conspiracy theories have grown significantly in recent years, and there is now a broad and interdisciplinary literature. In reviewing this body of work, we ask three specific questions. First, what factors are associated with conspiracy beliefs? Our review of the literature shows that conspiracy beliefs result from a range of psychological, political, and social factors. Next, how are conspiracy theories communicated? Here, we explain how conspiracy theories are shared among individuals and spread through traditional and social media platforms. Next, what are the societal risks and rewards associated with conspiracy theories? By focusing on politics and science, we argue that conspiracy theories do more harm than good. We conclude by suggesting several promising avenues for future research.

KEY WORDS: communication, conspiracy belief, conspiracy theories, politics, psychology

Conspiracy theories are abundant in social and political discourse, yet a coordinated research agenda to grapple with their causes and consequences has only developed in the last decade. It is imperative that scholars better understand conspiracy theories for many important reasons. Across history they have been closely linked to prejudice, witch hunts, revolutions, and genocide. Many perpetrators of terrorist attacks were known to be keen supporters of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have

also driven people to reject mainstream medicine to the point where once-cured diseases are now making a comeback in some parts of the world. Also, conspiracy theories drive people to reject scientific consensuses, most notably the consensus around anthropogenic climate change.

In this article, we review studies from psychology, political science, sociology, history, information sciences, and the humanities. We consider conspiracy theories ranging in topics from science, health, the environment, immigration, racism, terrorism, and politics to international relations. The research we review spans a range of methodologies including content analysis of texts, discourse analysis of political tracts and private interviews, analyses of public survey data, psychological experiments, studies of personality variables, trends within individuals over time, archival studies of societal trends, computer simulations, and automated computerized coding. We believe this effort comprises the most comprehensive and interdisciplinary review yet of research on conspiracy theories.

We begin by defining key terms and discussing measurement. We then delineate the psychological, demographic, and political factors that predict belief in conspiracy theories. Next, we address the motives, mediums, and methods of communizing conspiracy theories. Then we assess the effects of conspiracy theories, beginning with their social and political benefits and moving on to their influence on other views and actions. We conclude by highlighting some questions that remain open for future research.

Definitions

It is first necessary to define some key terms since many arguments about conspiracy theories originate with disputes over what counts as a conspiracy theory and what does not. First, we identify a "conspiracy" as secret plot by two or more powerful actors (Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 1995). Conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions. This definition goes beyond simple criminal conspiracies, such as conspiring to rob a corner shop. Conspiracies such as the Watergate scandal do happen, but because of the difficulties inherent in executing plans and keeping people quiet, they tend to fail (Dai & Handley-Schachler, 2015; Grimes, 2016; Keeley, 1999; Popper, 1972). When conspiracies fail—or are otherwise exposed—the appropriate experts deem them as having actually occurred (Levy, 2007).

"Conspiracy theories" are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors (Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr, 2017; Keeley, 1999). While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent. Conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terror attacks accuse the Bush administration, the Saudi Government, corporations, the financial industry, and the Jews; conspiracy theories about climate change accuse scientists, communists, the United Nations, Democrats, the government, and the oil industry among others. While a conspiracy refers to a true causal chain of events, a conspiracy theory refers to an allegation of conspiracy that may or may not be true. For a history of the term, see McKenzie-McHarg (2018), and for a critique of its usage, see Walker (2018).

Another term we will use throughout this review—"conspiracy belief"—refers to belief in a specific conspiracy theory, or set of conspiracy theories. For example, about 60% of Americans continue to believe that the CIA killed President John F. Kennedy (Enders & Smallpage, 2018), and in the run up to the 2016 European Union membership referendum in the United Kingdom, about 46% of those intending to vote "leave" believed that the vote would be rigged (YouGov, 2016; see also Drochon, 2018). Many of the social scientific studies on conspiracy theories focus on beliefs about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (McCauley & Jacques, 1979), the death of Diana, Princess of Wales (Douglas & Sutton, 2008), 9/11 "Truther" theories (Laine & Parakkal, 2017; Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel, 2007), "chemtrail" conspiracy theories (Tingley & Wagner, 2018),

and theories about Barack Obama's citizenship (Enders, Smallpage, & Lupton, in press). Other studies have looked at beliefs that are less specific about the plot but accuse groups of conspiring more generally (Furnham, 2013; Smallpage, Enders, & Uscinski, 2017).

Another suggestion made more recently by scholars is that there may be such a thing as a tendency toward "conspiracy thinking," or a general "conspiracy mindset" (e.g., Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Moscovici, 1987; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). This idea largely stems from the finding that people who already believe in particular conspiracy theories are likely to believe in others (Goertzel, 1994), even unrelated ones (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). This may indicate an underlying tendency for some people to prefer conspiracy explanations because of a bias against powerful disliked groups and official accounts (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012; see also Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). Other terms used to refer to this idea include "conspiracy predispositions," "conspiracist ideation," "conspiracy ideology," "conspiracy mentality," and "conspiracy worldview."

Finally, the term "conspiracy theorist" refers to a variety of concepts in both popular usage and in the literature. For some, the term refers to a person who believes in a particular conspiracy theory or has a strong tendency toward conspiracy thinking. It is sometimes used more specifically to denote a person who propagates conspiracy theories professionally (e.g., Alex Jones, David Icke) or to people who advocate strongly for a conspiracy theory, such as former Florida Atlantic University Professor James Tracy who claims that the 2012 killings at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut in the United States were a hoax, or Piers Corbyn—brother of UK Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn—who claims that climate science is a fraud. We avoid this term in this review in exchange for more precise language.

It is important for scholars to define what they mean by "conspiracy theorist" and "conspiracy theory" because—by signalling irrationality—these terms can neutralize valid concerns and delegitimize people (Harambam & Aupers, 2017; McKenzie-McHarg & Fredheim, 2017; Orr & Husting, 2018; Raikka & Basham, 2018). These terms can thus be weaponized, and because of this, people often deny that their ideas are conspiracy theories even though they clearly qualify. Politicians sometimes use these terms to deflect criticism because it turns the conversation back onto the accuser rather than the accused (Coady, 2006; Hall & Hewitt, 1970). The exact effect the term "conspiracy theory" and its variants have is open for debate. Some people are clearly repulsed by these terms, while others are attracted to them (see Wood, 2016). Nonetheless, conspiracy theories are a controversial subject (Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017; Smallpage, 2018) which can arouse passions both in and out of academia (Cullen, 2018; Lewandowsky, 2018).

Measurement

To measure belief in conspiracy theories, scholars and polling houses often ask respondents—through surveys—if they believe in particular conspiracy theories such as 9/11, the assassination of JFK, or the death of Princess Diana (Cassino, 2016; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Public Policy Polling, 2013). For example, one item from Douglas and Sutton's (2008) scale measuring belief in Princess Diana conspiracy theories is "There was an official campaign by MI6 to assassinate Princess Diana, sanctioned by elements of the establishment" where participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Some scholars create scales using several questions about belief in various different conspiracy theories like those mentioned above (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016; Oliver & Wood, 2014a) to come up with an overall measure of beliefs in conspiracy theories. To address issues of validity across time and cultural context, Wood (2017) devised a scale that could be adapted to specific conspiracy theories. Enders and Smallpage (2018) examined a wide range of polling techniques pointing out the promises and pitfalls of polling about conspiracy theories (see also studies by Berinsky, 2018 and Lopez & Hillygus, 2018).

Other researchers (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lantian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014) have devised scales to measure the general tendency toward conspiracy thinking rather than referring to specific events. For example, Brotherton et al.'s (2013) scale includes statements like "A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest" where participants rate the likelihood of each statement being true from 1 (*definitely not true*) to 5 (*definitely true*). Some of these scales include as many as 15 questions and may therefore be prohibitively costly for representative polling (i.e., Brotherton et al., 2013); other scales are significantly shorter. For example, Lantian et al. (2016) employ one question while Uscinski and Parent (2014) use three. One concern about all of these scales that is yet to be resolved is that all combine two elements that may be distinct—a tendency toward believing that malevolent groups are conspiring and a tendency to believe that official accounts are false. These two beliefs could substantively overlap, but they could also be separate (i.e., one could believe that an official account is wrong but not believe that malevolent groups are out to get them; see also Swami et al. [2017] for a critique of existing scales). Furthermore, both of these measurement approaches assume that belief in conspiracy theories is property that varies from individual to individual, but also a property that can be measured as a dependent variable in response to experimental manipulations predicted to heighten or reduce conspiracy beliefs. Whether these scales are appropriate for both of these purposes also remains an open question.

Expressions of belief can also be captured by measuring discourse. For example, Wood and Douglas (2013) surveyed online comments made by people who both believe and disbelieve conspiracy theories about 9/11; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, and Gignac (2013) gathered online comments rejecting published scientific research; Wood (2018) examined the content of Tweets; and Uscinski and Parent (2014) examined letters to the editor of *The New York Times*. This approach is valuable because it allows those engaging in the discourse to express their conspiracy beliefs, rather than researchers choosing a set of conspiracy theories and then asking respondents if they agree with them or not. Note that we are leaving aside from this discussion that some people spread conspiracy theories for profit (e.g., Alex Jones), political gain (e.g., Donald Trump), or as a foreign relations tactic (e.g., see Watanabe, 2018) and therefore may have a reason to transmit them other than to merely express their true beliefs.

All of these measurement methods have their merits. For example, surveys allow large-scale and representative data to be collected. They are also efficient to use and do not require lengthy contact with respondents. They are also relatively inexpensive. On the other hand, recording discourse avoids the problem that surveys have of occasionally capturing opinions on topics that were not thought about before the survey and are therefore nonopinions. Recording discourse also provides richer data on the content of respondents' conspiracy beliefs and how these relate to the personal experiences of respondents, which surveys cannot capture. Whichever method researchers choose, the aim is typically to gauge the extent to which people adopt conspiracy theories. It is this question that we turn to in the following section.

Why Do People Adopt Conspiracy Theories?

Psychological Factors

A small number of studies were published in psychology journals before 2007 (e.g., Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995; Goertzel, 1994; McHoskey, 1995), but a significant research agenda did not develop until after that time (Butter & Knight, 2018). A significant and rapidly growing body of research since then has concentrated on the psychological factors that increase the likelihood of believing conspiracy theories.

Goertzel's (1994) study used a survey of New Jersey residents in the United States that asked about 10 conspiracy theories. The data showed that some people believed in several while others believed in none. As an explanation for this, Goertzel proposed that conspiracy beliefs comprise part of a *monological belief system* where these beliefs comprise a self-sealing and expanding network of ideas that mutually support each other (Goertzel, 1994). Indeed, it does appear that conspiracy beliefs tend to "stick together"—some conspiracy beliefs tend to correlate strongly with each other. In addition, those who believe in a conspiracy theory often turn to other conspiracy theories to explain why their pet theory has amassed no positive proof or support (Boudry & Braeckman, 2011; Keeley, 1999).

While the monological explanation is appealing, it has limitations (see Franks, Bangerter, Bauer, Hall, & Noort, 2017; Sutton & Douglas, 2014). Specifically, conspiracy theories are not always mutually supportive and often directly contradict each other. For example, Wood et al. (2012) showed that the positive correlation between mutually contradictory conspiracy beliefs (e.g., that Princess Diana was murdered or that she faked her own death and is still alive) was no longer significant when participants' level of agreement that there was a cover-up was taken into account. Therefore, a competing and potentially more attractive explanation is that conspiracy beliefs are only related to each other to the extent that they cohere with a higher-order belief system. Given this, the monological account of conspiracy theories has lost traction, and the literature suggests that other psychological factors provide more compelling explanations. According to Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka (2017), people appear to be drawn to conspiracy theories when—compared to nonconspiracy explanations—they promise to satisfy important social psychological motives that can be characterized as *epistemic* (e.g., the desire for understanding, accuracy, and subjective certainty), *existential* (e.g., the desire for control and security), and *social* (e.g., the desire to maintain a positive image of the self or group). Note that people do not necessarily need to be conscious of these motives. We review each of these in turn.

Epistemic Motives

Conspiracy theories appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction. Consistent with this analysis, research suggests that belief in conspiracy theories is stronger under conditions of uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Further, belief in conspiracy theories appears to be stronger when people perceive patterns in randomness (van Prooijen, Douglas, & de Inocencio, 2018; van der Wal, Sutton, Lange, & Braga, 2018; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008; but see Dieguez, Wagner-Egger, & Gauvrit, 2015). Conspiracy belief is also stronger among people who consistently seek patterns and meaning in their environment, such as believers in paranormal and supernatural phenomena (Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011; Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Parker, 2012; Leiser, Duani, & Wagner-Egger, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014a, 2018). It is also stronger when events are especially large-scale or significant and when small-scale, mundane explanations therefore seem unsatisfactory (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013). People who overestimate their ability to understand complex causal phenomena are also prone to conspiracy beliefs (Vitriol & Marsh, 2018). Conspiracy beliefs have also been linked to the need for cognitive closure (Marchlewska, Cichocka, & Kossowska, 2018; Leman & Cinnirella, 2013), especially when events lack a clear official explanation. Conspiracy beliefs have also been linked to feelings of boredom (Brotherton & Eser, 2015).

However, conspiracy theories might appear to satisfy some epistemic motives at the expense of others. For example, conspiracy belief has been linked to the conjunction fallacy (Brotherton & French, 2015; Dagnall, Denovon, Drinkwater, Parker, & Clough, 2017), which is an error of probabilistic reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983). Other researchers have shown that projection of one's own personal beliefs onto others is associated with conspiracy belief—that is, the belief that "they conspire" is in part the

result of the belief that "I would conspire" (Douglas & Sutton, 2011). Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran, and Furnham (2014; see also Ståhl & van Prooijen, 2018) found that lower levels of analytic thinking predicted conspiracy beliefs. Mikušková (2017) found that student teachers high in conspiracy beliefs were more likely to score lower in rational thinking style. Douglas, Sutton, Callan, Dawtry, and Harvey (2016) found that hypersensitive agency detection—the tendency to attribute agency and intentionality where it does not (or is unlikely to) exist—predicts conspiracy beliefs (see also Brotherton & French, 2015; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015). McHoskey (1995) found that conspiracy beliefs may be in part a product of biased assimilation—accepting information that confirms one's views and scrutinizing information that disconfirms one's views (see also Thorson, 2015).

Other cognitive processes linked to conspiracy beliefs involve a tendency to accept epistemically unwarranted beliefs (Lobato, Mendoza, Sims, & Chin, 2014), a quasi-religious mentality (Franks, Bangerter, & Bauer 2013; Wagner-Egger, Delouvee, Gauvrit, & Dieguez, 2018), and lower levels of intelligence (Stieger, Gumhalter, Tran, Voracek, & Swami, 2013). Finally, conspiracy beliefs have been linked to factors such as nonclinical delusional thinking (Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker, Denovan, & Parton, 2015) and schizotypy (Barron, Morgan, Towell, Altemeyer, & Swami, 2014; Bruder et al., 2013; Darwin et al., 2011; Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stiener, & Voracek, 2013; van der Tempel & Alcock, 2015). Overall, there is evidence that conspiracy theories appear to appeal to individuals who seek accuracy and/or meaning, but perhaps lack the cognitive tools or experience problems that prevent them from being able to find accuracy and meaning via other more rational means.

Existential Motives

People may also turn to conspiracy theories when their existential needs are threatened, as a way to compensate for those threatened needs (Douglas et al., 2017). For example, people who lack agency and control may reclaim some sense of control by believing conspiracy theories because they offer the opportunity to reject official narratives and allow people to feel that they possess a better account. Consistent with this reasoning, studies have demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are associated with feelings of powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Pratt, 2003; Zarefsky, 1984/2014), anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Radnitz & Underwood, 2017), anxious attachment style (Green & Douglas, 2018), and existential anxiety (Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011). Further, Bruder et al. (2013) demonstrated a relationship between conspiracy thinking and low feelings of control in the sociopolitical domain (see also Nyhan, 2017; van Prooijen and Acker 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Conversely, experimentally strengthening people's sense of control appears to reduce conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; for another perspective, see van Elk & Lodder, 2018).

Furthermore, research demonstrates that conspiracy beliefs are correlated with alienation from the political system and anomie—a feeling of personal unrest and lack of understanding of the social world (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Bruder et al., 2013; Goertzel, 1994; but see Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018). Belief in conspiracy theories is also associated with a belief that the economy is getting worse (Parsons, Simmons, Shinhoster, & Kilburn, 1999). Conspiracy theories may allow people to come to terms with particular problems, enabling them to regain some of the psychological goods that they have lost (Franks et al., 2013). In this vein, others have demonstrated that conspiracy theories might buffer people from threats to the social system in which they live (Federico, Williams & Vitriol, 2018; Jolley, Douglas, & Sutton, 2018).

Social Motives

People generally have the need to maintain a positive image of the self, and conspiracy theories may assist people in maintaining this positive image. For example, Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Golec de Zavala (2016) demonstrated that the endorsement of conspiracy theories is associated with narcissism—an exaggerated self-view accompanied by the need for external validation. Other

studies have shown links between conspiracy beliefs and the social psychological need to feel unique to others (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017; Lantian, Muller, Nurra, & Douglas, 2017). Perhaps conspiracy theories allow people to feel that they are in possession of rare, important information that other people do not have, making them feel special and thus boosting their self-esteem.

People have a strong need to feel positive about the groups they belong to as well, such as their nationalities, political parties, and religious groups. A conviction that others conspire against one's group is more likely to emerge when the group thinks of itself as undervalued, underprivileged, or under threat (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). For example, research by Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2014) demonstrated that beliefs that Western people have victimized Muslims were associated with belief in conspiracy theories suggesting that Western intelligence services instigated terrorism in Indonesia. Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, and Wojcik (2013) showed similar findings in a Polish sample with respect to conspiracy theories about Jews. Thus, conspiracy theories are linked to defensive ways of identifying with one's social group. This is captured by the concept of *collective narcissism* (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009)—a form of ingroup positivity that reflects a belief in the ingroup's greatness associated with a conviction that others do not acknowledge the ingroup's worth enough. Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012) found that national collective narcissism in Poland predicted endorsement of conspiracy stereotypes of Jews. Golec de Zavala and Federico (2018) found that American collective narcissism predicted conspiracy theorizing during the 2016 US presidential campaign. Also, Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, and Olechowski (2016) demonstrated that national collective narcissism in Poland was associated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories about Russian involvement in the Smolensk crash of 2010 in which the Polish president and several officials died (see also Soral, Cichocka, Bilewicz, & Marchlewska, 2018). However, mere identification with the national group without the narcissistic component predicted *lower* likelihood of endorsing these conspiracy theories. This suggests that conspiracy explanations of intergroup events derive from a need to validate group image by denigrating outgroups.

Thus, conspiracy theories are more likely to be prevalent among members of low-status groups attempting to explain their status. Indeed, research shows that members of low-status social groups are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories than members of high-status groups (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). For example, Crocker et al. (1999) demonstrated that black Americans (compared to white Americans) were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about the American government conspiring against blacks.

Given their experiences, it is not completely irrational for historically disadvantaged groups to believe that dominant groups are conspiring against them (e.g., Davis, Wetherell & Henry, 2018; Thomas & Quinn, 1991). On this point, studies have shown that people are more likely to believe in conspiracies directed at their own group if they personally have experienced discrimination, such as being the victim of police harassment (Parsons et al., 1999) or racial discrimination (Simmons & Parsons, 2005). Thus, belief in outgroup conspiracies can be fueled by experiences suggesting that one's social group has been treated unfairly. Therefore it is important to consider the political, social, and historical contexts that make conspiracy theories seem plausible (see also Briggs, 2004; Nattrass, 2013).

Situational threats and crisis situations can also increase the likelihood of strong group attachment to foster conspiracy beliefs (Kofta, Sędek, & Sławuta, 2011; Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2014; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017; Thomson et al., 2012). Taken together, findings from research on the role of social identification highlight the fact that feelings of being undermined and threatened in the context of international relations can facilitate the development of conspiracy theories that serve to justify groups' disadvantaged position (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). In the end, a conviction that other groups conspire against one's own can help excuse the ingroup's disadvantaged position.

To sum up, research on the psychology of conspiracy theories suggests that epistemic, existential, and social motives drive conspiracy belief. Whether or not these psychological motives are

satisfied by conspiracy theories is another matter, and research would suggest that they are not and that conspiracy theories might even do more harm than good (Douglas et al., 2017). We return to this issue later when we highlight the consequences of conspiracy theories.

Demographic Factors

Some studies have attempted to chart the social characteristics of those prone to conspiracy theories. In the United States, Uscinski and Parent (2014) found that higher levels of conspiracy thinking correlate with lower levels of education and lower levels of income. A recent study analyzing historical survey data found further evidence of the relationships between demographic factors and conspiracy belief (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). In this study, conspiracy believers were more likely to be male, unmarried, less educated, have lower income, be unemployed, be a member of an ethnic minority group, and have weaker social networks. Similar relationships were found in a large sample of South African adolescents when surveyed about HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories (Hogg et al., 2017).

Other investigations point in particular to the link between conspiracy belief and lower levels of education (e.g., Bogart & Bird, 2003; Goertzel, 1994; Mancosu, Vassallo, & Vezzoni, 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014a). Two recent investigations have attempted to explain this relationship. Douglas et al. (2016) demonstrated that the relationship was explained in part by the tendency for people with lower levels of education to also be more likely to attribute agency and intentionality where it does not, or is unlikely, to exist. Van Prooijen (2017) found support for two additional mediating factors—greater feelings of control and a general doubt that complex problems may have simple solutions. Although neither of these articles have established a causal link between education and conspiracy beliefs, they suggest that education may provide people with a set of cognitive and affective attributes that enable them to resist conspiracy theories. For example, news media literacy has been found to decrease conspiracy theory endorsement (Craft, Ahsley, & Maksl, 2017).

The causal relationships between conspiracy beliefs and income are also indeterminate. It could be that employers shun those who advocate conspiracy theories or that those who advocate conspiracy theories shun establishment jobs that offer higher pay. For example, Uscinski and Parent (2014) found that those with the lowest levels of conspiracy thinking were the most likely to work in the financial industry or for government or the military. In addition, more research is needed to understand how elite status affects conspiracy theorizing. Simmons and Parsons (2005) found that elites and masses are equally likely to traffic in specific conspiracy theories, and Uscinski & Parent (2014) found that elites and masses follow similar patterns with their conspiracy discourse. Nefes (2013, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) has shown that political party members in Turkey endorse or reject conspiracy theories based upon situational and ideological factors. With this said, insiders seem to be the scapegoats of much conspiracy theorizing in Western societies, so it would seem obvious that insiders would tend to reject conspiracy thinking.

Political Factors

Politics presents circumstances similar to other social conflicts: There are "winners" and "losers" in highly competitive situations, one group (usually a party) is more powerful than others, and the stakes of the conflict are real. Given the stakes, conspiracy theories arise frequently from political events especially when those events stimulate the psychological states linked to conspiracy beliefs, such as low political trust, feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and unpredictability. For example, Einstein and Glick (2013) demonstrated that political scandals diminish trust in government, which in turn result in higher levels of conspiracy beliefs (see also Moore, 2018). Conspiracy beliefs can also be strengthened by exposing participants to redactions in government documents (Nyhan et al., 2016) or to media environments in which conspiracies feature prominently in the news (Einstein & Glick 2013; Udani, Kimball, & Fogerty, 2018; see also Weeks, 2018). Finally, conspiracy

theories can be especially potent in times of uncertainty—upcoming elections drive Americans to fear voter fraud (Edelson, Alduncin, Krewson, Sieja, & Uscinski, 2017) and Poles to link conspiracy theories portraying Jews as collective enemies to anti-Semitic attitudes (Kofta & Sedek, 2005). With this said, political scientists are just beginning to examine how conspiracy theories become part of political contests, what political factors drive conspiracy belief, and when conspiracy theories are used as persuasive political tools (Atkinson & DeWitt, 2018; Atkinson, DeWitt, & Uscinski, 2017).

Ideology

In general, people are more likely to believe that political opposition is involved in malevolent activity than their own party's representatives (Claassen & Ensley, 2016; McCloskey & Chong, 1985). In terms of accusing the opposition of fraud, Democrats are more likely to believe that Republicans commit voter fraud to win, and Republicans are more likely to believe that Democrats do so (Cassino & Jenkins, 2013; Karp, Nai, & Norris, 2018). Overall, these findings suggest that political opponents are more likely to accuse each other of being involved in conspiracies, which might be a reflection of the ingroup-outgroup mentality and be especially strong when people experience a threat to their political faction or feel that it is being undermined in some way (Smallpage et al., 2017).

However, research demonstrates that certain political convictions are more strongly associated with conspiracy beliefs than others (Mancuso et al., 2017). van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (2015) demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are most prevalent at the political extremes. They found a quadratic effect—that is a "U-shaped" function— in both the United States and the Netherlands suggesting that conspiracy theorizing is strongest at the far left and right, although stronger on the right. Similar effects have been found in Sweden (Krouwel, Kutiyski, van Prooijen, Martinsson, & Markstedt, 2017). Although it is unknown whether conspiracy theorizing may be a result of political ideology, or vice versa, or both, this research suggests that extremist attitudes may be a consequence of conspiracy belief. On the other hand, Uscinski and Parent (2014) and Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson (2016) suggest that levels of conspiracy thinking are stronger among those identifying as independents or with third parties.

There exists a strong assumption both within and outside academia that there is evidence for conservatives being more prone to conspiracy theories than liberals. Some studies support this assumption (Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Miller et al., 2016). Furthermore, several studies (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009; see also Richey, 2017) reported a link between conspiracy beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism—a dimension of political attitudes characterized by preference for conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission to authorities (Altemeyer, 1996). On the other hand, Oliver and Wood (2014a) and Uscinski and Parent (2014) did not find a link between political ideology/party and conspiracy belief, and Berinsky (2012) did not find a link between authoritarianism and conspiracy belief.

How is it possible to integrate these findings? One possibility is that although both extreme left- and right-wingers are likely to embrace various conspiracy theories, the link is stronger at the right side of the political spectrum, as observed by van Prooijen et al. (2015). In other words, although both extreme left-wing and right-wing ideologies foster conspiracy convictions, right-wingers are more predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories because they are also more likely to exhibit the personality predispositions that foster conspiracy thinking, such as the need to manage uncertainty (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). It is also possible, given that much of the research to date has been conducted on American samples during the Obama administration, that situational factors, rather than dispositional factors, affected the discrepancy between conservatives and liberals. For example, the research by Miller et al. (2016) was conducted in the United States while conservatives were on the "losing" side at the time of the data collection. In short, the method and timing of measurement could explain the discrepancies (Enders & Smallpage, 2018).

On the other hand, it may simply be the case that the bulk of the research has been conducted by left-leaning researchers (Cardiff & Klein, 2005). There have been many studies of conspiracy theories held by the right (going back to Hofstadter, 1964), but few studies focusing on conspiracy theories held by the left (Douglas & Sutton, 2015). The end result is that researchers may overlook conspiracy theories closer to home.

Motivated Reasoning

An increasing line of research shows that people with different ideologies are likely to interpret the same information differently (e.g., Jerit & Barabas, 2012). One mechanism that can explain this consistent finding is that of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013). People resort to motivated reasoning when they are presented with facts that contradict their predispositions, and they will interpret new information in such a way as to not disturb their previously held worldviews. Scholars in the American context most often observe this phenomenon in conjunction with partisanship (Lodge & Taber, 2013; see Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017 for an overview). Motivated reasoning has frequently been observed with conspiracy theories, particularly with partisanship and political ideology (Duran, Nicholson, & Dale, 2017; Edelson et al., 2017; Enders et al., 2018; Hartman & Newmark, 2012; Miller et al., 2016; Nyhan, 2010; Oliver & Wood 2014a; Pasek, Stark, Krosnik, & Tompson, 2014; Saunders, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

However, just as people filter events and circumstances through the lens of their underlying political predispositions (i.e., partisanship, political ideology; Berinsky, 2007, 2009; Campbell Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Zaller, 1992) they also interpret information through the lens of their underlying view about the role of conspiracies in political events (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013). In a survey experiment in which researchers attempted to convince Americans of a media conspiracy, Uscinski et al. (2016) showed that only nonpartisans who scored high on a measure of conspiracy thinking were affected by information suggesting a conspiracy because Republicans were already likely to believe that the media was conspiring against them, and Democrats were already likely to not believe this. This holds with predispositions outside politics. New Age believers are more likely to believe Da Vinci Code conspiracy theories than are Catholics (Newheiser et al., 2011), and sports fans are more likely to believe that other teams engage in shenanigans rather than their favorites (Carey, Nyhan, Valentino, & Liu, 2016). The literature strongly suggests that conspiracy theories must align with a person's existing set of predispositions to be adopted.

Are Conspiracy Theories for Losers?

Situational factors, such as being on the losing end of a power asymmetry, could lead to increased belief in conspiracy theories (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Uscinski and Parent (2014) argue that conspiracy theories are for "losers" and tend to accuse those in power and their coalitions. Examining letters to the editor of the *New York Times* spanning 1890–2010, they found that when a Republican was president, the resonant conspiracy theories tended to accuse Republicans and big business of conspiring, but when a Democrat was in office, the conspiracy theories tended to accuse Democrats and socialists of conspiring. They also found that during declared wars and the Cold War conspiracy theories focused on foreign enemies more than during other times. Edelson et al. (2017) found that electoral losers were more likely than winners to believe that fraud had occurred (see also Nyhan, 2017). To Uscinski and Parent (2014, Chap. 6), these findings indicate that:

> [The] targets and timing of resonant conspiracy theories follow a strategic logic, based on foreign threat and domestic power. In this way, conspiracy theories are used by vulnerable groups to manage perceived dangers: they are early warning systems that keep watch over the most sensitive areas and prepare solutions to potential attacks. At bottom, conspiracy theories are a form

of threat perception, and fears are fundamentally driven by shifts in relative power. Because defeat and exclusion are their biggest inducements, conspiracy theories are for losers. (p. 131)

One assumption of the "losers" idea is that conspiracy theories communicate information to generate collective action in the face of threat. To test this, Smallpage et al. (2017) asked an Mturk sample in the United States to match a series of partisan and nonpartisan conspiracy theories to the party most associated with each one. They found that partisans—even those who did not believe in the conspiracy theories themselves—correctly matched which conspiracy theories were "owned" by which party. They concluded that conspiracy theories function like calling cards sending clear signals to copartisans. By doing this, conspiracy theories could generate collective action. With this said, more work needs to investigate the effect of conspiracy theories on collective political actions such as voting (e.g., Atkinson & DeWitt, 2018; Swami, Barron, Weis, & Furnham, 2018).

How Are Conspiracy Theories Communicated?

The communication of conspiracy theories is of vital interest to anyone who wants to understand how they are spread, become established, and affect individuals, groups, society, and politics. In this section, we discuss why people communicate conspiracy theories, the media they use, and the ways in which they communicate those theories.

Motives to Communicate Conspiracy Theories

One of the challenges in studying the motives to communicate conspiracy theories is to tease these apart from motives to believe in conspiracy theories. While the psychological, social, and political factors that cause people to believe in conspiracy theories are almost guaranteed to shape the communication of conspiracy theories, much of the research seems to overlook any divergence. This is a difficult enterprise and as much as possible, we shall concentrate on research that focuses specifically on communication per se.

Nefes (2017) underlines that important social events, such as big-scale protests, lead to the prevalence of conspiracy talk. In Taiwan, after an assassination attempt on the Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in 2004 one day before the general election, conspiracy theories about the event were ubiquitous (Nefes, 2014). To understand the communication pattern of these accounts, Nefes conducted an online content analysis of people's comments on the assassination attempt. Perceptions of threat were associated with greater expressions of conspiracy theories, and people proposed conspiracy theories in line with their political arguments. Nefes (2013, 2015a, 2015b) uncovered similar findings in an analysis of the communication of anti-Semitic conspiracy rhetoric in Turkey. Further, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, Nefes (2017) analyzed the relationship between people's political views and online responses to the Turkish government's conspiracy rhetoric about the Gezi Park protests in 2013. The findings illustrated that people's political views predicted their acceptance or rejection of the conspiracy rhetoric. Conspiracy theories therefore appear to be communicated about events that are perceived to be important and relevant to people's political interests. In a similar vein, Raab, Ortlieb, Auer, Gunthmann, and Carbon (2013) argue that conspiracy theories could be viewed as a way of constructing and communicating a personal set of values and moral feelings, and Klein, Clutton, and Dunn (2018) show that anger is a precursor to the sharing of conspiracy theories.

A distinct psychological motivation, with a more social and political flavor, was identified by Franks et al. (2013). They argued that conspiracy theories spread as devices for making sense of events that threaten existing worldviews. They draw on social representations theory (Moscovici, 1961) to argue that conspiracy theories help groups to symbolically cope with threatening events by making abstract risk more concrete and by focusing blame on a set of conspirators. Franks and

colleagues (2013) argue that the spread of conspiracy theories therefore allows people to challenge abstract expert-dominated discourses about important events. They further propose that conspiracy theories are communicated as devices to cope with collective trauma.

In a more political vein, Sapountzis and Condor (2013) argue that conspiracy narratives are used to dispute dominant political and ideological assumptions (see also Uscinski, 2018). A sample of Greek political party members were asked a series of questions in an interview. In the interviews, participants were encouraged to talk freely with occasional prompts concerning conflicts in the Balkans. Results revealed that conspiracy narratives were typically used to challenge assumptions concerning Greece's majority status, suggesting that conspiracy theorizing may therefore be used as a way to construct causal arguments about intergroup relations and to dispute dominant ideological assumptions about political legitimacy and social hierarchy (see also Gosa, 2011). Also, parents may use conspiracy theories to explain difficult events to their children, such as when their group has been marked out as responsible for a terrorist attack (Jamil & Rousseau, 2011).

Studies of political messages advocating conspiracy theories about the Islamization of the United Kingdom (and Europe and the West more generally) articulate the political purposes for which conspiracy theories are used. Wood and Finlay (2008) conducted a discourse analysis of articles written by prominent members of the British National Party in the months following the London 7/7 bombings. They found that these articles promoted conspiracy theories about the intentions of Muslim immigrants to the United Kingdom. By casting even moderates as part of a conspiracy, the rhetoric is used to represent all Muslims as a potent threat to civic life and to justify radical, exclusionary politics—in this case the mass, forced deportation of Muslims. Lee (2017) found that published statements by prominent figures in the so called "counter jihad" movement, which casts itself as the unofficial opposition to the Islamization of the West, seldom use conspiracy theories explicitly to justify extremist political action. Rather, they use conspiracy theories to create the ideological conditions for extremism and political violence. These include fear of Muslims and radical distrust of political leaders and institutions which are represented either complicit with Islamists or their dupes—beliefs that inspired Anders Breivik's massacre of left-wing youth in Oslo (Fekete, 2012).

Leaving aside the advocacy of particular political objectives, Allen (2016) suggests another important communicative motivation for conspiracy theories. Allen examined the conspiracy theorizing by rival Palestinian political factions in the occupied West Bank (i.e., Fatah and Hamas). In an analysis of political advertising, Allen suggests that conspiracist representations of each side reflect an underlying "semantic ideology" that communication, even in politics, should be sincere. The carefully crafted, hedged, and often evasive quality of conventional political discourse (Bhatia, 2006; Clementson, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2011) may strike contemporary audiences as evidence that politicians are concealing secret agendas.

The Internet and Social Media

There has been much concern about how specific communication media—most notably the Internet—may promote the spread of conspiracy theories (Southwell, Thorson, & Sheble, 2018). While there is some suggestion that conspiracy theories may be flourishing in the age of the Internet (Morello, 2004), others suggest that it is not that straightforward (Uscinski, Atkinson, & DeWitt, 2018; Klein, Clutton, & Polito, 2018).

Clarke (2007) argued that while the Internet may facilitate the rapid spread of *more* conspiracy theories, this does not mean that it also helps the *development* of the conspiracy theories. The speed of dissemination may even retard the progress of conspiracy theories into coherent arguments. Clarke further argues that the Internet may be responsible for limiting conspiracy theories since billions of potentially critical voices are available to immediately refute conspiracy claims with evidence.

Uscinski et al. (2018) argue that for several reasons, the Internet may not necessarily be as big a boon to conspiracy theories as many think. First, in Western countries, websites with the most traffic are not devoted to conspiracy theories, and conspiracy theory websites are not highly visited. Mainstream sources of news far outpace conspiracy sources in terms of reach and audience (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). There are many websites dedicated to conspiracy theories, but it is likely that the only people seeking out these websites are those who are already predisposed. Second, in terms of the online information environment, Uscinski and Parent (2014) examined news and blog posts over the course of a year to see how the Internet discusses conspiracy theories. Much of the content was negative, suggesting that if one were to simply seek out news from the Internet, one would get a negative vision of conspiracy theories. Third, there is no evidence that people are more prone to conspiracy thinking now than they were prior to the invention of the Internet. Thus, it cannot be asserted that there has been an overall rise in conspiracy theorizing or that the Internet is responsible for such a rise in a straightforward way.

Finally, Uscinski et al. (2018) argue that conspiracy theories do spread on the Internet, but rarely in the ways popularly assumed. Conspiracy theories do not bounce indiscriminately from person to person through social media as is often assumed (DeWitt, Atkinson, & Wegner, 2018). Instead they tend to stay concentrated within the communities who already agree with them (Metaxas & Finn, 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Nonetheless, research points to the crucial role of the Internet in fostering distinct and polarized online communities (e.g., Bessi et al., 2015).

The polarization of communities on the Internet is crucial to understanding the dynamics of conspiracy communication. Highlighting the difficulties of rational and civil communication between polarized communities, Zollo et al. (2015) found that the sentiment of users' comments and posts became more negative as they became more active, and that the sentiment of communication threads between communities was especially negative, and became more negative as conversation threads persisted (see also Bessi, Zollo, Del Vicaro, Scala, Caldarelli, & Quattrociocchi, 2015; Del Vicaro et al., 2016). Communication within conspiracy communities may be more civil but not necessarily more rational. Bessi et al. (2015) examined reactions to posts that deliberately parody conspiracy information. They found that approximately 80% of the comments and likes on these posts were from conspiracy users. This indicates that conspiracy users are uncritically distributing and endorsing even deliberately false, highly implausible material (see also Bessi, Caldarelli, Del Vicario, Scala, & Quattrociocchi, 2014).

Arts and Media

The Internet is far from the only medium in which conspiracy theories are aired. Mainstream news media expose people to conspiracy theories on a regular basis (Stempel et al., 2007; Stieger et al., 2013). Other media include film, in which there is a recognized genre known as "conspiracy cinema" (Dorfman, 1980; Jameson, 1992), and television (Arnold, 2008; Letort, 2017). Exposure to conspiracy theories in these mediums increases receptivity to conspiracy theories (e.g., Butler et al., 1995; Mulligan & Habel, 2013; Robertson, 2015) and is entertaining for those who already believe in conspiracy theories (Nera, Pantazi, & Klein, 2018).

Conspiracy theories can also be communicated through music. Popular bands like Muse are known for alluding to conspiracy theories in their lyrics (Ward & Voas, 2011). More fringe genres, like White Power music, postulate that whites are being undermined by internationalist conspiracies (Corte & Edwards, 2008). White power musicians see themselves as victims and attempt to explain their own lack of success as the result of multicultural conspiracies (see also Johnson [2018] on the radicalization of white men with conspiracy theories).

Gosa (2011) studied the role of hip-hop in conspiracy theorizing, particularly as a way to explain and mobilize action against the perpetual disadvantages experienced by blacks in the United States and across the globe. Gosa demonstrated that conspiracy theories are advanced at three levels—in

the musical lyrics themselves, in interview statements by prominent hip-hop artists that are reproduced on TV, radio, magazines, and academic books, and in ongoing interactions between hip-hop artists and their fans (e.g., in concerts and on blogs). Tellingly, indicating the cross-fertilisation of fiction, arts, and politics, the conspiracy theories uncovered by Gosa are influenced by books and films including the *Da Vinci Code* and "V" (which, before Icke, 2001, portrayed a world in which the world is ruled by shape-shifting lizards in human form). Thus, prominent artists including Jay-Z and Kanye West are held to belong to a "Hip Hop Illuminati," who "in exchange for record sales and stardom… agree to poison the minds of the black masses" (p. 194).

Styles of Communicating Conspiracy Theories

Thus far, we have considered why and where conspiracy messages are communicated. Next, we consider the communicative, linguistic, and persuasive devices employed by those communicating conspiracy theories.

Some emerging research has examined the communication of conspiracy theories about vaccines on social media (Dredze, Broniatowski, & Hilyard, 2016; Safford, Hamilton, & Whitmore, 2017; Sharma, Yadav, Yadav, & Ferdinand, 2017). For example, Grant et al. (2015) examined the content of two provaccination and two "vaccine-skeptical" websites to examine what might make antivaccination communication tactics successful. They found that vaccine-skeptical sites had links to both pro- and antivaccination material, creating the impression that both sides of the argument were being presented openly. In addition, the vaccine-skeptical sites were highly interactive, with spaces for community discussion, and oriented towards the creation of people affected (or think they are affected) by vaccination. The authors argue that vaccine-skeptical websites are more effective in fostering community building to achieve their ends. In contrast authoritative provaccination sites offer limited interactivity and focus on imparting evidence-based knowledge. Unfortunately, this format may fuel the conspiracist view of elites as aloof and dictatorial (see also Kata, 2010; Moran, Lucas, Everhart, Morgan, & Prickett, 2016).

Other lines of research also suggest that advocates of conspiracy theories are careful to appear rational and open-minded. A content analytical study by Wood and Douglas (2013) examined the comments made by 9/11 Truthers and their opponents on a large sample of comments from four mainstream news sites in 2011. The majority of the comments were from a conspiracist position, again suggesting that conspiracy advocates are disproportionately active in sharing and disseminating their views online. More interestingly, the conspiracist and conventionalist comments used different communication techniques—specifically that conspiracist arguments showed a tendency to spend more time arguing against the official explanation of 9/11 rather than offering any alternatives. Anticonspiracy rationalists, on the other hand, showed the opposite pattern, advocating their own "official" explanation more than arguing against the conspiracy position. They also used a more hostile tone (see also Golo & Galam, 2015) which may contribute to the sense, among conspiracy theory believers, that they comprise a bullied, principled minority whose opponents are using orthodox levers of power and authority to cow them.

Further insights into how conspiracy theories are communicated online have been yielded by text-based analysis. This methodology analyzes the frequency of individual words that have been categorized by expert raters (e.g., as emotion words, analytic words, as indicative of authenticity). Faasse, Chatman, and Martin (2016) applied this technique to 1,500 comments on a provaccination Facebook post by Mark Zuckerburg. The analysis revealed that antivaccination and provaccination comments tend to use different kinds of language. Antivaccination posts used more analytical, but less authentic, less anxious, and less tentative language. These findings suggest that online opponents, compared to proponents of vaccines, use more authoritative, confident, assured, and manipulative language.

To sum up, research suggests that people recruit conspiracy theories largely to justify their own political positions, and they do this even when their political leanings are radical or exclusionary. The Internet and social media are useful in these efforts but the conspiracy theories may not reach their potential impact because people tend to consume information from their own "bubbles" and dismiss what is not relevant to them personally. Scholars should make efforts to integrate studies of the communication of conspiracy theories with studies that look at the psychological and other factors that drive individuals' beliefs.

What Are the Consequences of Conspiracy Theories?

Beliefs can drive actions, therefore in this section, we examine the potential consequences of conspiracy theories.

Potential Benefits of Conspiracy Theories

First, conspiracy theories may allow individuals to question or challenge dominance hierarchies and query the actions of powerful groups. One positive consequence of these challenges could be that governments are encouraged to be more transparent (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Swami & Coles, 2010). Conspiracy theories can also reveal inconsistencies in government or official versions of events (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Olmstead, 2009), may open up issues for discussion that would otherwise be closed (Miller, 2002), and may even uncover real conspiracies (Swami & Coles, 2010).

Various scholars view conspiracy theories as results of people's and groups' attempts to understand social and political reality (Radnitz & Underwood, 2017). For example, Knight (2001) understands conspiracy theories as symptoms rather than causes of social dysfunction and proposes that conspiracy theories could be seen as a part of a class-based alienation from contemporary neo-liberalism (see also Knight, 2002, 2008). Spark (2001) agrees and accepts conspiracy theories as a part of the mainstream culture and that they voice the discontent in contemporary politics. Further, Jameson (1992) claims that conspiracy theories function as cognitive maps for people to comprehend social and political realities. Others go further arguing that since elites do engage in conspiracy, conspiracy theories are a crucial instrument for holding authorities accountable (Basham, 2003; Dentith, 2016a, 2016b; Dentith & Orr, 2017). Singh (2016) argues that globalization has resulted in the increasing power of informally rather than formally networked elites, meaning that conspiracist understandings of the world order may increasingly reflect political realities.

Conspiracy theories may have some benefits, so we would caution against a demonization of conspiracy theories and the people who believe and communicate them. Some conspiracy theories may raise issues in society that need to be addressed. Indeed, it is possible to view conspiracy theories as an important ingredient of democratic discourse (Moore, 2016a, 2016b). However, as we will review in the following section, conspiracy theories have been predominantly linked to harmful social, health, and political consequences. It is also debatable whether or not conspiracy theories meet the psychological needs that people adopt them for (Douglas et al., 2017).

Attitude Effects

One of the first investigations of the effects of conspiracy theories demonstrated that they change people's attitudes. Butler et al. (1995) surveyed American adults at a cinema screening the Oliver Stone film *JFK*, which presented a conspiracy hypothesis about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Half of the participants were surveyed before seeing the film, and half were surveyed afterwards. It was found that the film significantly influenced endorsement of the conspiratorial narrative. Those who had viewed the film were more strongly in favor of the idea of conspiracy than those who had not yet seen it. A similar investigation by Mulligan and Habel (2013) found that participants who had watched the outlandish conspiracy film *Wag the Dog,* about how a government

stages a fake war in a Hollywood studio, were more likely to respond positively to statements such as "How likely is it that a US president will stage a fake war in the future?" than those who had not watched the film. Douglas and Sutton (2008) corroborated these findings with respect to conspiracy theories about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. They further investigated whether people were aware that their attitudes had changed as a result of exposure to conspiracy theories, finding that they were not.

Research also suggests that conspiracy theories can influence political attitudes. However, this may depend on people's existing predispositions. Uscinski et al. (2016) embedded the word "conspiracy" within a survey about media coverage during the 2012 U.S. presidential election for half of the participants, and half did not receive this cue. The inclusion of the conspiracy only influenced people who scored high in conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories may therefore influence people's attitudes, but the level of influence appears to depend on preexisting attitudes and possibly other factors that remain to be investigated. What effects might they have on social and political behavioral intentions?

Prejudice

Conspiracy theories have been linked to negative attitudes about groups. For example, Swami (2012) asked a sample of Malaysian participants to complete a scale of conspiracy belief, a scale specifically concerning anti-Jewish conspiracy theories (e.g., "Jews are attempting to establish a secret world government") and various ideological attitudes. It was found that belief in Jewish conspiracy theories was associated with anti-Israeli attitudes and also racism toward Chinese people. Further, Golec de Zavala and Cichocka (2012) found in a Polish sample that belief in specific conspiracy theories about Jewish domination of the world (e.g., Kofta & Sędek, 2005) were associated with more general anti-Semitic attitudes. In a Polish representative sample, Bilewicz et al. (2013) found that belief in the Jewish conspiracy was a better predictor of anti-Semitic behavioral intentions (e.g., legal discriminatory intentions against Jews; social distance toward Jews) than traditional anti-Semitism. Further, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) found that among a U.S. sample, a tendency toward conspiracy theorizing was associated with prejudice against a variety of high-power groups (e.g., Jews, Americans and capitalists). Finally, in a sample of white Americans, reports of negative contact with African Americans was associated with expressed doubts about Barack Obama's American citizenship and eligibility to be president (Barlow et al., 2012).

This research suggests that in some cases, conspiracy theorizing may be associated with prejudice toward particular groups (Pasek et al., 2014). In further support of this idea, Rousseau and Jamil (2008) conducted ethnographic research among Pakistani immigrants in Canada and Pakistani residents of Karachi about the events surrounding the 9/11 attacks. Respondents in both countries overwhelmingly supported the conspiracy theory that the United States orchestrated the attacks and that therefore Muslims were not responsible. Conspiracy beliefs might therefore appear to reinforce the "us" versus "them" dichotomy. By questioning the official explanation, minority groups—and not just majority groups—could potentially reinforce differences between groups.

Health-Related Choices

Several correlational studies have shown that belief in health-related conspiracy theories is associated with the choice to use contraception and practice safe sex. Specifically, one conspiracy theory alleges that birth control is a form of genocide against Africans and African Americans (see Ball, 2016; Ford, Wallace, Newman, Lee, & William, 2013). This conspiracy theory is believed widely in both the United States and South Africa (Hogg et al., 2017; Nattrass, 2013). Thorburn and Bogart (2005) found that belief in this conspiracy theory among African Americans was positively associated with negative attitudes toward contraceptive methods and less use of contraceptive methods. Another study, also testing an African-American sample, found that conspiracy beliefs and

perceived discrimination against the group both predicted contraceptive behavior (Bogart & Bird, 2003; see also Bogart & Thorburn, 2005; Bogart, Wagner, Galvam, & Banks, 2010; Bogart, Galvan, Wagner, & Klein, 2010; Hoyt et al., 2012). In similar work conducted in South Africa, Grebe and Nattrass (2012) found that the odds of using condoms were halved among female African AIDS conspiracy believers.

Oliver and Wood (2014b) demonstrated a strong relationship between medical conspiracy beliefs and people's health choices. People who endorsed medical conspiracy theories (e.g., "Health officials know that cell phones cause cancer but are doing nothing to stop it because large corporations won't let them") were less likely to engage with medical professionals, were more likely to trust medical advice alternative sources, and were more likely to choose unconventional medicines. Observations from medical professionals (e.g., Chung, 2009) suggest that conspiracy theories, mistrust of medial authority, and nonexpert celebrities are associated with vaccine refusal among parents.

One challenge of all of this research is that it is correlational. It is therefore impossible to determine the direction of causality. For example, conspiracy beliefs might drive vaccine refusal, or vaccine refusal may fuel conspiracy beliefs. However, Jolley and Douglas (2014a) provided experimental evidence of the potentially negative effects of antivaccine conspiracy theories on vaccine intentions. Participants were presented with common antivaccine conspiracy theories, arguments against the conspiracy theories, or no information (control). Findings showed that participants who had been exposed to conspiracy theories were reluctant to vaccinate compared to the other two conditions. Other researchers used focus groups and interviews to understand why some Romanian parents refuse to put their daughters forward for the HPV vaccination (Craciun & Baban, 2012). It was found that two of the key reasons for not vaccinating were the perception that the vaccine is an attempt to reduce the world's population, and the perception that it is an experiment to allow pharmaceutical companies to make large profits (see also a field study of Pakistani parents by Khan & Sahibzada, 2016).

Science Denial

Goertzel (2010) ties ideology and political commitments to conspiracy theories about science, including HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, Genetically Modified Food (GMO) conspiracy theories, "anti-vax" conspiracy theories, and climate change conspiracy theories (see also Weigmann, 2018). One recent survey showed that over a third of Americans agree that global warming is a hoax (Public Policy Polling, 2013), making climate skepticism very much a mainstream belief. In general, climate skeptics argue that climate change either is not occurring, or at least that humans are not the cause. More extreme climate skeptics assert that climate scientists are involved in data faking and fraud so that they ensure that they keep receiving research funding. In the United Kingdom, the "climategate" scandal concerning climate scientists at the University of East Anglia demonstrates the importance of beliefs about climate change and the lengths that people are prepared to go to (e.g., hacking emails) to attempt to discredit climate science. These conspiracy theories continue to resonate long after the claims were discredited (Anderegg & Goldsmith, 2014; Bricker, 2013; Jacques & Connolly-Knox, 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). There is ample evidence that conspiracy theorizing about climate change goes hand in hand with conspiracy thinking and science denial more generally (e.g., Lahrach & Furnham, 2017; Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, Brophy, & Marriott, 2015; Lewandowsky, Oberauer, et al., 2013; Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013; Uscinski, Douglas, & Lewandowsky, 2017; Uscinski and Olivella, 2017, see also Rutjens, Heine, Sutton, & van Harreveld, 2017).

Some experimental research suggests that climate change conspiracy theories influence people's environmental intentions. Jolley and Douglas (2014b) exposed a sample of British undergraduate students to a narrative about climate change conspiracy theories (e.g., that climate change is a hoax designed by climate scientists to obtain research funding), arguments refuting the conspiracy

narrative, or no arguments (control). Participants who had been exposed to the conspiracy narrative showed lower intentions to engage in the climate friendly behaviors. Although this research has not used behavioral dependent measures (e.g., whether people actively reduce their carbon footprint), it suggests that conspiracy theories at least inform what people intend to do on important matters such as climate change and vaccination as discussed earlier (see also van der Linden [2015] for similar findings).

It should be noted, however, that not all climate change conspiracy theories are antiscience. In fact, some of these conspiracy theories side with scientists against alleged governmental and corporate interference. Douglas and Sutton (2015) examined conspiracy theories on both "sides" of the climate debate and argued that some of the more debatably left-wing conspiracy theories are very much in favor of the scientific consensus, arguing that scientific evidence is being hidden or at least watered down. Specifically, some environmental groups suggest that solid, scientific information about climate change is being deliberately hidden for political reasons, as when information was omitted from the 2014 IPCC report about China's gas emissions. Other conspiracy theories cite support for the idea that large corporations with interests in the fossil fuel industry are suppressing climate science findings. Such conspiracy theories receive much less airtime than the right-wing antiscience versions, and their consequences are therefore unexplored.

Political Engagement

Conspiracy theories have also been linked to political attitudes and behaviors. Jolley and Douglas (2014b) found that participants who were exposed to antigovernment conspiracy theories—compared to those who were presented with refuting information— showed less intention to vote in the next election. Another negative outcome is decreased political trust. Einstein and Glick (2013) exposed participants to conspiracy claims, or a narrative disputing such claims. Exposure to the conspiracy theories negatively affected trust in government and institutions, even when the institutions were not connected to the allegations (see also Kim & Cao, 2016). Further, Butler et al. (1995) found that participants who had viewed the conspiracy film *JFK* showed lower intentions to engage in the political process by voting or making political contributions. Uscinski and Parent (2014) also showed that people higher in conspiracy thinking were less likely to register to vote, to actually go out and vote, to donate money to candidate, or to put up political signs at their homes.

In different contexts however, conspiracy theories may be associated with intentions to engage in political action against elites. Imhoff and Bruder (2014) examined conspiracy thinking and intentions to act in support of a nuclear phase-out following the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in 2011, by showing an intention to engage in protests. Among a sample of German respondents, conspiracy thinking was significantly and positively associated with the intention to engage in political actions in support of a nuclear phase-out. Although these findings are correlational, they suggest that conspiracy theorizing may sometimes trigger behaviors aimed at challenging the status quo and those in power (Atkinson et al., 2017; see also Chayinska & Minescu, 2018; Franks et al., 2013).

Violence, Radicalization and Extremism

Conspiracy theories may be associated with increased radicalized and extremist behavior. Bartlett and Miller (2010) analyzed the content of a broad range of extremist groups and found that conspiracy theories are not only prevalent throughout, but that there is a great deal of overlap between the conspiracy theories mentioned, even across extremist groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum. This evidence is consistent with van Prooijen et al.'s (2015) analysis. For instance, they found that anti-Jewish capitalist conspiracy theories were features of both right- and left-wing extremist groups. Bartlett and Miller argued that conspiracy theories play important social and functional roles for extremist groups. Specifically, they may be a "radicalizing multiplier" (p. 4) that contributes and reinforces the ideologies and psychological processes within the group.

More generally, conspiracy belief has been linked to violent intentions. Uscinski and Parent (2014) conducted a nationally representative survey in the United States in which they separated participants who were high and low in conspiracy thinking. Results showed that those who were more generally inclined toward conspiracy theories were more likely to agree that "violence is sometimes an acceptable way to express disagreement with the government" than those less inclined. Those inclined toward conspiracy belief are also in favor of lax gun ownership laws (Uscinski & Parent, 2014), show a willingness to conspire themselves (Douglas & Sutton, 2011), and show greater intentions to engage in everyday crime (Jolley, Douglas, Leite, & Schrader, in press). Again, we must caution that findings from correlational research do not imply causality (but see Jolley et al., [in press] for experimental findings). Sadly, however, the world is all too familiar with cases of people who have committed violence on the basis of conspiracy ideas (e.g., Timothy McVeigh, Anders Breivik) and of governments committing violence based on conspiracy theories and propaganda (e.g., Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia).

Workplace Engagement

DiFonzo, Bordia, and Rosnow (1994) discuss the detrimental consequences of "questionable information" such as rumors, in the workplace. They argue that despite appearing to be trivial notions shared around the water fountain, rumors can drain productivity, create stress in the workplace, reduce profits, and denigrate a company's image. Although rumors and conspiracy theories differ in one crucial element—rumors do not necessarily imply the collusion of individuals and groups—some important parallels can be drawn. For example, both can reduce trust in authorities, both more often than not lack proof, and both are often relied upon when reliable information is not available or endorsed in particular under conditions of some uncertainty.

Douglas and Leite (2017) carried out an experimental investigation of the effects of conspiracy theorizing in the workplace. Participants who were asked to imagine a conspiratorial workplace were more likely want to leave that workplace than those in a control condition. This effect was driven by lower feelings of commitment and lower job satisfaction (see also van Prooijen and de Vries [2016] for similar findings). Sharing suspicions around the water fountain might therefore be damaging to the workplace.

Future Directions

The current research on conspiracy theories is broad and interdisciplinary, and as such, we believe we have a unique opportunity to consider what, from here, are the key directions that future research should take.

First, we argue that some methodological issues need to be addressed. Specifically, to be more confident in the power of research findings, we would recommend the use of larger, more representative samples. While the use of student populations and crowdsourced samples may be convenient and inexpensive, these samples do not provide an overall picture of conspiracy beliefs among the general population, nor are they able to tell us how different groups in society are likely to embrace conspiracy theories compared to others. Field experiments could also add value to the literature. Studying conspiracy beliefs in specific contexts and at specific points in time can give a detailed account of the factors that determine those beliefs and what effects they may have. Furthermore, since much of the literature to date has been correlational, future efforts must focus on experimental and longitudinal research designs to examine the causes and effects of conspiracy theories more directly.

Next, there are several different measures of conspiracy beliefs and conspiracy thinking, but no one accepted measure (see Swami et al., 2017). Although scales correlate very highly with each other, the literature could benefit from more standardized measurement as exists in other research areas. Further, more work must examine how these scales translate across geographic context, particularly into closed societies where the conspiracy theories about government are likely to be more

rational. The study of conspiracy theories is beginning to traverse geographic boundaries; for example, see works on Turkey (Nefes, 2015b), Russia (Yablokov, 2018), Europe (Drochon, 2018), the Middle East (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018; Siddiqui, in press), Latin America (Filer, 2018), and Thailand (Greenhill & Oppenheim, 2017). Studies should begin integrating these various findings to develop broader theories.

Also, it is important to note that the majority of studies examining beliefs in conspiracy theories have relied on self-report survey measures. These measures raise the possibility of *expressive responding*—endorsing ideas to express opposition to policies and politicians rather than reflecting genuine beliefs (e.g., Bullock, Gerber, Hill, & Huber, 2015). Some scholars argue that responses to political statements are rife with expressive responding and that participants' responses can therefore not be relied upon as their true beliefs (Prior, Sood, & Khanna, 2015). Other scholars, however, have found no evidence for expressive responding and argue that survey responses therefore serve as a "window into the underlying beliefs and true preferences of the mass public" (Berinsky, 2018, p. 211). This is an important issue to consider in the case of political conspiracy theories, and researchers should consider additional alternative methods (e.g., interviews, discourse analysis) to tap into these beliefs. However, it is also important to note that not all conspiracy theories are political, and therefore expressive responding is unlikely to be a significant concern in all studies. Nevertheless, this is an important issue to consider in future research.

Further, although research has uncovered many personality, social, and political factors that contribute to conspiracy belief, some important controversies have emerged and some lines of research are yet to yield conclusive answers. For instance, some research has demonstrated a relationship between pattern perception and belief in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2018; van der Wal et al., 2018), but other studies have found no relationship (Dieguez et al., 2015). More research is required to examine the role of people's ability to process information. The role of education in conspiracy belief is becoming clearer (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2017), but further delineating the role of both crystalline and fluid intelligence (Catell, 1971) is required if we are to know whether conspiracy belief arises from a cognitive deficit or instead from a lack of skills that education provides.

Also, research and theory on the relationship between political conviction and conspiracy belief is clear, and even settled, on some points but not on others. As we have seen, it is clear that people on both sides of the left-right political spectrum entertain conspiracy beliefs about the other side. However, some scholars maintain that conspiracy theories are more characteristic of the right than the left. Others dispute this and suggest that conspiracy theories are overwhelmingly bipartisan— found on both sides of any political debate (Berlet, 1992; Citrin, McClosky, Shanks, & Sniderman, 1975; Graumann, 1987; Hollander, 2017). Still others find that conspiracy theories are stronger at the political extremes (van Prooijen et al., 2015). A great deal more work involving comparative studies of conspiracy theories in different political epochs, of conspiracy theories in different contemporary polities, and different varieties of conspiracy belief, is required.

Further research is also needed to understand the communication of conspiracy theories. The development of automatic coding of web content, of social networks in Web 2.0, and analyses of communication dynamics opens up many opportunities to study the large-scale communication of conspiracy theories and its implications for social and political processes. These technologies have much to offer the conspiracy theory literature. One of their advantages is their ecological validity—they allow researchers to directly observe the unfolding and sharing of conspiracy theories in real time and in real life, rather than through the medium of self-report surveys and laboratory simulations. A related and very important advantage is that these technologies allow access to large numbers of conspiracy believers who can be very hard to reach for survey and experimental studies. These methods will allow researchers to address crucial research questions that are impossible to address in other ways, such as examining patterns of conspiracy communication alongside political movements and political events. In terms of small-scale communication of conspiracy theories, many

research questions also remain ripe for investigation using the traditional survey, interview, and experimental methodologies of the social sciences. One core theoretical question concerns the relationships between producing conspiracy theories, believing in them, and actively communicating them to others. As political leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán increasingly use conspiracy theories to discredit the opposition and win votes, these questions have never been more important.

As the research on conspiracy theories has developed, it has become increasingly clear that conspiracy theories are likely to affect important social and political outcomes. But, since most research has focused on the causes rather than the consequences of conspiracy theorizing, much more work is needed. For example, there is surprisingly little research into how people who espouse conspiracy theories are viewed, and whilst some research has revealed that people fear social exclusion from expressing conspiracy beliefs (Lantian, Muller, Nurra, Klein, Berjot & Pantazi, 2018), one study suggests that labelling statements as "conspiracy theories" may not lower their perceived credibility (Wood, 2016). Future research could examine the social consequences that face people who adopt conspiracy theories. Taking the opposite perspective, research could also examine the social consequences that face people who are viewed as the victims of conspiracies or those who are alleged to have been involved in conspiracies.

Further, a good deal of research has explored the ideological variables and worldviews that contribute to conspiracy belief. Future research could begin to examine the interplay between ideology and conspiracy belief—how conspiracy theories may shape ideological variables, and how conspiracy and ideological variables may interact with each other to affect social and political behavior. For example, future research could also explore the consequences of conspiracy theories for political engagement and collective action. Past work has yielded mixed evidence showing that on the one hand, exposure to conspiracy theories decreases political engagement (Jolley and Douglas, 2014b), but on the other it may stimulate collective action against the powerful elites (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). It is possible that conspiracy beliefs decrease normative forms of political engagement, but stimulate disruptive forms of political engagement.

Finally, more research is needed to determine how it is possible to successfully intervene on conspiracy theories. Existing research has shown that presenting counterconspiracy information may sometimes be effective, even among high conspiracy believers (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014). Jolley and Douglas (2017) showed that presenting counterconspiracy information before conspiracy information—in other words "inoculating" people against conspiracy theories—can reduce belief. Orosz, Krekó, Paskuj, Tóth-Király, Bothe, and Roland-Lévy (2016) showed that counterarguing and even ridiculing conspiracy claims could be effective in reducing conspiracy belief. In future efforts, researchers may consider some of the techniques used to address misinformation more generally (e.g., counterarguing, retraction, prewarning; see Flynn et al., 2017 for an overview). However, research in this area will need to take into account that arguments against conspiracy theories are often ignored or even absorbed into the conspiracy theory (Stojanov, 2015). Interventions may therefore backfire (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Other methods, not designed as interventions but to facilitate experimental tests of the bases of conspiracy theory, show promise in small-scale settings. Education may combat conspiracy beliefs as well (Wilson, 2018). Encouraging analytical rather than intuitive thinking has been shown to reduce conspiracy belief (Swami et al., 2014), as has encouraging people to think of themselves as personally moral (Douglas & Sutton, 2011). Future research is needed to determine whether these techniques are scalable for use as interventions to reduce belief in conspiracy theories.

Final Remarks

Scholarly efforts to understand the appeal and consequences of conspiracy theories have yielded a diverse and interdisciplinary literature. We have argued that conspiracy theories are

much more than trivial notions and should be taken seriously for several reasons. First, there are a variety of reasons why a person might adopt conspiracy theories, ranging from personality traits to satisfying complex social needs. People communicate conspiracy theories by many different means, satisfying a broad set of political, psychological, and social motives. Finally, conspiracy theories have effects on both individuals and important societal institutions. Their risks (and benefits) are far-reaching, and much more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the importance of this pervasive psychological, political, and social phenomenon, especially on the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups that have been identified as most expected to benefit from them.

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