

Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has claimed to show that conspiracy theorists are prone to simultaneously believe mutually contradictory conspiracy theories, as well as believe entirely made up conspiracy theories. The authors of those studies suggest that this supports the notion that conspiracy theories operate within “monological belief systems”, in which conspiracy theorists find support for conspiratorial beliefs in other conspiratorial beliefs, or in related generalizations, rather than in evidence directly relevant to the conspiracy in question. In this article, I argue that all of that is either wrong or at least misleading.

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1. Introduction

Focusing primarily on three articles (Wood *et al.* 2012, Swami *et al.* 2011, and Goertzel 1994), but addressing others as well, I argue that there is a trend in the social science literature on conspiracy theories that is significantly misleading (presumably¹ due to bias against conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists). Specifically, I show the following: (1) The often cited claim that conspiracy

¹ When a field of scholarship contains a number of authors (and, apparently, referees and editors as well) who reason in a rather obviously fallacious manner (or fail not notice these obvious fallacies) so as to unfairly malign a class of people, and there does not seem to be an analogous situation with opposite implications, it is reasonable to suspect bias may be involved. Of course, this does not by itself conclusively establish that there is bias (a very difficult thing to do in any circumstance), but the more obvious, egregious, widespread, and unidirectional the phenomenon is the more likely there is bias. Readers can make their own judgments regarding degrees, but I hope to have provided some good reasons to think that this phenomenon is rather obvious, egregious and widespread. That it is unidirectional I have taken for granted; I await citation of any examples of peer-reviewed published scholarship that unfairly stigmatizes those who accept “conventional wisdom” or official accounts regarding conspiracy theories.

theorists tend to simultaneously believe contradictory conspiracy theories (based on Wood *et al.* 2012) is unfounded. (2) A study that purports to show that conspiracy theorists are more prone than others to believe entirely fictitious conspiracy theories (Swami *et al.* 2011) is one-sided and misleading. In addition, the authors make an error about belief that is analogous to the one made by Wood *et al.* Further, there is nothing unusual or problematic about the reasoning process that presumably underlies the phenomenon they document. (3) Both of the above studies claim to provide evidence that conspiracy theorists tend to operate within a “monological belief system”, an idea first put forward by Ted Goertzel (1994). This label, as described by Goertzel, implies that there is something epistemically problematic about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists. However, in all three studies, the evidence produced supports only a connection with its *unproblematic* aspects. There is no documented evidence that the *problematic* aspects actually apply to conspiracy theorists.

And yet these articles, along with similar others, have been used to imply that something epistemically problematic has been discovered about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists in particular. For example, Martin Bruder and his co-authors write:

There is increasing evidence that there are stable individual differences in people’s tendency to believe in [both new and ‘classic’] conspiracy theories; if a person believes in one conspiracy theory, he or she will also be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories. In fact, this tendency even extends to beliefs in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories, and to beliefs in fully fictitious conspiracy theories. Thus, those who believe that Princess Diana faked her own death are also more likely to believe that she was murdered; those who believe in “real-world conspiracy theories” (i.e., that John F. Kennedy fell victim to an organized conspiracy) are more likely to believe that there was a conspiracy behind the success of the Red Bull energy drink—a conspiracy theory that was purposely developed for a social psychology study (Bruder *et al.* 2013: 1).

A large chunk of the above is quoted by Cass Sunstein in his most recent revision of his article, “Conspiracy Theories”, in *Conspiracy Theories and Other Dangerous Ideas*. And the claims included in it are repeated, citing largely the same evidence, by a number of scholars as well as journalists. My central thesis is that all of these assertions, both separately, and especially when taken together to insinuate that there is something wrong with “conspiracist ideation”, are either wrong or at least misleading.

In the above quotation, Bruder *et al.* make three related claims about conspiracy theories. Claim 1: “[I]f a person believes in one conspiracy theory, he or she will also be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories”. Here these authors cite Swami *et al.* (2010), and could have cited others as well. I do not contest the truth of this point, but maintain that the probable underlying thought process is normal and reasonable, not distinctive or problematic. Claim 2: “[T]his tendency [to be more likely to believe in other conspiracy theories] even extends to beliefs in mutually contradictory conspiracy theories”. This claim is supported by Wood *et al.* (2012). However, as I will argue below, the authors have not provided any evidence for *this*, though they do mistakenly assert that they have. Thus, the claim is unsubstantiated and presumably false as a generalization, being implausible as well as unsupported. Claim 3: “[This

tendency even extends] to beliefs in fully fictitious conspiracy theories”. This claim is misleading. Bruder seems to imply that there is something epistemically problematic, or at least unusual, going on. But a close examination of the relevant study (Swami *et al.* 2011) reveals that that is not the case.

Each of the following three sections addresses one of the above claims. I start with Claim 2 in section 2, followed by Claim 3 in section 3. In section 4 I address claim 1 in the context of a larger discussion of so-called “monological belief systems”, as described by Goertzel (1994). Then, in sections 5, I discuss some critical points made in an article by two co-authors of Wood *et al.* 2012 (namely, Sutton and Douglas 2014). They too have come to recognize problems with Goertzel’s attempt to attribute “monological belief systems” to conspiracy theorists, though they do not acknowledge the problem with their own earlier study (i.e. Wood *et al.* 2012).

2. Conspiracy Theorists Believe Contradictory Conspiracy Theories!

In a recent review of the literature, Jan-Willem van Prooijan and Paul A.M. van Lange write:

One of the main research findings on this phenomenon [i.e. in belief in conspiracy theories] is that conspiracy beliefs are monological in nature: one conspiracy theory reinforces other conspirational ideas, making individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory more likely to also believe in other conspiracy theories (van Prooijan and van Lange 2014: 237).

This finding, as described here, is neither surprising nor epistemically problematic (for reasons to be elaborated below). Indeed, the idea that this is “the main research finding” regarding belief in conspiracy theories may cause one to wonder, “Why is such a commonsensical and innocuous finding even regarded as interesting?” The answer is that the idea of being “monological” is thought to have other, more problematic, implications. Conspiracy theorists are thought to take this normal and unproblematic reasoning process—using one belief as evidence for another—too far. Indeed, allegedly, they take it to the point of self-contradiction. Continuing, van Prooijan and van Lange write, “A recent study reveals that this monological belief system even applies to conspiracy theories that are mutually exclusive” (van Prooijan and van Lange 2014: 237, citing Wood *et al.* 2012).

Postponing the discussion of “monological belief systems”, let us here focus on the claim, based on a recent study (Wood *et al.* 2012), that conspiracy theorists have a tendency to simultaneously believe two mutually inconsistent conspiracy theories. This finding is also cited prominently by other scholars writing on this topic, including Cass Sunstein, Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, Viren Swami, and Christopher French. It is a powerful meme for anyone who one wants to encourage a dismissive attitude toward conspiracy theories, because it suggests that the fantastical thinking of conspiracy theorists is not even held in check by the most obvious of contradictions. Below are a just few examples of depictions of this finding that reveal the flavor it is given.

In their recent book, *American Conspiracy Theories*, political scientists Uscinski and Parent write:

A predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking... explains why people believe theories that are logically contradictory (e.g., many of the people believing Osama Bin Laden is still alive also believe he was dead long before the raid on his compound) (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 14).

Professor of Psychology, and head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Christopher French writes in *Scientific American*:

[P]eople who are strongly inclined toward conspiratorial thinking will be more likely to endorse mutually contradictory theories. For example, if you believe that Osama bin Laden was killed many years before the American government officially announced his death, you are also more likely to believe that he is still alive (French 2015).

In an article titled, “Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, Swami *et al.* write:

[A] growing body of evidence suggests that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with ... belief in contradictory statements (Swami *et al.* 2014: 573, citing Wood *et al.* 2012).

The science news website, *Live Science*, under the headline “Contradictions Don’t Deter Conspiracy Theorists”, also makes the same claim:

Did Princess Diana fake her own death to escape the public eye? Or was she killed by a rogue element of the British secret service? If you agree with one of these theories, there’s a good chance you’ll subscribe to both even though one suggests Princess Diana is alive, the other dead, a new study indicates.... [And] people who believed bin Laden was already dead before the raid were more likely to believe he is still alive (Wynne Parry, January 27, 2012).

In an Op-ed for *Newsday*, Cass Sunstein writes:

Remarkably, people who accept one conspiracy theory tend to accept another conspiracy theory that is logically inconsistent with it. People who believe that Princess Diana faked her own death are more likely to think that she was murdered. People who believe that Osama bin Laden was already dead when U.S. forces invaded his compound are more likely to believe that he is still alive (Sunstein 2014b).²

² This is not an isolated slip, or a one-time remark. Sunstein has asserted this repeatedly. For example, in the *New York Times* he writes, “In fact, people who embrace one conspiracy theory are also inclined to embrace another conspiracy theory that cannot simultaneously be true. In one study, people who said they believed that Osama bin Laden is alive and well were more likely to believe that he was dead before U.S. forces invaded his compound” (Sunstein 2015). Likewise, in an interview that can be viewed on YouTube under the title “Why conspiracy theories are rational to believe”, Sunstein again makes the same claim. He says, “[A] good predictor of whether people will believe in conspiracy theories is whether they believe in other conspiracy theories”. That much is true. Sunstein continues, “And that effect is so intense that people will believe in logically incompatible conspiracy theories. So if you think princess Diana

Sunstein is suggesting that such people are reasoning in a “remarkably” irrational way.³ Skepticism toward “authorities”, Sunstein elsewhere writes, “even lead[s] suspicious individuals to disregard contradictions between them [i.e. between alternative conspiracy theories]” (Sunstein 2015). Sunstein suggests that conspiracy theorists are so “suspicious” that they are driven to “embrace” mutually contradictory positions.

However, there is a serious problem with all this: the research referred to does not actually show the self-contradictory thinking that is alleged. This misreading of the study is not entirely the fault of Sunstein and these others (although they do share in the responsibility), for the authors of the study themselves suggested the same interpretation of their findings. The very title of the article in question, “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories”, suggests the above interpretation. And, so there can be no misunderstanding, the article concludes by clearly stating that, “Believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 772).⁴

Yet this is all unfounded. The article did not document individuals who simultaneously believed two mutually exclusive scenarios (though it would not be too surprising to find some isolated occurrences). The authors of the article in question, Michael Wood, Karen Douglas, and Robbie Sutton, describes two studies, which will be examined in turn.

Study 1 tells us that there is a correlation between the *degree* of “agreement” with several statements about the death of Princess Diana. What is regarded as interesting in this study is that some positively correlated statements about the death of Princess Diana seem to be contradictory. The authors write, “Either she was killed by a rogue cell of British secret service (#1) or by business rivals of the Fayeds (#4), or she faked her own death (#3)”⁵ (Wood *et al.* 2012: 769).

was murdered, you are more likely to think she is still alive, and these can’t simultaneously be true” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnYT5Fp6w_M, at 1:15 – 1:45). The advantage of actually watching such an interview, rather than merely reading the words, is that Sunstein’s successful conveyance of ridicule, which can be read clearly on his interlocutor’s smirking face, cannot plausibly be denied. The irony is that this ridicule is based on misinterpretation of the study, and a failure to make a critical and rather obvious distinction.

³ Sunstein and his co-author Adrian Vermeule take a more nuanced position in their 2009 paper on this subject (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009), arguing that conspiracy theorists are not irrational *per se*, but merely are hampered by a “crippled epistemology”. That thesis, and Sunstein and Vermeule’s paper more generally, has been shown to be highly problematic for a variety of reasons. See Hagen 2010, 2011, and Griffin 2011.

⁴ Wynne Parry, writing for *Live Science*, got the message. Quoting the study’s conclusion, Parry writes, “The central idea—that authorities are engaged in massive deceptions intended to further their malevolent goals—supports any individual theory, to the point that theorists can endorse contradictory ones, according to the team. ‘Believing that Osama bin Laden is still alive is apparently no obstacle to believing that he has been dead for years,’ they write in a study published online Wednesday (Jan. 25 [2012]) in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*” (Parry 2012, referring to Wood *et al.* 2012).

⁵ Other combinations could have been taken as equally contradictory, but for some reason were not indicated as such in Table 1 in Wood *et al.* 2012 (769). But it does not matter. If they had been, the same critique would apply.

These are described as “mutually incompatible” and “unambiguous contradictions”. Clearly, the first two (#1 and #4) are not “unambiguous contradictions”. British Intelligence and the Fayed’s business enemies could have colluded, as many people believe about the mob and the CIA with regard to the JFK assassination.⁶ However, both propositions #1 and #4 really do (nearly enough) contradict the notion that Diana faked her own death (#3). Now, what does a correlation of this kind really mean, anyway? It means that if subjects rated their *level of* “agreement” to one of these statements as relatively high, on a scale of 1 to 7, they were likely to rate the other relatively high too, as compared to those who rated the first relatively low. It is important to notice that *nobody* would have to *believe* any of these statements to produce this result. And it is also worth noting that “endorsement of the faked-own-death theory was extremely low... with a mean of only 1.52 on a 7-point scale” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 770). So, in this context, even a rating of “2” is relatively high! Can that be reasonably interpreted as “belief”? More generally, what does it mean to “agree” to a statement at a level of, say 2,3, 4, or even 5 or 6 on a scale of 1 to 7? It is not clear what it means. But the obviousness of the incongruence of the genuinely incompatible statements suggests that it does *not* amount to belief. It is more plausibly interpreted as something resembling what is more explicitly measured in Study 2, to which we now turn.

In the abstract to their paper, the authors write, “In Study 2 (n = 102), the more participants believed that Osama bin Laden was already dead when U.S. special forces raided his compound in Pakistan, the more they believed he is still alive” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 767). But that is not quite accurate. Again, the researchers did not measure “belief”. What they measured in this study can more accurately be characterized as the *degree of credence* given to mutually contradictory conspiracy theories. In their own words, they found “significant positive correlation between composite endorsement ratings” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 767). If person A found the theory that Osama bin Laden is still alive relatively more “plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 771) than person B did, then person A was likely to also find the theory that Osama was already dead at the time of the raid more plausible (etc.) than person B did. And this is actually *perfectly reasonable*; there is no contradiction here. As the researchers quite reasonably suggest, what seems to be at work here is a mediating belief that authorities are untrustworthy. Indeed, that is not *merely*

⁶ Elsewhere two of the authors of the study write, “If indeed Princess Diana was assassinated, the royal family and Al-Fayed’s business partners could not both have been independently responsible for her death” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 258). This is a little misleading. The study in question does not require that the various hypothetical culprits had to act *independently*. (It also does not include “the royal family did it” as an option, though one could imagine that MI6 did it on behalf of the royal family.)

It is curious what these authors regard as incompatible. They write, “Consider, for example, the left-leaning theory that oil companies plot to discredit evidence that use of their product is warming the planet, and the right-leaning theory that governments and scientists deliberately exaggerate the risk of anthropogenic climate change. With such different and often mutually incompatible content, it is by no means obvious why these theories tend to come together in the minds of some people” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 256). These examples, though contrasting, are clearly not mutually incompatible.

an obvious and plausible idea; it is also supported by their statistical analysis.⁷ If a particular individual is less trusting of the government than someone else (regardless of what level of trust is warranted), he or she is more likely to give greater credence to alternative accounts of contested events. There is simply nothing epistemically dubious about, say, rating both the notion that Osama was already dead *and* that he is still alive as more “plausible, convincing, worth considering and coherent” than someone else with more faith in official stories rated both theories.

Lee Basham puts the same objection this way, “[T]he researchers conflate participants’ reports of *strong suspicions* with *settled beliefs*” (Basham 2017: 64). He provides the following illustration.

Imagine you have misplaced your key ring. You suspect you left it in the front door lock. You also suspect you left it in the kitchen. Given your previous behavior, you rate as quite probable, “agree” that it is in the front door and equally as probable, “agree”, the keys are in the kitchen. This is an entirely rational cognitive practice. But according to the interpretation of Wood *et al.*, you *believe* your keys are located, at the very same moment, in both your front door and in your kitchen. For those with lost-key beliefs, believing one has left the keys in the front door is apparently no obstacle to believing the keys are simultaneously in the kitchen (Basham 2017: 64-65).⁸

The authors should have noticed this,⁹ since they did notice an analogous issue regarding “interestingness”, which they decided to exclude it in their analysis because “there is no contradiction in finding two rival theories equally interesting” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 771). Yet they failed to recognize that there is also *no contradiction in finding two rival theories equally plausible, convincing, worth considering, and coherent*.

Elsewhere, Robbie Sutton and Karen Douglas (2014), the other two authors of “Dead and Alive”, consider several possible theories that could potentially explain how contradictory beliefs could be “held together”. They write, for example, “Beliefs may not support each other, but instead may be held together by believers’ perception of their own moral tendencies” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 262). Alternatively, along with other views,¹⁰ they consider that,

⁷ Their analysis reveals that “the correlation in endorsement of the two contradictory theories is explainable entirely by their connection with belief in a deceptive cover-up by authority” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 771).

⁸ Basham and I independently noticed this flaw in Wood’s paper. That should not be surprising; the problem is rather obvious. What is surprising, at least to me, is that so many others failed to notice.

⁹ The authors come close when they noted, “[H]igher-order beliefs may be so strongly held that any conspiracy theory that stands in opposition to the official narrative will gain *some degree of endorsement* from someone who holds a conspiracist worldview, even if it directly contradicts other conspiracy theories that they also find *credible*” (Wood *et al.*, 2012: 768, emphasis added).

¹⁰ Here is another proposed explanation for what “holds beliefs in various conspiracy theories together”. Sutton and Douglas explain, “[C]onspiracy theories imply that powerful elites are willing and able to conspire. This central belief in the existence of conspiracies may be the essential glue that holds beliefs in various conspiracy theories together” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 264). Does any serious person actually question

“[I]ncompatible conspiracy beliefs may be held concurrently because they are explained by their coherence with ‘nuclear ideas’ that pull ideas together to form an ideological system” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259). The problem is that, because there are no simultaneously believed contradictory beliefs documented, *there is nothing here that needs explaining*—nothing, at least, that is peculiar to conspiracy theorists. So, while the general question of how beliefs and attitudes hold together is an interesting one, the premise that conspiracy theorists in particular tend to hold *incompatible* beliefs, which would make them especially in need of explanation, is unfounded.

As far as one can tell from Wood *et al.* 2012, “suspicious” people reason normally and properly. And so the fact that this paper has been used to disparage and even ridicule conspiracy theorists is unfortunate and inappropriate. And the authors are partially responsible for this. But what is significant here is not that an isolated paper happens to have been flawed. It is that this flaw, which should not have been difficult to recognize, not only escaped the notice of multiple authors, and passed peer review, but appears to have been universally accepted in the psychological research community and widely repeated in both academic and wider venues. Further, as we will see, this is *not* an isolated error. There is an almost systemic distortion in the psychological literature, and to some degree the social science literature more generally, regarding which the problems with “Dead and Alive” are symptomatic. (To some extent this may be in the process of self-correction. Surprisingly, it is the authors of “Dead and Alive” themselves who have begun this process, as we will see.)

3. Conspiracy Theorists Even Believe Conspiracy Theories that are Completely Made Up!

In a study led by Viren Swami (Swami *et al.* 2011), subjects were asked to rate “the extent to which they agreed” with various statements about a fictitious conspiracy theory. Let us pause and think for a moment. To what extent *should* someone agree with a statement they know nothing directly about, have never heard of, and so could not have had *any* opinion about prior to being asked? It seems they should have responded, “I don’t know. I have no opinion”. (For all they know about it, which is nothing, the theories could be true.) But “I don’t know” was not an option. They had to pick a number between one (completely false) and nine (completely true).¹¹ The sensible thing to do, it seems, is to answer according to how *likely to be true* they judged the statement to be, or how *plausible* it seemed to them. And if they do this, the subjects can be expected to make their judgments based on their views regarding analogous cases about

“the existence of conspiracies” or that “powerful elites are willing and able to conspire”? I should think that the only real questions are questions of extent: *How* prevalent are conspiracies? *How* willing and *how* able to conspire are powerful elites?

¹¹ Like “Dead and Alive”, this study does not clearly measure belief *per se*. Ostensibly, it measures the degree of truth or falsity. But this seems to be an inappropriate measure in this context. How can one assess the degree of accuracy (which is what degree of truth or falsity means, if taken literally) in a case about which one knows nothing? Thus, the subjects have little choice but to interpret and answer in terms of the degree of plausibility or likelihood, rather than degree of truth or falsity.

which they do already have opinions, presumably based on *something*. And so, it seems, they did. Based on this, Swami concludes, as if it tells us something interesting (and unflattering) about conspiracy theorists, “[B]elieving in real-world conspiracy theories appears to make it more likely that an individual will also be more accepting of fictitious conspiracy theories” (Swami *et al.* 2011: 460).

Yes, indeed. *So it should*. The subject does not know that the theory is fictitious, and presumably makes her assessment of the probability/plausibility of the fictitious theory based on the only evidence available to her—her other beliefs. These beliefs, presumably, are in turn supported by other beliefs, which may or may not ultimately have reasonably solid grounding. A person who has beliefs that suggest that “such things” do occur would normally rank the fictitious story as more plausible than people who have beliefs that suggests “such things” do not occur, or occur only very rarely. And so, of course, those who believe in real-world conspiracy are “more accepting of fictitious conspiracy theories”, that is, they find them more plausible or more likely to be true than do those who do not believe in real-world conspiracy theories.

Here is the trick. The experimenters pick fictitious conspiracy theories making the conspiracy believer end up looking a little silly for giving some degree of credence to a theory that is made up from nothing. In comparison, the “conventionalist”,¹² seems like the better thinker.¹³ But that is an illusion. The conspiracy theorist and the conventionalist, as far as we can tell, are both reasoning the same. If the researchers had picked a true but little known conspiracy theory as the test, the conspiracy theorist would have come out looking better. Indeed, that is not just speculation; such an experiment has now been done. As described by Rob Brotherton (of all people):¹⁴

A recent study... found that people who reject speculative conspiracy theories (such as “evidence of alien contact is being concealed from the public”) are also more likely to reject documented conspiracies (such as “How likely is the idea that the government has performed mind-control experiments on its own citizens

¹² I am following Wood and Douglass 2013 in adopting the word “conventionalist” for those who stick with conventional, orthodox interpretations, rejecting alternative “conspiracy theories”.

¹³ The authors never explicitly say that their result reflects poorly on conspiracy theorists. If challenged, they may even deny that they intended such an inference. Uscinski and Parent, for example, have strenuously insisted that they do not mean to be judgmental (Uscinski and Parent 2014). But it is one thing to claim to mean no offence, it is another to actually conduct evenhanded research—“By their fruits ye shall know them”. Despite the problems of “Dead and Alive” outlined above, Michael Wood’s more recent work has been more evenhanded (see Wood *et al.* 2013 and Wood 2016). More will be said below about the mixed but improving record of Sutton and Douglas, Wood’s co-authors for “Dead and Alive”. Goertzel’s intent, on the other hand, is clear. This is also discussed below.

¹⁴ Rob Brotherton favorably cites the studies that I have criticized in this article, and he himself conducts similar psychological studies, sometimes in collaboration with Christopher French. He is generally dismissive regarding controversial conspiracy theories, though he does claim no intention to be insulting. After all, he is just trying to find the psychological peculiarities that drive people to beliefs that he dismissively rejects. Why should anyone be offended by that?

without their consent?”—a coy reference to the CIA’s very real MKUltra program) (Brotherton 2016).

Brotherton is referring to a study lead by none other than Michael Wood (namely, Wood 2016), which is, to Wood’s credit, more balanced than his “Dead and Alive” paper, discussed above. Here Wood offers a couple plausible explanations.

[P]eople who are aware of past malfeasance by powerful actors in society might extrapolate from known abuses of power to more speculative ones. Alternatively, people with more conspiracist world views might be more likely to seek out information on criminal acts carried out by officials in the past, while those with less conspiracist world views might ignore or reject such information (Wood 2015: 698).

The first “alternative” is perfectly reasonable, awareness of known abuses of power *should* incline a reasonable person to “rate the likelihood” of speculative cases higher than she otherwise would. The second “alternative” points to confirmation bias at work in seeking out the information. Nevertheless, evidence is still evidence, even if one finds it as a result of bias.

It is important to keep in mind that neither conspiracy theorists nor the conventionalists can make an *a priori* claim that their inference was the better one. Which group is more likely to be right in real cases depends upon how common the conspiratorial behaviors of the types in question *really* are. And, to have a sense of that, one has to do an empirical study, not of conspiracy theorists, but of the history of conspiracies, both of the officially acknowledged and of the controversial varieties.

Another point that needs to be emphasized is that neither side is *reasoning* badly, given their beliefs about conspiracy theories in general. It is entirely reasonable for those who believe in conspiracy theories to be more inclined to believe theories that are relevantly similar to other theories that they think they have reason to believe, especially if those theories imply that authorities cannot be trusted. And, likewise, it is entirely reasonable for people who do not believe in conspiracy theories in general to be less inclined to believe in any particular one. This is because the (perceived) prior probability of a given type of explanation influences, and *ought* to influence, one’s assessment of plausibility of a particular hypothesis of that type. The interesting question in this context is not whether one’s perception of the prior probability involved *influences* one’s judgment about the plausibility of a specific case. (In general, it clearly does and should.) Rather, the interesting question is whether the degree of prior probability is accurately perceived in the first place.¹⁵ In other words, if we want to make a judgment about who has the most appropriate perspective on the issue we would have to study whether or not belief in conspiracy theories *in general* is warranted. And to do this, we would have to study the relevant history, and the empirical evidence surrounding controversial cases. And this is something that these social scientists do not typically want to bother with very

¹⁵ See Basham 2011: 64-68 for a useful analogy (involving a “good family” and a “bad [Mafia] family”) illustrating how considerations of prior probability influence, and *ought* to influence, the evaluation of conspiracy theories.

much. Just as “people with more conspiracist world views” people might be inclined to “seek out information on criminal acts carried out by officials in the past”, as Wood has suggested, people with conventionalist world views may be inclined not to. Both are forms of confirmation bias. As for academics who shy away from such studies, one can hardly blame them. After all, the evidence supporting conspiracy theories involving the most paradigmatic conspiracy theories, the JFK assassination and 9/11, is mountainous.¹⁶

Along with the alleged tendency to believe contradictory theories, the supposed inclination to be “more accepting” of entirely fictitious conspiracy theories is cited as evidence that conspiracy theorists operate within a “monological belief system”. For example, Swami writes:

Evidence of an association between belief in this entirely fictitious conspiracy theory and real-world conspiracy theories would provide strong evidence for a monological belief system in relation to conspiracist ideation (Swami *et al.* 2011: 453, citing Goertzel 1994).¹⁷

It is this notion of “monological belief systems” to which we now turn.

4. Conspiracy Theorists are Monological Thinkers—They Talk Only to Themselves!

The idea that so-called “conspiracy ideation” is indicative of a “monological belief system” was first suggested by political scientist Ted Goertzel (1994) and now enjoys experimental support (supposedly) from the work of various psychologists, including Michael Wood and Viren Swami. Swami regards Goertzel’s claim that, in Swami’s words, “conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’” as “[p]erhaps one of the most important conclusions” of studies addressing influences on belief in conspiracy theories (Swami and Coles 2010: 562).¹⁸ Elsewhere, Swami *et al.* elaborate:

In a seminal study, Goertzel (1994) argued that conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’ in which a conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation. Thus, for example, recent work [Swami *et al.* 2010]

¹⁶ To say that it is mountainous is not to say that is of good quality (though I happen to think much of it is good). The claim that it is mountainous can be established by pointing to a large pile of books; whether on the whole it is of good or poor quality can *only* be established by reading and critically evaluating those books.

¹⁷ Similarly, Swami *et al.* write, “This provides additional support for Goertzel’s (1994) argument that a person who believes in one conspiracy theory is more likely to believe in others, including entirely fictitious ones perceived as real” (Swami *et al.* 2011: 459).

¹⁸ What follows is the complete context, which also includes claims similar to those quoted from Swami *et al.* 2011. “Perhaps one of the most important conclusions to emerge from the handful of studies to focus explicitly on the individual antecedents of belief in conspiracy theories was Goertzel’s (1994) assertion that conspiracy beliefs form part of a ‘monological belief system’. This allows conspiracy theorists to easily assimilate explanations for new phenomena that would otherwise be difficult to understand or would threaten their existing beliefs. Recent work supports this, showing that those who more strongly endorsed 9/11 conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in other, seemingly unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami and Coles 2010: 562).

has shown that respondents who more strongly endorsed conspiracy theories about the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks were more likely to believe in other, unrelated conspiracy theories (Swami *et al.* 2011: 444-45).

They also tie in the results of their 2011 study:

[W]e showed that the strongest predictor of belief in 7/7 conspiracy theories was belief in other, general conspiracy theories. This is consistent with the suggestion that conspiracist ideation forms part of a monological belief system (Goertzel, 1994), where one conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation. In the case of the present study, it might be suggested that belief in a range of conspiracy theories provides a basis for comprehending and accepting 7/7 conspiracy theories (Swami *et al.* 2011: 452).

There is something strangely asymmetrical about this study. It purports to tell us something about “conspiracist ideation”, presumably as opposed to non-conspiracist, or “conventional” ideation. Namely, “conspiracy beliefs” in particular “form part of a ‘monological belief system’ in which a conspiratorial idea serves as evidence for other conspiracist ideation” (Swami *et al.* 2011: 445). But is there really anything here that applies uniquely to conspiracy ideation, or that, in any case, is epistemically problematic or noteworthy? I do not think so. What Swami *et al.* describe is a characteristic of all sensible people, including believers in conventional interpretations of events. What follows is Swami’s summary of his results modified by simply crossing out and replacing individual words so that it applies to conventionalist ideation instead of conspiracist ideation. The quotation starts with a speculative claim that seems to apply equally in both cases. (Note that the first paragraph just sets the context by stating the findings of other studies. It is interesting here because it invites the reader to view conspiracy ideation as associated with mostly negatively framed qualities—the exception being support for democratic principles, which the authors have camouflaged under the acronym “SDP”. I have also adjusted these qualities to neutralize, or even reverse, the emotive feel while trying not to express more bias than the original.)

~~[Conspiracist~~ [Conventionalist] ideation may initially begin as an individual process, in which a person tries to makes sense of some event perceived as threatening or calamitous. In such a scenario, a tendency towards ~~conspiracist~~ [conventionalist] ideation may tend to be more prevalent among individuals who are politically ~~cynical~~ [trustful/naïve], show ~~stronger~~ [weaker] SDP [support for democratic principles], have ~~lower self-esteem~~ [higher self-admiration], are more ~~disagreeable~~ [agreeable/acquiescent], and possibly have ~~lower~~ [higher] crystallised intelligence. Systemic factors, such as discrepancies or ambiguities in mainstream explanations for an event, may ~~also~~ play a role in initially shaping *conspiracist* ideation.¹⁹ [On the other hand, mainstream criticisms of conspiracy theories, and constant repetition of conventional accounts, perhaps even demeaning insinuations regarding “conspiracy theories” emanating from the academy, may play a role in initially shaping *conventional* ideation.]

Once this process has been initiated, a confirmation bias and avoidance of cognitive dissonance may further the drive towards ~~conspiracist~~ [conventionalist]

¹⁹ Here Swami cites Hardin 2002, and Sunstein and Vermeule 2009.

ideation.²⁰ However, our results also suggest that the strongest predictor of whether or not an individual will ultimately accept a ~~conspiracy~~ [conventionalist] theory is the presence of earlier ~~conspiracist~~ [conventionalist] ideation.²¹ This is entirely consistent with ~~Goertzel's (1994)~~ [the] suggestion that ~~conspiracy~~ [conventionalist] theories form part of a monological belief system, where ~~conspiracist~~ [conventionalist] ideation increases the chances that an individual will accept evidence of ~~novel conspiracy theories~~ [conventional explanations]. Such a system may allow individuals to easily comprehend new phenomena within existing belief systems, but communal reinforcement may also play a role in embedding ~~conspiracy theories~~ [conventional accounts] within particular social groups (Swami *et al.* 2011: 459-60, amended).

Now, what exactly is a monological belief system? So far I have only mentioned, quoting Swami, that it involves “a conspiratorial idea serv[ing] as evidence for other conspiracist ideation”. Let us look more closely. Ted Goertzel, the originator of the idea that conspiracy theorists are monological thinkers, puts this in more general terms, “In a monological belief system, each of the beliefs serves as evidence for each of the other beliefs” (Goertzel 1994: 740). Goertzel’s study provides evidence that this manner of reasoning applies to conspiracy theorists, a finding that is later supported by other studies (Wood *et al.* 2012; Swami *et al.* 2011). However, there is something strange about pointing out this fact. For the reasoning it describes is both ubiquitous and epistemically unproblematic. *Of course* one belief serves as evidence for another, and so it *should*. There is hardly an alternative.

If one is convinced that al Qaeda was behind the embassy bombings in Africa, as well as the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, should that be taken as evidence, as is often suggested, that al Qaeda was behind the September 11 attacks? The answer, clearly, is yes. It *is* evidence (though, of course, not proof). And because it is evidence, a rational person should, based on this consideration, increase his or her assessment of likelihood that that event was carried out by al Qaeda. In general, the degree of credence one gives to one event is, *and should be*, influenced by one’s beliefs about other events.

In this case, of course, the September 11 attacks and the embassy bombings are thought to be *related*, both perpetrated al Qaeda. What is supposed to be interesting about the reasoning of conspiracy theorists is that they make inferences about particular conspiracy theories from other *unrelated* conspiracy theories. As Sutton and Douglas explain,

[T]he most consistent finding on the psychology of conspiracy theories, often used as an explanation for their popularity and persistence, is that belief in one particular conspiracy theory is predicted by belief in other theories—even when they refer to completely unrelated events and protagonists (Sutton and Douglas

²⁰ Swami cites Douglas and Sutton 2008, though its relevance does not seem particularly strong.

²¹ This seems to be an unstated corollary of their study. The study suggests that a given conspiracy theory is more likely to be accepted by those who already accept other conspiracy theories, than by conventionalists. So, conventionalists are less likely to accept the conspiracy theory, and thus more likely to stick with the conventional account. And thus, it would seem, a prior predominance of conventionalist ideation would be predictive of acceptance of future conventional accounts.

2014: 255, citing Douglas and Sutton 2011; Goertzel 1994; and Swami *et al.* 2010, 2011).

For example, Swami *et al.* cite evidence that people who “more strongly endorsed conspiracy theories about the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks were more likely to believe in other, unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami *et al.* 2011: 445, citing Swami *et al.* 2010).²² But *are* the conspiracy theories in question really unrelated in the relevant sense? That is, are they *epistemically* unrelated? That is what matters. After all, of what significance is being unrelated in some other sense? So long as belief in one theory gives one a good reason to give increased credence to another, there is nothing distinctive or problematic about doing so. Wood, Douglass, and Sutton themselves provide reasonable considerations. In “Dead and Alive”, they mention several plausible mediating beliefs, including “belief in deception by authority” and “belief in the effectiveness of intimidation and bribery” (Wood *et al.* 2012: 772).²³ A person who believes that authorities are more deceptive than does someone else, perhaps based on their knowledge of a particular case, has reason to regard conspiracy theories as more plausible than does the other person. (Which person has more accurately assessed the degrees in question is another matter entirely.) This need not be a complete explanation, but it is enough to conclude that there is no mystery here. To be clear, I do not have a strong objection to social scientists proving the obvious. What I do find objectionable is framing it in a way that suggests that there is something distinctive going on that reflects poorly on conspiracy theorists when, in fact, there is not.

A related notion, also supported by empirical studies, is this: “The more conspiracies a monological thinker believes in, the more likely he or she is to believe in any new conspiracy theory that is proposed” (Goertzel 1994: 740). As Sutton and Douglas put it, “[P]eople who already believe in existing conspiracy theories will tend to be receptive to new conspiracy theories, exactly as Goertzel (1994) suggested”.²⁴ This effect may seem epistemically problematic, as Goertzel way of putting it seems to imply. But that is a mistake. Nothing has gone wrong here.

As an analogy, the more a person believes that scientific discoveries have solved social problems (whether or not they have good reasons for believing

²² Elsewhere, Swami and Coles characterize the theories in question as “*seemingly* unrelated”. They write, “[T]hose who more strongly endorsed 9/11 conspiracy theories were also more likely to believe in other, *seemingly* unrelated conspiracy theories” (Swami and Coles 2010: 562, citing then-forthcoming Swami *et al.* 2011). This qualification, of course, makes a big difference.

²³ Clearly these beliefs must be about the *degree* of deception, and *degree* of effectiveness, since no serious person could deny that authorities *sometimes* deceive and that intimidation and bribery have *some degree* of effectiveness.

²⁴ Sutton and Douglas continue, “This is an important finding even if it does not show that conspiracy theorists have a monological mind-set” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 266-67). Why exactly is this thought to be an important finding? After all, people who already believe in existing conspiracy theories *should* tend to be receptive to new conspiracy theories, precisely because one belief *should* serve as evidence for another. So it is hard to understand why that finding is thought to be significant. Perhaps other psychologists should study why some psychologists think that ordinary reasoning is particularly interesting when it happens to be employed by conspiracy theorists.

this) the more likely he or she is to believe that a scientific discovery will solve other problems. It is not just “monological” thinkers who think this way. Everyone does. And everyone *should*. There is nothing wrong with *the inference*, so long as it is not conceived of as proof, but only a matter of increasing likelihood. If one’s reasons for one’s more primary beliefs, on which other beliefs are based, are not good ones, then that *is* a problem. (The problem is that they are reasoning based on shaky premises, not that the inference itself is problematic.) But the fact that a person is more likely to accept a new conspiracy theory because they already accept other conspiracy theories in no way implies that the more primary beliefs were not well grounded empirically.

Goertzel himself provides the following example: “African-Americans, who are more likely to be aware of the Tuskegee syphilis conspiracy, are predisposed to believe that AIDS may also be a conspiracy, while this idea may seem absurd to people who are unfamiliar with past medical abuses” (Goertzel 1994: 740). This much is presumably true: People who are aware of the Tuskegee experiment, and are motivated to consider it,²⁵ would likely be more disposed, in some degree, to have unconventional beliefs about AIDS than those who are unaware of such historical outrages. And so they *should* be. It is not that they should *believe* that AIDS is a conspiracy of some sort. But they should more inclined to think that it might be than they otherwise would have been.

Still, there is something about monological belief systems that *is* epistemically problematic. Goertzel describes it this way, “[B]elief systems can be characterized as *dialogical* or *monological*. Dialogical belief systems engage in a dialogue with their context, while monological systems speak only to themselves, ignoring their context in all but the shallowest respects” (Goertzel 1994: 740). Sutton and Douglas characterizes this as a “key feature” of monological belief systems, writing, “[F]or Goertzel (1994), a key feature of monological belief systems is what we might call a *closed epistemology*. Beliefs are evaluated according to their coherence with other beliefs in the system, rather than external data” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 256, emphasis in original). Clearly, this “closed epistemology”, in which context is ignored, is epistemically problematic. Sutton and Douglas see the problem as involving two features. They explain:

Goertzel (1994) identifies two key features of the monological conspiracist mindset: [1] a closed epistemology in which adherents are indifferent to evidence, preferring to rely on their previous beliefs, and [2] a nomothetic explanatory style in which each event is explained in terms of general patterns in the world rather than the unique, proximal conditions that might have brought it about (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 257).

These two ideas are clearly related. Conspiracy theorists are charged with disregarding evidence, or, in other words, disregarding the relevant “unique, proximal conditions”, and instead reason primarily by analogy to beliefs they have about other cases, and thus tend to focus on “general patterns”. However,

²⁵ I have had encounters with other (white) academics who are perfectly aware of the Tuskegee Experiment (and similar cases), but *until I remind them of it* (or of similar cases) they seem to reason as though they did not know.

as Sutton and Douglas recognize, there is *no evidence* for this—indeed, it seems to be false (see section 5 below).

Goertzel has, in effect, equivocated between two ideas. (1) People who believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe (or give more credence to) another—because one belief serves as evidence for another. And, (2) conspiracy theorists ignore empirical evidence—and other people too. They “speak only to themselves” (Goertzel 1994: 740). They are closed-minded. The first claim is supported by scientific research, but is not epistemically problematic. The second claim is epistemically problematic, but is unsupported. Indeed, there is some evidence that the opposite is true—conspiracy theorists tend to be more open minded (Swami *et al.* 2010, 2013). Goertzel has tried to pin the problematic aspect of his pejorative-sounding “monological belief systems” on conspiracy theorists, while only actually providing evidence regarding the unproblematic aspects. The further evidence that later accumulated likewise only supported the unproblematic aspects.

In sum, the charge (and it does have a ring of indictment²⁶) that conspiracy theorists operate within a “monological belief system” suggests that (1) they attempt to maintain an internal coherence among their beliefs, such that hypotheses that cohere well with settled beliefs are regarded as relatively more plausible, for which studies like Swami *et al.* (2011) provide support, but which is in no way unusual or problematic. It also suggests that (2) conspiracy theorists live in a particularly “closed-off” world.²⁷ We can divide the latter into two claims: (2a) they do not engage with contrary viewpoints, and (2b) they make little effort to ground their beliefs in empirical evidence. However, the evidence provided by various studies purporting to link conspiracist ideation with monological belief systems actually only support the former aspect of monological belief systems, the normal and unproblematic aspect. That is, conspiracy theorists form beliefs based in part on their other beliefs, as we all inevitably do. However, neither of the latter aspects (2a and 2b) has been established. Indeed, 2a is false, at least as it applies to a large segment of conspiracy theorists, who clearly do engage with conventionalists, and often seek out opportunities for debate. The same is true of 2b. Indeed, it is almost ironic. Many conspiracy theorists are, as Sunstein admits, “spectacularly well-informed”

²⁶ The pejorative ring seems to have been intentional. Goertzel reportedly declared the pejorative use of the term “conspiracy theory” to be “one of our accomplishments” (Walker 2015). Also, consider the following characterization of conspiracy theorists as monological thinkers: “Monological conspiracy thinkers do not search for factual evidence to test their theories. Instead, they offer the same hackneyed explanation for every problem—it’s the conspiracy of the Jews, the capitalists, the patriarchy, the communists, the medical establishment, or whatever. In these cases, the proof which is offered is not evidence about the specific incident or issue, but the general pattern; for example, the X conspiracy has been responsible for all our other problems, so it is obvious that X must be responsible for this one as well” (Goertzel 1994: 741). That is quite a caricature.

²⁷ Citing Goertzel 1994, Swami *et al.* 2010, 2011, and Clarke 2002, Wood *et al.* describe the worldview of conspiracy theorists as “a unitary, closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a *monological belief system*” (Wood *et al.* 2012, emphasis in original).

(Sunstein 2015) about the pertinent empirical details,²⁸ and they are constantly calling for further empirical studies, and demanding the release of relevant records.²⁹

5. Sutton and Douglass to the Rescue—Sort of

Sutton and Douglas do make a number of valid points that militate against making any negative inferences about the merit of conspiracy theories based on research linking conspiracy theorists with monological belief systems. They point out that, “[T]here is no empirical evidence for key tenets of the monological position” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259). More specifically, they write:

[1] [T]here is no evidence that these people explain events in more abstract, general, less case-specific terms. Indeed, even a cursory examination of websites devoted to conspiracies, such as that of the 9/11 Truth Movement, appears to reveal a deep rhetorical³⁰ attachment to case-specific facts, true or not, regarding the melting point of steel, the burning temperature of aviation fuel, the way the buildings collapsed, and the collapse of neighboring buildings, *inter alia* (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259).

Similarly, philosophers Lee Basham and Matthew Dentith remark: “[A] quick review of popular conspiracy theory websites, as well as dozens of interviews conducted over the last decade with self-identified conspiracy theorists reveals the evidence attentive adherents of popular conspiracy theories amass is impressive” (Basham and Dentith 2015).

[2] [T]here is little evidence that conspiracy theorists have a generally closed epistemology. Indeed, some findings suggest that such individuals may tend to be somewhat more open to experience (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 259, citing Swami *et al.* 2010, 2013).

[3] The correlations among various conspiracy beliefs can be explained in other, simpler ways, without invoking a closed epistemology or a nomothetic explanatory style (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 260).

Sutton and Douglass conclude:

²⁸ I am not aware of a good reason to think that Joe Conventionalist knows any more or less than Joe Conspiracist regarding the empirical facts surrounding the conspiracy theories about which they both have firm, if ungrounded, convictions. But it is rather clear that *serious* conspiracy theorists (like most of those who give talks at JFK assassination conferences, for example) know a lot more about the relevant empirical evidence than do the academics who study conspiracy theorists, who largely try to stay above the fray.

²⁹ Regarding the push to address the pertinent empirical facts regarding 9/11, see David Ray Griffin’s, “9/11: Let’s Get Empirical”, which can be found at <http://www.brianwright.com/Griffin.pdf>, or watch his corresponding lecture, which can be found in various places online, including YouTube.

³⁰ Referring to the 9/11 Truth Movement’s apparent attachment to case-specific facts as “rhetorical” seems to be itself rhetorical.

In sum, we think it is premature, and unfairly pejorative, to portray conspiracy beliefs as a manifestation of monological thinking. Closed-mindedness and willful ignorance of facts are stigmatized characteristics. It is sobering to reflect that scales measuring agreement with conspiracy theories also, by definition, measure disagreement with them. So *we might equally say that correlations between conspiracy items show that rejection of conspiracy theories comprises part of a monological worldview, in which alternatives to official accounts are dismissed in a closed-minded and irrational fashion!* (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268, emphasis added).

Sutton and Douglas are to be commended for their attempt at evenhandedness, and for urging other scientists to be non-judgmental. They write, “We would advocate a dispassionate mode of scientific inquiry which is open to the possibility that these theories have conventionally desirable and undesirable consequences, and which is not unduly influenced by the cultural impulse to label them as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). But their attempt at evenhandedness is spotty. In addition to continuing to maintain that conspiracy theorists tend to simultaneously believe contradictory theories, they also seem to accept some baseless stereotypes, such as the view that conspiracy theorists base their ideas on “limited information”.³¹ They also state, “[T]he majority of conspiracy theories lack evidential support and are resistant to falsification” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 254). They cite a 2002 article by Steve Clarke. Although often cited by psychologists working on conspiracy theories, that paper has serious problems pointed out by David Coady (2006a). In any case, Clarke does not exactly assert (much less prove) that conspiracy theories lack evidential support. In fact, though Clarke does seem to take a dim view of conspiracy theories, it is not because they simply “lack evidential support”. Indeed, Clarke writes, “[Conspiracy theorists] are typically quite dedicated in their search for evidence relevant to their favorite conspiracy theory and are usually able to overwhelm you with a deluge of evidence in favor of that theory” (Clarke 2002). So, as it turns out, not only does the claim that “the majority of conspiracy theories lack evidential support” itself lack evidential support, its falsity is admitted by critics of conspiracy theories.³² Of course, those critics do not believe the evidence as a whole best supports conspiracy theories, but

³¹ The suggestion that conspiracy theorists operate from a position of “limited information” was made intellectually respectable by the assertions of Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009), who did not actually support it with any evidence. Sutton and Douglas seem to subtly endorse this view when, having just alluded to Sunstein and Vermeule, they write, “[I]t may be necessary to address not only the limited information available to the disaffected but also the socio-structural bases of the disaffection itself” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 264). To what end these interventions are necessary is not explicitly stated, but since the context of the statement links disaffection with inclination toward conspiracy theories, it seems that there is an assumption that conspiracy theorists have limited information, and that that is partially responsible for their presumed errors. Although Sutton and Douglas’s implied “cure” is less problematic than Sunstein and Vermeule’s proposed “cognitive infiltration”, they nevertheless seem to have adopted the view, explicit proclamations to the contrary notwithstanding, that conspiracy theories represent a *problem* needing to be “addressed”.

³² There is probably a way of interpreting “conspiracy theories”, and of setting the bar for what counts as “lacking” evidential support, according to which this claim would be true. But this would probably either necessitate caricaturing conspiracy theories or employing an unusual and unfair sense of “lacking”.

making an empirical case against these conspiracy theories would require actually dealing with the “deluge of evidence”.

Sutton and Douglas do attribute some (weakly) positive aspects to conspiracy theories. They point out that conspiracy theories “can be seen as creative, almost heroic efforts by ordinary people to question and to create alternatives to political orthodoxy” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). If that does not strike you as a little patronizing, try this one: “They can be seen as products, and affirmations, of the democratic right to entertain minority views, no matter how absurd or unsettling they seem to the majority” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). More significantly, Sutton and Douglas do admit that conspiracy theories “may allow people to question social hierarchies, causing governments to be more transparent and democratic” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). But they cannot seem to quite acknowledge the most significant potential positive value—that controversial conspiracy theories might sometimes be on to something, and thus help reveal important truths, thwart pernicious conspiracies, and serve as a deterrent to other would-be conspiracies.

6. Some Final Considerations

Many scholars writing on conspiracy theories, such as most of those mentioned above, seem to assume that conspiracy theories *are neither true nor warranted*. Consider Cass Sunstein’s rhetorical question: “Why, then, do they [“spectacularly well-informed” conspiracy theorists] accept theories that are patently inconsistent with reality?” (Sunstein 2015) Elsewhere, Sunstein insinuates that conspiracy theorist’s “information” is wrong. But he does not effectively justify that assertion (see Sunstein 2014a).³³ In general, when conspiracy theories are construed as false or “relatively implausible”³⁴ in the social science literature, no serious argument about the relative plausibility of conspiracy theories is made, it is merely assumed without argument, or with the briefest of dismissive remarks, that any theory that the researchers regard as a “conspiracy theory” is implausible.³⁵ This begs a rather important question.

³³ Ironically, it is Sunstein himself who seems to be peddling “information” that is wrong. He claims that video frames released by the Department of Defense show Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon (see Sunstein 2014a: 27). But the frames in question do not clearly show what is approaching the pentagon. So, to be clear, although the footage might have captured Flight 77, or part of it, approaching the Pentagon, it is wrong to say these frames *show* that happening. Since Sunstein does not provide much evidence about the events of 9/11, it is particularly significant that what he does provide is wrong and misleading. It misleads by giving the impression that this was clear and incontrovertible evidence of Flight 77 approaching the building, when it is not.

³⁴ Rob Brotherton defines a conspiracy as, among other characteristics, “an unverified claim of conspiracy which is not the most plausible account of an event or situation... based on weak kinds of evidence” (Brotherton 2013: 9). Citing this, Brotherton and Chris French write, “A conspiracy theory can be defined as an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy” (Brotherton and French 2014: 238).

³⁵ With the exception of the above-mentioned appeal to flagrantly mischaracterized photographs (see footnote 33, above), Sunstein gives almost no argument at all against 9/11 conspiracy theories, which are nevertheless used as a “running example” of a “demonstrably false” conspiracy theory.

Still, the desire to avoid this question is understandable. After all, what would it take to prove that controversial conspiracy theories are implausible? Nothing less than addressing the relevant particulars directly—as well as sizing up all the prior probability factors.³⁶ For the most part, academics shy away from this. Is it not conventionalist social scientists, then, who exhibit *to a greater degree* a problematic aspect of monological belief systems, in their relative unwillingness to engage in debate, and to investigate the factual details?

But perhaps that does not matter. Let us look at the issue once again, this time framed by Sutton and Douglas: “One of the predictions of the monological position is that adherents (vs. skeptics) of conspiracy theories will invoke fewer concrete facts and more general patterns when explaining major events” (Sutton and Douglas 2014: 268). Even if they did, so what? This is not really a problem, so long as there is at least *some* attention to facts of the case in question. After all, if we are only talking about a difference in degree, not about abandoning all consideration of proximate data altogether, would it be better to rely more on proximate evidence or more on analogy to other cases and other general considerations (i.e. prior probability considerations)? We cannot render a general verdict. It depends on the all sorts of factors. What can be generally said is that to some degree *both* background considerations relevant to prior probability *and* direct evidence pertinent to the particular case should be considered. Showing that conspiracy theorists tend to rely more prior probability than forensic evidence, dubious though that proposition is, would imply nothing interesting about the psychology or the quality of the reasoning of those conspiracy theorists.

Consider a similar issue, for which there is some evidence. Compared to conventionalists, “conspiracist commenters were more likely to argue against the opposing interpretation and less likely to argue in favor of their own interpretation” (Wood 2013). This and other tactical differences in argument style (such as greater focus on issues of prior probability, if that can be shown to apply) can plausibly be attributed *situational* differences. As an analogy, a defense attorney, in any particular case, may stress the character of his client, calling witness after witness attesting to his integrity, while the prosecution appeals to forensic evidence. We cannot prejudge the verdict based on the difference in strategy, nor should we attribute the strategy to psychological differences between defense attorneys and prosecutors. Most plausibly, they have each simply selected the evidence that is best suited to their case. If the facts of the case were different, they may reverse strategies. If such strategy reversals occur only occasionally, so that we find a statistically significant tendency, we still should not infer anything about the psychological dispositions of defense attorneys. More likely, there is something about these kinds of cases by virtue of which one strategy tends to serve the defense better than the prosecution. In the case of conspiracy theories, one situational consideration in

As another example, this time regarding surveys that document increasing belief in conspiracy theories regarding the assassination of JFK, Goertzel remarks, “This increase in the belief in conspiracy has taken place despite the fact that the accumulation of evidence has increasingly supported the lone-assassin theory” (Goertzel 1994: 731). Goertzel cites one source (Moore 1990). Well, I guess that settles it then!

³⁶ There have been attempts to find short cuts, such as Clarke 2002 and Keeley 1999. But these have been effectively refuted. See especially Coady 2006a.

particular stands out. Namely, conspiracy theorists have neither the resources nor legal powers available to the government. Conspiracy theorists are therefore more limited in their ability to acquire information and cannot ordinarily force testimony. Though they do their best to wrest information from the government, through freedom of information requests, and through the courts, they are nevertheless forced, to a large degree, to deal with the evidence that is put forward by and through official sources. Is it any wonder, under these circumstances, that they would tend to focus on the problems with the official account more than on developing a detailed positive account?

Now, academics, for the most part, are convinced that controversial conspiracy theories are not true. Even when trying to be polite, “open-minded”, and exhibit proper scientific neutrality, they signal in subtle ways that they regard conspiracy theorists as nutty—even if they cannot seem to prove it. The focus on conspiracy theorists itself, without equal attention to conventionalists, signals that one ought to think something strange is going on with conspiracy theorists in particular. Driving the point home, some researchers, such as Brotherton and French, classify the study of conspiracy theorists under the heading of “anomalous psychology” (Brotherton and French 2014: 246).

In alliance with other social scientists, it seems that psychologists have invented a problem so as to posit a psychological explanation for it, and do so in a way that seems to reflect poorly on conspiracy theories. But there is nothing here that needs any kind of special explanation, or that should be understood as problematic. The most straightforward view is that different people come to different conclusions about conspiracy theories for the same kinds of reasons that they come to different conclusions about other matters. They weigh up the evidence they are aware of, factoring in some sense of prior probability. Neither the psychological research by Wood and Swami, nor the arguments of Goertzel, indicate that the explanation for conspiracy theorizing resides in anything more interesting than that.

Rather than focusing on conspiracy theorists, many of these lines of investigation could be turned on people who believe official stories. It would be interesting, and arguably at least as important, and would go some way toward bringing balance to this area of research, if some effort was made to explore why it is that so many people believe false or dubious official stories, or ideas that certain elites clearly try to promote even if they do not explicitly state them. For example, why did so many Americans believe that Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with al Qaeda? (We know that part of the reason is that officials actively encouraged this belief. The question is: Why did people buy it?) Relatedly, why did soldiers in Iraq believe they were avenging the victims of 9/11? Why did people believe the baby incubator story that was used to market the first Gulf War? Why do some people believe that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would be so irrational as to use chemical weapons right after Obama declared that to do such a thing would be crossing a line that would ensure US military action against him (and almost did)—especially when the evidence presented was weak? This could be framed as an inquiry into the “good German” syndrome.³⁷

³⁷ Expressing frustration with the cluelessness and gullibility of most Germans while the Nazis perpetrated outrages, a leaflet from the White Rose Society reads, “The German people are again sleeping on in obtuse, stupid sleep, giving these fascist criminals the temerity and opportunity to continue to rage” (cited in Hoffmann 2014). The title of the

But those are just suggestions for others; I am not a psychologist. For me, further work will involve considering whether the definition of conspiracy theory is being used inconsistently in a way that is unfair to serious conspiracy theorists, or whether the implied image of a conspiracy theorist that is found in much academic work amounts to a crude caricature.

7. Conclusion

This article has shown, in a narrow sense, that several social science papers focusing on conspiracy theories have published very flawed findings, and that these flawed findings were accepted uncritically and repeated by other scholars, and more broadly as well. Indeed, these findings were used to disparage conspiracy theorists unfairly, making them appear intellectually unhinged, while it was these scholars themselves, ironically, who were failing to reason clearly. Further, this article has suggested that the flaws in question ought to have been noticed (though exactly how obvious these flaws are is a matter of subjective interpretation). One implication is that scholars, and social scientists in particular, ought to be much more careful in their treatment of conspiracy theorists. Unfairly disparaging a large class of people is no small matter.

I will end with a more general worry. Many philosophers, including David Coady and Steve Clarke, have commented that academics have a “low opinion” of conspiracy theorists (Coady 2006b: 1), or that conspiracy theorists are “unpopular amongst intellectuals” (Clarke 2002: 131). Indeed, it hardly takes a philosopher to notice *that*. But it is troubling to consider this in connection with the lopsided and unfair treatment of conspiracy theorists in the social science literature, for it suggests that these are not just “innocent mistakes” that could have gone either way. Rather, one must worry that bias against conspiracy theories is influencing the results of social science scholarship, with one biased finding building upon another. And while this article has been narrowly focused on the treatment of conspiracy theories in particular, it raises the question of the degree to which the social science literature more generally may be influenced by other widely shared biases.³⁸

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article from which this is quoted, “The Good Germans: Inside the Resistance to the Nazis”, turns the ordinary use of the phrase “good Germans” on its head. Regardless, I mean it in the sense expressed in the quotation—referring to the people who went along with the program, even to the point of believing the propaganda.

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