A narrative analysis into the psychological epistemology of conspiracy theorists.

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Supervised by: Mr Kenneth Drinkwater 18th April 2017

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Abstract

Past psychological research regarding conspiracy theory endorsement has been conducted quantitatively. Therefore, psychologists have been unable to establish the personal views and opinions concerning individuals who believe conspiracy theories. Consequently, the current investigation was predominantly qualitative in nature. The aim of this study is to present a clear insight into the epistemology of individuals who believe in conspiracy theories. This aim was achieved by recruiting 22 participants to fill out a Likert Scale questionnaire, which asked about the individual's general conspiratorial thinking. A score was gathered from each participant and if the individual gained over 50% on the questionnaire they were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and the general public. Through employing thematic analysis, four themes were identified; Definitions, Negative Connotations, Questioning and Endorsement Reason. The current study identified aspects of conspiracy theory endorsement which both agreed and disagreed with past research. Further research should take a qualitative standpoint when conducting explorations as new information and perspectives are gained, creating new information and knowledge regarding this topic area.

KEY WORDS:	Conspiracy Theory	Epistemology	Ontology	Thematic Analysis	Endorsement

Introduction

Belief in conspiracy theories seems to be widespread (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014) and growing rapidly with the aid of the Internet (Brotherton and French, 2014). Oliver and Wood (2014a) conducted four nationwide surveys, demonstrating that over 50% of the American public believe in a minimum of one conspiratorial narrative. However, with the large endorsement of conspiracy theories, it is astonishing that such little research has been conducted into the reasons for belief in conspiracy theories (Sustein and Vermeule, 2009). Due to this limited research, it is not shocking that psychologists do not agree upon a sole definition for the expression 'conspiracy theory' (Dagnall *et al,* 2015; Drinkwater *et al,* 2012). Nonetheless, there seems to be a consensus throughout the various definitions. The common explanation of a conspiracy theory is, a secret plan by multiple authoritative individuals, with the intention to achieve malevolent and sinister goals (Abalakina-Paap *et al*, 1999; Brotherton and French, 2014; Dagnall *et al*, 2015; Moulding *et al*, 2016; Prooijen, 2016; Swami and Furnham *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016; Wood, 2016a; Wood and Douglas, 2013; Wood *et al,* 2012) through deception of the general public (Wood and Douglas, 2013).

The definition of a conspiracist seems to branch off the explanation of a conspiracy theory as the two are neither dependent on, nor independent of each other. Individuals who endorse conspiracy theories are thought to; hold counterproductive opinions and produce socially counterproductive actions (Prooijen, 2016), frequently create associations between events which previously appeared to be unconnected (Parker, 2001) and consider it their responsibility to expose the truth to the rest of the world (Moulding *et al,* 2016).

Although the research into reasons for conspiracy endorsement is narrow, many of the investigations demonstrate that believers of one conspiracy are highly likely to believe other conspiracy theories (Brotherton *et al,* 2013; Gebauer *et al,* 2016). Interestingly, this seems to be the case, even if the conspiracy theories are contradictory of one-another (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014; Prooijen, 2016; Wood and Douglas, 2013; Wood *et al,* 2012). For example, Imhoff and Bruder (2014) state how individuals who believe that Princess Diana was assassinated by the Royal Family are also likely to believe that Princess Diana faked her own death. Due to this finding, psychologists believe that individuals must have a predisposition to endorse conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, psychologists have been unable to detect a single reason as to why certain individuals are more inclined to believe conspiracy theories over others.

Intolerance to Ambiguity

It has been suggested that one reason why individuals may endorse conspiracy theories is due to a lack of information and intolerance to ambiguity. It is believed that conspiracy theories can offer a simplistic explanation regarding multifaceted events around the world. Therefore, these simplified descriptions may draw the attention of individuals who favour cognitive simplicity over complexity (Abalakina-Paap *et al, 1999;* Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016). Abalakina-Paap et al (1999) continue to imply that individuals may find it easier to believe conspiracy theories instead of facing the ambiguities within the world. Therefore, individuals who would rather not analyse the reasons why major world events take place, may be more accepting of conspiracy

theories as they propose a ready-made convenient cause for the events which might otherwise appear undecipherable.

Nevertheless, Jolley and Douglas (2014b, cited in Moulding *et al,* 2016) discovered that those who were exposed to information regarding governmental conspiracy theories had less inclination to engage in politics. Suggesting that individuals who had access to information were less motivated to research the subject matter. The contradiction between past research introduces the issue of establishing cause and effect. It is clear that psychologists have been unable to identify whether a belief in conspiracy theories causes a lack of information to be sought out, or whether a lack of information availability, and a high level of ambiguity causes a belief in conspiracy theories.

Need for an Explanation

In relation to an intolerance, psychologists have attributed belief in conspiracy theories to a "need-for-an-explanation" (Moulding *et al,* 2016:346). Knight (2006, cited in Drinkwater *et al,* 2012) declares that unconventional theories may develop due to a desire to comprehend the cause and consequences of prominent events. Numerous psychologists have also argued that a reason for the mass endorsement in conspiracy theories may be due to wanting to regain control and be able to predict future events (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). Furthermore, Prooijen (2016) introduces the idea of subjective uncertainty as a predictor of conspiracy theory belief. Subject uncertainty encourages a sense-making process, which is targeted at understanding complicated and multifaceted societal events. This is because the sense-making process aims to restore the individual's perception of the world. However, Gebauer et al (2016) state

that although the amount of information that an individual receives can influence their belief in conspiracy theories, the individual's predisposition to conspiratorial beliefs will affect whether the conspiracy theory is accepted or rejected, due to the individual's worldview. This demonstrates that there must be an underlying susceptibility to conspiratorial beliefs, regardless of the amount of information available to them.

Reality Testing

Psychologists have suggested that a deficit in an individual's reality testing may be an underlying explanation for why the individual endorses conspiratorial theories. According to Irwin (2004), reality testing is an individual's inclination to analytically assess viewpoints and theories, as a result of the individual's pre-existing general knowledge and personal experience (Irwin, 2004; Langdon and Coltheart, 2000). Drinkwater et al (2012) conducted a study on the relationship between reality testing deficits and the support of conspiracy theories. A correlation between the two was established using the IPO-RT and a conspiracy theory belief self-report Likert Scale. Drinkwater et al (2012) found that high levels in reality testing deficits were associated with a lower belief in official explanations. However, this correlation only accounts for thirteen percent of the different influences for belief in conspiracy theories; suggesting that other aspects must impact an individual's endorsement of conspiracies. Therefore, Drinkwater et al (2012) propose that the effect that probabilistic reasoning has on conspiratorial belief should be studied.

Conjunction Fallacy

The conjunction fallacy is defined as a particular error in a person's probabilistic reasoning, which results in the individual overestimating the likelihood of co-occurring

events. Moreover, the representativeness heuristic may influence an individual's involuntarily adoption of a conjunction fallacy (Brotherton and French, 2014). The representativeness heuristic, in regards to conspiracy theories, demonstrates how an individual can be unintentionally and biasedly accepting of an explanation (Moulding *et al*, 2016), if the significance of the explanation is equivalent to the significance of the event. Brotherton and French (2014) examined the association between the quantity of conjunction fallacy errors and anomalistic phenomena belief, specifically conspiracy theories. The findings demonstrated that the individuals who committed more conjunction fallacy errors also displayed a higher belief and acceptance of different conspiracy theories. Falling victim to the conjunction fallacy, due to an unconscious need to satisfy the representativeness heuristic, indicates that there is a deficiency in the logical reasoning of conspiracists. This, in combination with reality testing deficits (Drinkwater *et al*, 2012), implies that conspiracists are susceptible to conspiracy theories belief due to maladaptive personality traits.

Personality Traits

The notion that conspiracy theory belief can have negative effects both socially and politically (Brotherton *et al,* 2013; Brotherton and French, 2014; Moulding *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al*, 2016) may have prompted the perception that conspiratorial beliefs must be associated with psychopathology (Swami and Furnham *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016), specifically schizotypy (Darwin *et al,* 2011; Wood and Douglas, 2013). Results from a correlation were consistent with past research which investigated the relationship between schizotypy and conspiracy theory belief (Swami and Weis *et al*, 2016).

In keeping with the notion that conspiracy theory belief is caused by psychopathology, psychologists have argued that paranoia plays a large role in this (Brotherton *et al,* 2013; Hofstadter, 1996; Moulding *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016). Nonetheless, according to Oliver and Wood (2014a) the declaration of belief in conspiracy theories is thought to be merely a different type of political discussion; one that allows for interpretation of public events. Therefore, some psychologists have recognised that there are negative connotations attached to 'a conspiracist' or 'a conspiracy theory'. Bale (2007) states how even when a belief in conspiracy theories is articulated with a cautious approach and is verified by trustworthy evidence, it is still seen as a taboo subject and manages to exceed the boundaries of acceptable discourse. When analysing online forums, which discuss both for and against comments regarding conspiracy theories, Wood and Douglas (2013) found that few people were willing to name themselves 'a conspiracist' and to attach the term 'conspiracy theory' to their ideas. Furthermore, Wood (2016b) states that labelling an explanation a conspiracy theories, may make the explanation less believable as it is then associated with the stereotype of paranoia.

The association between conspiracy theory belief and psychopathology is large amongst psychologists and can lead to negative stereotypes about conspiracists. However, numerous other psychologists have claimed that psychopathology alone cannot simply be a cause of conspiracy theories endorsement (Dagnall *et al,* 2015; Drinkwater *et al*, 2012) as the extensive support for conspiracy theories is prevalent throughout various communities and populations (Dagnall *et al,* 2015; Prooijen, 2016; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Oliver and Wood, 2014b). It has been said that concluding advocacy of conspiracy theories to be related to psychopathology only is

over simplified. Drinkwater et al (2012) highlight that using selective data to process and question the accuracy and validity of official accounts, requires a level of logical and successful analytical processing. Therefore, psychopathology alone cannot be attributed to conspiracy theory belief.

Obscured Epistemology

Drinkwater et al (2012) identify that, although the wide endorsement of conspiracy theories cannot be caused by psychopathology, issues may arise when individuals accept alternative explanations without adequate evidence to support the explanation. This brings about the concept of a "crippled epistemology" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009:211), which occurs as people can only acquire a limited quantity of information and a great deal of that information will be incorrect. Nevertheless, this viewpoint proposes that conspiratorial thinkers may be acting logically regarding the information that is available to them (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). This is because, when society is denied information about the world events occurring around them their civil rights and civil liberties are taken away. Therefore, there is a higher chance of people finding reasons to accept conspiracy theories. This implies that there is no deficit in their analytical processing (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). This presents an explanation for belief in conspiracy theories as it emphasises how the belief in conspiracy theories may purely be a consequence of a shortage of information concerning a specific topic.

Epistemological Standpoint

As declared previously, pre-existing knowledge and experiences can influence an individual's reality testing (Drinkwater *et al,* 2012). This prior knowledge and experience can also impact an individual's epistemological worldview and ontological

claims. People appear to have a common propensity to support information that is in agreement with their own beliefs and reject alternative information that opposes these beliefs (Gebauer *et al,* 2016). Hartman and Newmark (2012:449) attribute "motivated reasoning" where individuals may process information biasedly and endorse information which support or link to their prior values and attitudes. Evidence for the influence of motivated reasoning is seen in a convergent of results from an Explicit questionnaire and an Implicit Association Test which demonstrated that within memory certain concepts are strongly associated. An individual may not be aware of these associations, as these implicit associations automatically come to mind with no conscious attempt (Hartman and Newmark, 2012).

After consideration of past research into the motivations and explanations for conspiracy theory assertion, it is clear that an agreement has not yet been achieved. Therefore, the current study aims to present a clear insight into the epistemology of individuals who believe in conspiracy theories.

Research Question

The research questions investigated were:

1. How does a conspiracist's epistemology impact upon the rationale for their belief of conspiracy theories?
2. How do conspiracy theorists define a conspiracy theory?

Methodology

Design

Although this exploration was focused on qualitative data analysis, the investigation did feature a quantitative questionnaire which was employed to recruit participants for the semi-structured interview. Skinner et al (2004) describes how qualitative investigations are advantageous as they allow the researcher to analyse the participants' personal opinions and experiences and the deeper meanings and reasons for these. Therefore, in relation to the topic of conspiracy theories a semi-structured qualitative approach was appropriate. This is because semi-structured interviews allow participants to elaborate on their opinions and experiences through the use of two-way face-to-face communication and open-ended questions (Stuckey, 2013). This consequently permits researchers to conduct a holistic analysis of the interviewees epistemology (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The research was conducted from an interpretivist epistemology as the beliefs of the participants are relative to each individual.

Participants

Recruitment

The participants consisted of males and females over the age of 18, all situated in the North West of England, including both university students and the general public. Students were approached on the university campus grounds and asked to take part in the investigation. However, the participants from the general public were recruited through a previously established acquaintance with the researcher or through networking with other researchers. Each possible participant received a participation information sheet (Appendix 1) detailing the purpose of the study and the various

aspects involved. For the individuals who agreed to take part, a consent form (Appendix 2) was provided. Every participant completed the questionnaire (Appendix 3) which consisted of a series of Likert Scale questions, creating an individual score. Participants were split into potential conspiracy theory believers and non-believers by their score on the questionnaire. Participants with a score of over 50% (55 out of 110) were classed as potential conspiracy theory believers and were asked if they would like to take part in the focus interview. Consequently, the questionnaire was employed as a material in order to gain appropriate participants for the interview.

The Likert Scale questionnaire distributed to each participant was a combination of two previously published Likert Scale questionnaires by Brotherton et al (2013) and Drinkwater et al (2012). As the questionnaire was used as a recruitment tool for the latter part of the investigation, it questioned participants on their general attitudes towards conspiracy theories using non-specific statements, such as “conspiracy theories accurately depict real life events” (Drinkwater *et al*, 2012) and “the government uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity” (Brotherton *et al,* 2013). Out of the 20 items on the questionnaire, Drinkwater et al (2012) originally created 5. During the initial study, the reliability of the Conspiracy Theory (CT) Scale was established to have satisfactory internal reliability. The researchers also correlated the Official CT Scale and Alternative CT Scale with the CT Scale, resulting in a significant negative correlation (α=.72). This demonstrates that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a greater acceptance of alternative accounts and a lowered belief in official accounts. The 15 items which originated from the study conducted by Brotherton et al (2013) were assessed for validity and reliability. In order to test the criterion-related validity of the Generic Conspiracist

Beliefs (GBC) Scale, a multiple regression was conducted. Additionally, in terms of reliability, a test-retest was also conducted on the GBC. Time 1 and Time 2 were established to have a positive correlation, demonstrating that the GBC has a high reliability (α=.93). As a result of their previously established high reliability and validity, the researcher employed the use of these questionnaires, in order to indicate which members of the sample would be suitable to include in the interviews.

Number of Participants

Many researchers have an issue establishing how many interviews to conduct when carry out qualitative research. Mason (2010) suggest that this is because qualitative studies aim to centre on deep meaning and explanation, unlike quantitative research which focuses on statistical analysis. Therefore, it is challenging to determine the correct quantity of interviews to undertake. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) propose that carrying out less than 20 interviews can build rapport between the interviewer and interviewee as there is time to nurture and maintain an interpersonal relationship. However, other social science researchers determine the appropriate number of interviews due to saturation. Although, initially the term ‘saturation’ illustrated the quality of data rather than the size of the sample, more recently, saturation has been utilised in terms of ‘data saturation’ which aids researchers to gauge a suitable sample size and not data adequacy (Hennink *et al*, 2016). In order to establish when a study has reached data saturation Guest et al (2006) suggest that if the participants involved are a homogenous group saturation can be reached at around the 12 participants. Moreover, conducting few interviews is said to be justifiable when the respondents hold a high level of prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Due to previous depth and breadth of knowledge that the interviewees hold, saturation would

be reached earlier; therefore, fewer participants are required (Romney *et al,* 1986). Consequently, by taking into account the suggestions of past studies, for this investigation the researcher chose to conduct 10 interviews. This is because the interviewees all scored over 50% on the questionnaire, indicating that they had previous knowledge of the subject area of conspiracy theories.

Method

Data Collection

Although the questionnaire was initially conducted purely to recruit the correct participants for the interview, once the questionnaires were completed, the researcher decided to statistically analyse the results. At the end of the investigation, 22 questionnaires were completed.

The interview conducted was semi-structured in style. The use of semi-structured interviews was beneficial to this study as the researcher was able to plan certain questions prior to the interview resulting in a basic structure for the interview. However, semi-structured interviews also permit interviewees to express their opinions openly and freely and allows them to speak in-depth about the subject matter (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). This is also aided by using open-ended questions, such as, “please describe in your own words what a conspiracy or a conspiracy theory is” (Appendix 5). Stuckey (2013) explains how a longer interview is advantageous as most questions are constructed during the interview as a response to what the interviewee has said. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews in this study lasted a minimum of 30 minutes, which gave the participant and researcher enough time for a two-way conversation, rapport to be built and for the interviewee to give detailed responses. Barriball and

While (1994) also express how semi-structured interviews nicely complement studies which focus on epistemological worldviews as the researcher is able to investigate topics initially conveyed by the respondent. For transcription, the interviews were audio recorded on a Dictaphone. Transcriptions were saved in a password protected file in order to retain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

After the questionnaire, any participants who were not eligible for the interview or declined the invite to the interview were given a debrief form (Appendix 4) detailing the part of the study they had taken part in and how to withdraw if they wished to. Participants involved in the interview were given a debrief form (Appendix 6) after the interview, describing both parts of the study and how to withdraw if they wished to.

Data Analysis

The quantitative questionnaire was statistically analysed in order to illustrate the range of results gathered from the various participants and the mean score gained on the questionnaire. Thematic analysis, a typology of narrative analysis, was used to analyse the interview transcriptions. Thematic analysis requires the systematic coding of significant aspects of the transcripts, organisation of those codes into themes, the review and defining of each theme and then the analysis of the themes in relation to past research and the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcribes were analysed using two different features of thematic analysis; the frequency that each code appears in each transcript and the underlying meanings of the themes and individual codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Joffe and Yardley, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent (Appendix 2) was gained from each participant, regarding anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal procedures, before they took part in the questionnaire and/or the interview. Participants were made aware that pseudonyms will be used for any direct quotes used from the interviews. It was stated throughout the investigation that participants were able to withdraw from the study by providing the researcher with their unique code which were wrote on the questionnaire and stated on the audio recordings of the interviews. Details of how to withdraw from the study were given in the information sheet (Appendix 1), consent form (Appendix 2) and debrief forms (Appendix 4 and Appendix 6).

In order to retain the researchers and the participant's safety, interviews were held in mutually agreed public locations. Also, although the study did not pose any immediate or physical harm to the participants, the topics covered could have caused slight stress and mental suffering, as some conspiracy theories include distressing events. Therefore, each participant received contact details of a counselling service which they could contact if they felt they needed guidance. The contact details were clearly marked on the debrief forms (Appendix 4 and Appendix 6) and information sheet (Appendix 1).

The study adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethical guidelines and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Ethics by completing the Application for Ethical Approval Form (AEAF) (Appendix 7)

Analysis and Discussion

From the Likert Scale the researcher was able to derive a range of scores and the mean score gained from the questionnaire. The lowest score received on the questionnaire was 31 (28%) and the highest score obtained was 102 (93%). The mean score on the questionnaire was 65.6 (60%).

Through the use of open-ended questions, participants gave their opinions on various subjects and aspects of conspiracy theories. By employing thematic analysis, various codes were identified throughout each transcription, creating subthemes. The similar subthemes were then grouped together, forming the overarching themes; Definitions, Negative Connotations, Questioning and Endorsement Reason.

Theme 1: Definitions

The theme of Definitions, explores the various responses that the interviewees had when asked what a conspiracy theory or conspiracist was. This is in relation to the second research question. The subthemes which were combined to form this theme were; Alternative Explanations, Umbrella Term and Critical/Analytical Thinkers.

Alternative Explanation

The participants were asked to explain what they personally believed a conspiracy theory was. The interviewees were all found to describe a conspiracy theory in different ways. This is demonstrated with the following quotes:

> “A conspiracy is when one or more people attempt to conceal something that other people would view as being bad, for their own benefit. Conspiracy

> theories are the ideas behind it, the possibility that it could be true, that governments or people conceal things from the public." (Steve:5-8)

> "…it answers questions that don't really tie in with what, shall we say the government is telling us" (Tombstone:5-6)

> "It's about an event that's happened and it's not as straightforward as the information that is being given to the public" (Shannon:10-11)

The variety in explanations for what a conspiracy theory is gives support for the fact that psychologists are unable to agree upon an academic definition for a conspiracy theory (Dagnall *et al,* 2015; Drinkwater *et al,* 2012). This is because each individual has a varying view on what makes a conspiracy theory and each person classifies conspiracy theories in various ways. However, most participants did express a consensus regarding a secret and involving the government, which provides support for the harmonious explanation given by various psychologists.

Interestingly, one participant aligned with past research by stating that a conspiracy theory is "a counter explanation for a prominent world event" (Eric:5). This reinforces the statement by Oliver and Wood (2014a) who express that conspiracy theories are simply a type of political examination which allow public events to be interpreted differently. From the quotes provided, it is clear that some conspiracy theories are thought to be nothing more than alternative explanations for events which take place, compared to what is classed as the official explanation given by authoritarian bodies.

Umbrella Term

The participants expressed how the terms conspiracy theory and conspiracist were very wide subjects and how each conspiracy theory and conspiracist is different:

> "[a conspiracy theory is] such a wide subject and it covers all aspects of life" (Tombstone:210)

> "…it's not really a homogenous type, there are different types of people and ideologies that will lead to that umbrella term of a conspiracist" (Eric:48-49)

> "you know it becomes part of the great problem that lumps under the heading of conspiracy theories" (Amy:533-534)

The notion that all conspiratorial thinkers must all hold the same predisposition to endorse conspiracy theories (Gebauer *et al,* 2016) may be incorrect. It is thought by the participants, that the terms conspiracy theory and conspiracist are merely overall headings for a group of unique events and individuals. Therefore, as each individual and world event is different, then people may become conspiratorial thinkers for various reasons, highlighting that perhaps there are multiple aspects and motivations for an individual to begin believing conspiracy theories. This could establish why psychologists have been unable to identify one underlying concept for why people believe conspiracy theories and also why a definition has not been agreed upon (Dagnall *et al,* 2015; Drinkwater *et al,* 2012).

Critical/Analytical Thinker

When explaining what a conspiracy theory was many of the interviewees also clarified what they believed a conspiracist was.

> "… they can be critical thinkers or analytical thinkers…" (Shannon:34)

> "a conspiracist can be someone who's just a very critical thinker. Someone who looks beyond what they're being told at the moment" (Cerberus:27-28)

In comparison to the aforementioned research, the interviewees believe that individuals who believe conspiracy theories are critical and analytical thinkers. Abalakina-Paap et al (1999) and Swami and Weis et al, (2016) both state how conspiracists prefer cognitive simplicity over complexity, also it was found that conspiratorial thinkers were less inclined to be involved in politics (Jolley and Douglas, 2014b, cited in Moulding *et al,* 2016). However, in order for an individual to "think beyond the information that's being given" (Shannon:33), they must be able to process multifaceted information and engage in the political information available to them. Therefore, this study contradicts past research regarding the intolerance to ambiguity approach to conspiratorial thinkers.

Theme 2: Negative Connotations

In relation to the interviewees describing a conspiracist as a critical or analytical thinker, many of the respondents also refused to refer to themselves as a conspiracist. One participant described themselves as "an independent thinker" (Charles:99), another referred to themselves as "a critical thinker" (Cerberus:50). From the quotes

provided below, this choice of self-identification may be due to the negative connotations attached to being a conspiracist.

> "…it often has negative connotations… well it's a typical type of stereotyping… when you think of a conspiracist, you probably think of a small-minded person, who's part of a minority group, who's holding some silly, ridiculous, preposterous, obscured ideas" (John:188-191)

> "I wouldn't give myself the name 'conspiracist', partly because I think there is a little bit of a negative connotations about being classed as a conspiracist" (Shannon:47-49)

According to Bale (2007), even expression of conspiracy theory belief that is supported by reliable evidence is seen as a taboo area of discussion. Moreover, Wood and Douglas (2013) found that even online where a person's presence is anonymous, individuals who supported conspiracy theories did not want to be labelled a conspiracist. This study defends Bale's (2007) claim and Wood and Douglas's (2013) findings as the participants did not want to name themselves as conspiracist in order to avoid the negative associations. Alternatively, compared to information given by various psychologists regarding paranoia (Brotherton *et al,* 2013; Hofstadter, 1996; Moulding *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016), participants expressed a disagreement that people who believe conspiracies are paranoid. This can be seen with the quote:

> "I think most people feel a sort of ambivalence or alternately a little bit of

cynicism, definitely not paranoia" (John:70-71).

Theme 3: Questioning

As support of Sunstein and Vermeule (2009), who recognise that a lack of information can result in society feeling like they are being deprived of civil rights, one participant describes questioning the official explanations of major events as "a democratic right" (Eric:203). Therefore, the theme Questioning, explores the different views that the participants had in relation to questioning official and conspiratorial explanations of world events. The theme is constructed through the subthemes; Healthy Questioning and Disbelief Is Not Evidence.

Healthy Questioning

The participants believe that the amount of questioning which they take part in is healthy; one participant says that "anything that allows people to… think out of the box, as long as they're not going crazy with it then it's a good thing" (Shannon:90-92). Many of the interviewees also expressed how they believed that a "kind of healthy questioning is probably a good thing" (Charles:110-111).

> "I think normal people believe in conspiracy theories through life experience and through just having a questioning nature… you're either very trusting of authority or you're questioning and I think everybody should be questioning" (Steve:305-307)

> "if you immediately say 'no I don't believe that' straight away then it's just as bad as believing everything straight away but in the opposite way" (Charles:446-447)

This viewpoint from the interviewees opposes past research into conjunction fallacy. Conjunction fallacy reveals how people endorse conspiracy theories due to their unconscious need to satisfy the representativeness heuristic (Moulding *et al*, 2016). The quotes provided above contradict the concept of conjunction fallacy as the participants clearly state how they question what they are told, but do so with conscious effort rather than an unconscious desire.

Disbelief Is Not Evidence

The subtheme Disbelief Is Not Evidence relates to when the participants frequently identify that they also question the truthfulness of conspiracy theories as well as official accounts. This counteracts the concept of an intolerance to ambiguity and a need for an explanation. Many participants expressed how they believed that simply accepting one theory as truthful because they disagree the other is a flawed approach.

> "… they find that doubt as being justification for adopting another theory for which there's little evidence" (John:61-62)

> "…but when people won't look into things that annoys be because I think ignorance is not bliss…" (Cerberus:340-341).

> "I don't know what happened, I just know that what they're telling us isn't true" (Steve:179-180)

Past research has indicated that conspiracy believers have a "need-for-an-explanation" (Moulding *et al,* 2016:346). However, the participants in this study gave the impression that they do not use disbelief of the official account as evidence in support of conspiracy theories. Therefore, they seemed to prefer to recognise that they do not know the truth rather than endorse a theory which may be incorrect. This contradicts previous research, which implies that alternative explanations may arise due to a need to understand the sources and consequences of major events (Knight, 2006, cited in Drinkwater *et al,* 2012).

Theme 4: Endorsement Reason

In relation to the first research question, the theme Endorsement Reason investigates how an individual's worldview and epistemology can impact their endorsement level of conspiracy theories, from the view point of the believer. Past research has suggested that people endorse conspiracy theories due to various reasons, from an intolerance to ambiguity (Abalakina-Paap *et al, 1999;* Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016) to psychopathology (Swami and Furnham *et al,* 2016; Swami and Weis *et al,* 2016). However, it seems that the participants in this study all have various reasons as to why they endorse conspiracy theories.

> "…believability and plausibility, those sorts of factors" (John:42)

> ‘I’ll leave it a little bit or I’ll see if someone else from another news source says the same thing or I’ll Google it and see if it comes up…” (Erin:116-117)

> “I think it’s the prevalence of the conspiracy theory that matters” (Eric:112-113).

The quotes provided above give just a few of the several explanations as to why an individual may believe conspiracy theories. Many participants also spoke of how experience and personal growth had influenced their belief in conspiracy theories due to gaining new knowledge about the way in which the world works. It is clear that the individual’s in this study are influenced to believe conspiracy theories due to their epistemological standpoint on the world. For example, one participant says “look into things, investigate, because you will be lied to your entire life, you will be manipulated” (Steve:314-315).

A “crippled epistemology” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009:211) occurs when an individual is acting logically to a lack of or incorrect information. However, from the previous theme, it is clear that the participants do not endorse conspiracy theories simply because they are lacking in information, as they are willing to acknowledge that disbelieving one theory is not evidence for another theory. Therefore, although Sunstein and Vermeule (2009:211) investigated the influence of a “crippled epistemology”, further research should be conducted into the various epistemologies that conspiracy believers hold. This is because, the participants held varying views on the world and the reasons as to why they endorse conspiracy theories.

This study has offered an insight into the ontology and epistemology of a conspiracy theory believer through the use of qualitative methodologies and thematic analysis. The research aims were appropriately and successfully explored throughout this investigation. The exploration also uncovered new information and knowledge in addition to the research aim. However, as the questionnaires were only analysed basically, through the range and means, future research should look at conducting a mix-methodology investigation in further detail. Statistically analysing questionnaires and conducting interviews would give future research different perspectives and may in form researchers of whether the answers an individual gives on an anonymous questionnaire are the same as the responses given in an interview. Forthcoming studies should also aim to conduct more than 10 interviews, as this may give a broader range of opinions, creating new knowledge and information from the view point of a conspiracy theory believer. This study interviewed participants who gained a score of over 50% on the questionnaire. However, future research should aim to establish at what point an individual can be classed as a conspiracy theory believer, in order to verify that the opinions given in the interviews are specifically from a conspiratorial thinker's point of view.

The themes throughout this analysis are all closely linked to one-another. The themes; Definitions, Negative Connotations and Questioning are all in relation to a person's view of the world and the theme, Endorsement Reason explores the reasons in which an individual would believe a conspiracy theory. This implies that reasoning for conspiracy theory endorsement is closely linked to an individual's epistemological standpoint. From the last theme, it is clear that each person's reason for endorsing conspiracy theories is varied, therefore, perhaps psychologists, instead of looking for

one single explanation to clarify conspiratorial thinking, should look at further investigating differing epistemologies and how they can influence conspiratorial thinking. Psychologists should conduct further research into psychopathology as a reason for conspiracy theory belief, as the participants in this study were all logical in their approach to conspiracy theories. Therefore, many other conspiracy theory believers may also have the same rational and plausible approach to why they endorse conspiracy theories.

Reflexive Journal

The role of a reflexivity is frequently recognised as a vital strategy when generating new knowledge through the numerous and differing types of qualitative methodologies (Berger, 2015; Dowling, 2006). The purpose of a reflexive journal is to demonstrate an awareness that the researcher and the topic being investigated can continuously affect each other throughout the research process (Symon and Cassell, 2012). Within general research debates, reflexivity proposes that the researcher should participate in on-going critical self-evaluation and self-appraisal, in addition to continually acknowledging that they may affect the outcome of the research (Berger, 2015; Dowling, 2006).

Due to frequently indulging in conspiratorial thinking myself, the research aims were created in relation to my own personal interests. Although many psychologists have expressed various reasons for why individual's may endorse conspiracy theories, my curiosity was further reinforced when I realised that no qualitative research had been conducted. Therefore, as many of my peers and relatives also support conspiratorial

thinking, I was interested in establishing whether past research was correct in relation to a conspiracy theory believer's own opinion. This is because every person's experiences and world knowledge is varied in relation to conspiracies, hence each individual's perspective regarding why they believe conspiracy theories, I believed would be different.

As many of the participants and I had a pre-existing relationship, the interviews were much more relaxed than I initially thought they would be. This aided the study as rapport was easily established. Therefore, in-depth information was gathered with less effort, compared to the participants where pre-existing rapport was not present. However, this difference in acquaintance between the participants and I may have affected the analysis as varied depths of views were gathered which may have resulted in a less holistic analysis.

Furthermore, as I myself tend to endorse conspiracy theories, my analysis of the interviews was perhaps biased as I may have interpreted a participant's viewpoint in accordance with my own views. In order to avoid this, I often re-read my analysis and changed the coding many times. This helped with my final analysis as the themes that were established were specific, yet relevant to past research. Although some of what was mentioned during the interviews did align with my pre-existing ideas regarding conspiracy theory belief, I was presented with new concepts and opinions, widening my worldview. Therefore, from researching other people's epistemological standpoints, I believe that my own epistemological standpoint has been influenced for the better.

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