"Do I Believe?": Three Aspects of "Belief" in Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract: The following text aims to offer and illustrate a new concept for grasping the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Based on field research in the form of semi-structured interviews and previous research, it provides a triadic schema for navigating the conspiracy landscape and understanding the transformations and functions that conspiracy theories provide to their adherents. After introducing the topic, the first part of the text briefly summarises previous research relevant to the article and describes the theoretical position on which it is based. Subsequently, it uses H. S. Versnel's schema to introduce the three levels of meaning of conspiracy narratives: substantivist, functionalist, and cosmological. It then concludes by reflecting on the possible applications of this framework and its relevance for future research.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; levels of meaning; function; cosmology; belief

Abstrakt: Následující text si klade za úkol nabídnout a ilustrovat novou koncepci pro uchopení fenoménu konspiračních teorií. Na základě vlastního výzkumu v podobě polostrukturovaných rozhovorů a předchozího bádání poskytuje trojiční schéma pro orientaci v konspiračním prostředí a pochopení proměn a funkcí, které konspirační teorie poskytují svým šiřitelům. V první části text po uvedení do tématu krátce shrne stav přechozího bádání relevantního pro potřeby článku a popíše teoretickou pozici, ze které vychází. Následně na základě schématu H. S. Versnela představí tři úrovně významu konspiračních narativů, které nacházíme v životě jednotlivců, a to substantivistickou, funkcionalistickou a kosmologickou. Na závěr se pak zamyslí nad možným použitím této koncepce a jejím významem pro budoucí bádání.

Klíčová slova: konspirační teorie; úrovně významu; funkce; kosmologie; víra

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Introduction

In recent decades, our society has been preoccupied with the reoccurring theme of conspiracy theories. Especially now, the pandemic of Covid 19 has, at least in Czechia, increased the number of people somehow invested in or reacting to this phenomenon.[1] With all this, it is no surprise that the phenomenon has lately become a centre of attention, both in the public debate and academia.

Regardless of this fact, though, the public debate still primarily operates on relatively simple and often misleading premises. The general assumption is that people who believe in conspiracy theories make cognitive mistakes; they are wrong, misled or simply ignorant[2] and can be somehow corrected by debunking specialists. The question often is, "Why do people believe in such nonsense?"

Our article aims to challenge this public opinion and show that cognitive errors might not be the only source of conspiracy theories. This is not a new approach in academia. Using our study as well as past research, we want to explore the various ways that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories operates and changes among different people that accept them. Along with other scholars focused on conspiracy theories[3], we believe the mainstream approach has many limits. Mainly, it does not explain why so many people are affected by conspiracy theories since, according to their disputants, the truth is accessible to anyone. It also does not explain the motivations that bring people to conspiratorial thinking. In the case of the previous question, the focus should not be on why people believe in conspiracy narratives but instead on what it means to believe.[4] Our contribution is a simple tool that should help better to understand the complexity of belief in conspiracy theories.

First, we will place our standpoint in the context of previous studies to explain and clarify our approach. Then we will introduce the research that led us to write this article. Finally, with the help of data obtained through this research and past findings, we will present our thesis, concluding our article with a reflection on what this study could signify in the present-day context.

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[1] "COVID-19 and Conspiracy Spreaders" [online], STEM, 2021, available online at https://en.stem.cz/covid-19-and-conspiracy-spreaders/.

[2] For example, this belief is well described in HELEN YOUNG and, GEOFF M. BOUCHER, "Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions: The Case of QAnon", *Humanities 11* (3, 2021): p. 4–6.

[3] We work in the footsteps of Peter Knight, Stef Aupers, Michael Butter, David Robertson, Asbjørn Dyrendal, Anna Ichino, and Juha Räikkä. The work of Jason Harambam should also be mentioned here. JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability,* Routledge: New York 2020, passim.

[4] There are other researchers who deal with motivations and impacts on everyday life. One recent example: J. CARLSON and E. RAMO "I'm Not a Conspiracy Theorist, But…", *Social Forces,* 101 (4, 2022): p. 1658–1681.

Theoretical Background

Before presenting our discoveries and arguments, we should address our position and background in the (now ever-growing) scholarly inquiry into conspiracy theories. To describe the phenomenon of conspiracy theories throughout history, we drew on the work of Michael Butter and Peter Knight: "The history of conspiracy theory research".[5]

Since the highly influential and fundamental contribution of Richard Hofstadter was published, the centre of attention in academic and public debate has been on the pathological character of conspiracy narratives. His essay from 1964 named "Paranoid Style in American Politics"[6] shaped the academic approach to the phenomenon, which Karl Popper labelled as "conspiracy theories of society"[7]. He achieved that by framing their followers as a minority and the theories themselves as unscientific worldviews born out of paranoia[8] threatening the liberal-democratic consensus.[9] The pathologising paradigm dominated the academic debate (still limited in its extent at the time) until the 1990s,[10] when scholars in cultural studies started to challenge Hofstadter's approach.[11]

Many crucial studies aspiring to shift this dominant position have emerged since. Authors such as Jodi Dean[12], Timothy Melley[13], Mark Fenster[14], and Peter Knight[15] tried to explain conspiracy theories as a changing phenomenon born out of contemporary society's anxieties, uncertainties, flaws and discrepancies. Fundamentally, they all observed that conspiracy theories moved into the centre of Western (main-

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[5] MICHAEL BUTTER and PETER KNIGHT, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research", in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 36.

[6] RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *Paranoid Style in American Politics: an Essay: From the Paranoid Style in American Politics,* Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016, passim.

[7] KARL POPPER, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Routledge 2014, p. 165.

[8] It must also be said that his description of what he called the "paranoid style" brought focus on the general style of conspiracy thinking and paved the way for others to focus not only on the style of thought but also on the narrative and aesthetic aspects.

[9] RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *The paranoid style in American politics : and other essays* [online] in New York : Vintage Books, 1967, passim.

[10] It is also important to mention the forefathers of the non-pathologizing approach Loewenthal and Guterman who already in 1949 regarded conspiracy thinking as "means-making cultural practice that was worth analyzing and studying." KATHARINA THALMANN, "'John Birch Blues': The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era", *Copas 15* (1, 2014): p. 7.

[11] BUTTER and KNIGHT, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research", p. 36.

[12] JODI DEAN, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures form Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998, passim.

[13] TIMOTHY MELLEY, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, passim.

[14] MARK FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2008, passim.

[15] PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*, London and New York: Routledge 2000, passim.

ly American) culture. Peter Knight provides us with an illustration of how this new approach operates in his book *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*. He shows how influential the phenomenon is when linking it to (among other things) the fight for racial equality, feminism, and pop culture. Even more noteworthy is the connection of conspiracy thinking with cultural conditions, as the author states that conspiracy theories articulate "increasing doubt and uncertainty" about agency and even identity in the context of postmodernity. He describes a shift from "secure paranoia" (making a clear distinction between "us" and "them") to "insecure paranoia" (disbelief in the system within its borders) and goes as far as to claim that a conspiracy narrative is not born of faith but default scepticism.[16] Stef Aupers works on similar premises when discussing presupposed internal threats of modern institutions dominant in the uncertain postmodern society. He contrasts them to the earlier threat of the "exotic other", which helped to affirm collective identities. Aupers connects conspiracy thinking with postmodernity, its destruction of the authority of science and state, and its inability to find "the truth" in our world. Conspiracy theories are born to provide us with what postmodern society and culture lack.[17]

Cultural studies came up with a much-needed new understanding of the phenomenon. We follow in the footsteps of cultural scholars when we grasp conspiracy theories as alternative narratives that work as a "skewed critique" of the mainstream system and are born out of its discrepancies and problems.

Our Position and the Question of "Belief"

Certain scholars of cultural studies and other fields have already shown the problematic aspects of the term "belief" in conspiracy theories while pointing out that other things are in play.

Knight, already in the early 2000s, claimed that belief in the case of conspiracy theories is more complicated than just accepting factual information. Scepticism is crucial in this context, and whether conspiracists see the theories as accurate is often unclear. Knight even claims that: "in many instances consumers of conspiracy don't really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either."[18] and that "often people believe (…) only with a provisional commitment, believing [only] as if (…)."[19] "Self-proclaimed acceptance of a conspiracy theory may be a way to express emotions or feelings – such as distrust, fear, prejudice or frustration."[20]

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[16] Peter Knight, "ILOVEYOU: Viruses, Paranoia, and the Environment of Risk", *The Sociological Review* 48 (2, 2000), p. 17–30.
[17] Stef Aupers, "'Trust No One': Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture", *European Journal of Communication* 27 (1, 2012), p. 30.
[18] Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47.
[19] Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47.
[20] Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 155–159.

Aupers follows and helps himself with the famous motto of agent Mulder from the TV series X-Files: "I want to believe", which, according to him, shows the discrepancy between belief and non-belief, the secular and the religious, rationality and enchantment that lies at the heart of contemporary conspiracy culture. Aupers' arguments bring him to the connection between religion and conspiracy theories. He claims that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories is close to religion and especially alternative spirituality as both look for meaning and satisfy the "want to believe" in the modern world. However, they are not quite the same thing; conspiracy theories are both spiritual and irrational as well as rational and sceptic. They transcend the modern distinction between rationality and irrationality, belief and non-belief.[21]

David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal, as our fellow scholars of religion, also see a connection between alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories. Among other things, this helps them grasp different aspects of belief also visible in religion and spirituality. They claim that when speaking of belief, people most likely think of propositional belief expressed by proclamations and statements. Belief is often situational because it is more likely to be a set of different reactions, opinions, actions, or commitments emerging in different contexts. As Robertson and Dyrendal point out, this is something we see in both the case of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories. That is one of the reasons why they situate both phenomena in the same socio-cultural milieu.[22]

A similar tendency appears in the philosophical perspective of Anna Ichino and Juha Räikkä. Their recent article claims that the general attitude towards conspiracy theories is dominated by what they call "doxastic assumption", meaning an assumption that conspiracists hold the information they spread as the truth.[23] However, Ichino and Räikkä argue that this is not always the case and that there exist what they call "non-doxastic conspiracy theories."[24] In this case, hope or adherence to a social group may be important factors. A conspiracist merely hopes his theory is true because, if so, it would fit within their worldview.[25] Alternatively, the conspiracist only shares and spreads[26] the theories because they articulate opinions accepted in their social group or movement without having a "doxastic commitment".[27] Even if the theory

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[21] Aupers, "'Trust No One...'", p. 22–34.

[22] David G. Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal, „Conspiracy Theories and Religion: Superstition, Seekership, and Salvation", in Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 411–421.

[23] Anna Ichino and Juha Räikkä, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", *Argumenta* 13 (2, 2021): p. 247.

[24] Ichino and Räikkä, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", p. 248.

[25] We could even say that they hope the theory is true because it fits their general attitude towards life, their cosmology.

[26] Recent research by a Czech organization called STEM shows a typology of people who spread conspiracy theories and supports the claim that acceptance of facts is not the only factor and shows that people can disseminate the theories for different social and personal reasons. "COVID-19 and Conspiracy Spreaders" [online], *STEM.cz*, 2021, accessed June 2022, available online at https://en.stem.cz/covid-19-and-conspiracy-spreaders/

[27] Ichino and Räikkä, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", p. 248.

fails, it is not crucial to them. Ichino and Räikkä even claim that the person who supports a conspiracy in this way does not actually believe in the theory; they might simply lack a clear view of what their attitude towards the theory is. According to them, this should also be considered when developing communication strategies.[28]

Furthermore, the social psychologist Sylvain Delouveé points out that spreading a theory does not necessarily mean believing in it. He situates conspiracy theories close to rumours[29] when he claims both operate on social logic instead of Cartesian logic. Social logic works in social thinking, "so-called natural thinking about a social phenomenon and, at the same time, thinking that occurs through social factors."[30] People who accept either of the phenomena do so because of social factors that influence them. They think that their knowledge could be true, and that is enough. This is also why Delouveé holds it impossible to "convince an adherent of a conspiracy theory or rumour of the false nature of that conspiracy theory or rumour because representatives of the two sides are not thinking on the same level."[31]

Like Delouveé, literary scholars Helen Young and Geoff M. Boucher also believe it problematic to debunk conspiracy theories through rational or scientific means (fact-checking, for example) because they operate on different levels.[32] In the example of QAnon, they show how certain conspiracy narratives are more stories than theories. According to Young and Boucher, these stories are "fusions of cognitive, normative and affective elements into an imaginative presentation of possible experiences", and because of that, they are very similar to fictional narratives. It is, of course, rather difficult to debunk compelling stories of speculative character (expressing political and other speculations based on the fore-mentioned elements) because people do not "believe" in them in the same sense as they accept facts.[33]

This statement is the core of our argument, and following in the footsteps of the fore-mentioned scholars, we will try to present our understanding of it, offering a simple tool to navigate through different spheres of "belief"[34] that come into play in the case of conspiracy theories. It must be said that certain cultural scholars have come to conclusions similar to those we will try to demonstrate in the following text.[35]

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[28] Ichino and Räikkä, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", p. 247–263.

[29] Interestingly enough Radek Chlup similarly notices a different narrative logic behind conspiracy theories when he sees them as a type of mythical narrative combining features of what he calls social, fictional and political myths.

[30] Sylvain Delouvée, "Repeating is Not Believing: The Transmission of Conspiracy Theories", *Diogenes* 62 (3–4, 2015): p. 4.

[31] Delouvée, "Repeating is Not Believing…", p. 6.

[32] We can also see that in a recent article by Jaron Harambam where the author claims that debunking and fact-checking only works on certain conspiracy theories while others are not affected by it or are able to adapt. Jaron Harambam, "Against modernist illusions: why we need more democratic and constructivist alternatives to debunking conspiracy theories", *Journal for Cultural Research* 25 (1, 2021): p. 112.

[33] Young and Boucher, "Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions…" p. 1–18.

[34] As in different types of reasons for why people are interested, affiliated or invested in conspiracy narratives or why they spread them.

[35] Especially Peter Knight, Anna Ichino, Juha Räikkä, David Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal. For references see Butter and Knight, "The History of Conspiracy Theory Research", p. 33–46,

However, we believe that they were able to show only various partial aspects of this issue and that we can unify them from a new perspective. Through that, we try to shed light on why and how people accept conspiracy theories and what it means to believe in them in different contexts. After all, as scholars of religion, we often must pose questions concerning personal beliefs when dealing with religious and socio-cultural phenomena.

Three Levels of Meaning

To provide orientation in the complexities of belief in conspiracy theories (in some respects comparable to religion), we have chosen a classification scheme based on a text by the Dutch professor of classical history, Hendrik Simon Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II*.[36]

Versnel refers in his study to an Indian anthropologist Rajendra Pradhan[37] who studied the Dutch obsession with talking incessantly about the weather. When Pradhan asked why this occurs, the Dutch gave him two types of answers:

1. We talk about the weather because it is terrible and unpredictable.
2. The weather is an excellent neutral topic of conversation with other people.

   In addition to these "native" explanations, Pradhan recognises another one that is not explicitly stated but is based on an analysis of the collective Dutch mentality:
3. The Dutch talk about the weather because its chaotic nature contradicts the Dutch idea of a world in which everything is ordered and under control.

Versnel applies these three levels to myths and rituals. Analogously, he creates a triadic scheme consisting of three levels: substantive, functionalist and cosmological. In doing so, he says that all of them are represented to a certain extent in all religious phenomena. The substantive level is the layer of specific convictions accepted as true (n. 1). The functionalist level denotes the function that the concept performs for the community or an individual (n. 2). The cosmological level includes the way in which the concept fits into the overall understanding of the world and views of it (n. 3).

In interviews with our respondents, we noticed that these three levels also apply to their thoughts and ideas. For example, a conspiracist may genuinely believe that there are microchips in vaccines (substantive, n. 1). At the same time, they may share the theory to get a like on Facebook and not lose touch with their group of friends

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Ichino and Räikkä, "Non-Doxatic Conspiracy Theories", p. 247–263, Robertson and Dyrendal, "Religion: Superstition, Seekership, and Salvation", p. 411–421.

[36] Hendrik Simon Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994, p. 6–13.

[37] Rajendra Pradhan, "Mooi weer, meneer": Why do the Dutch speak so often about the weather? *Etnofoor* 1 (2, 1989), p. 3–14.

(functionalist, n. 2). However, the same motif may also be a symbolic expression of the warped and precarious sociopolitical order of late modernity (cosmological, n. 3).

Looking at these occurrences closely, we realised that the different levels of Versnel's typology could also interact with and complement each other. However, to present their complex relationship, it is first vital to describe them separately and more in-depth.

Data and Methods

At the end of 2021, our team conducted seven semi-structured interviews to take a random sample of the milieu of conspiracy theories. Since we attempt to demonstrate our perspective on their responses, we should introduce them first.

Our respondents have been anonymised. They are from different social strata, do not know each other and were chosen because they participate to some degree in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories.[38] The respondents were selected from internet forums focusing on conspiracy theories. This was based on recommendations within the personal networks of the original research team. Each team member chose one respondent and interviewed them with open-ended questions permitting discussion of the more nuanced and complex aspects of the conspiracism phenomenon. The interviews were done following the methodological and ethical conventions of conducting semi-structured interviews.[39]

1) David is a 21-year-old university student born and based in Prague. He is from a well-off family. He often spends time online in various thematically focused groups. On the one hand, he mocks conspiracy theories; on the other, he takes on some of the narratives.
2) Filip is a middle-aged man living in Prague. He is a well-known figure in the Czech conspiracy scene and runs his own conspiracy website.
3) Marie is a middle-class 50-year-old woman who lives in a family house with her adult son and husband. At the time of the interview, she worked in HR and now works as a teacher's assistant. The Covid pandemic introduced her to conspiracy narratives. She is invested in them but sees them as only a possibility.
4) Lukáš is a 60-year-old man living with his family in a house in central Bohemia. He is a construction manager. He has a distinct worldview, including alternative

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[38] We are aware that there is only one woman among the respondents. This was not intentional due to the interviewers not knowing whom their colleagues were interviewing in advance. Given the small number of respondents, it certainly does not say anything gender-wise about conspiracy theories.

[39] Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications 1996, p. 19–36, 124–136, 144–157; Kathleen Musante DeWalt and Billie DeWalt , *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*, 2nd ed., Lanham: AltaMira Press 2011, p. 137–156.

    narratives to historical events but does not share it with anyone and does not look for any community with similar interests.

5) Tomáš is a middle-aged man living in a small village in southern Bohemia. He is an engineer, studied Sanskrit, and is generally interested in things out of the ordinary. He is in a long-term relationship and does not have children. His interest in conspiracy theories is born from his doubt of almost anything.

6) Jakub is a successful middle-aged engineer and works with people from all around Europe. He could be described as a liberal. Conspiracy theories are a source of amusement for him, yet he does not believe in all mainstream information sources. Because of this, he is open to alternative versions of different events.

7) Petr is a 31-year-old man from Prague. He works in HR and is in a long-term relationship. His father was very interested in conspiracy theories, leading to Petr's complicated relationship with the phenomenon.

    Our subsequent work with the transcribed interviews was based on the structure of the five main approaches to the analysis of meaning provided by Steinar Kvale in his book *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing.*[40] First, each team member *(1) condensed* their interview into a short essay. The process of *(2) categorisation* was divided into two parts. An effort was made to find keywords, and those were later summarised collectively in a team discussion. While the respondents differed from each other significantly, we were able to detect some words that emerged frequently in all interviews. We provide a list in a footnote.[41] In the discussion, we also focused on finding reoccurring themes that each member identified in their interview.[42] The list is again provided in a footnote.[43] We also employed *(3) narrativisation* principles to the interviews to grasp the complexities of respondent's interaction with conspiracy theories and how it changes throughout their lives. Our work was constantly regulated in mutual discussions on possible *(4) interpretations* of what the interviews and the employment of chosen approaches reveal. During these discussions, we saw that the reoccurring themes revealed different layers of how conspiracy theories operate in people's lives. With Kvale's *(5) ad hoc method* approach, we have discovered that we can grasp these layers more precisely with Versnel's threefold typology.[44]

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[40] KVALE, *Int erViews*, p. 187–209.

[41] *Distrust (nedůvěra), disbelief (nevíra), belief (víra), certainty (jistota), uncertainty (nejistota), control (kontrola), truth (pravda), lie (lež), disapproval (nesouhlas), explanation (vysvětlení), covid (covid), vaccination (vakcinace), theory (teorie).* Because the interviews were conducted in Czech, these are translations debated over by our team, so that they correspond best with their Czech equivalents.

[42] Cf. descriptions of data reduction in DEWALT and DEWALT, *Participant* Observation, p. 181–193.

[43] *Using conspiracy theories as source of amusement, using conspiracy theories for self-(re)presentation, using conspiracy theories to express disagreement, doubting conspiracy theories, trust in conspiracy theories, doubting the mainstream media, alternative world view, meaning and sense making, world order, disagreement with the situation in the world, disagreement with covid restrictions, different aspects of belief.*

[44] It is clear then, that we have chosen the *grounded theory* approach. KATHY CHARMAZ, "Grounded Theory", *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods,* Thousand Oaks and London:

The Substantive Level

In the public debate, this category is the most frequently mentioned level of meaning when thinking about conspiracy theories. Based on that, we also expected this level to be the most frequent, but we were surprised to find out it is not the case, at least in our sample of respondents. In general, this level focuses on the substance or content of the specific narrative. In our case, it would refer to conspiracists believing in the literal content of the conspiracy theory. Surprisingly, examples of these straightforward literal proclamations of belief seem to be very rare. In our study, we were only able to identify a few. One example would be Filip's statement that "Adolf Hitler was a British agent with the purpose of destroying the Soviet Union – until he proved incapable of carrying out his task." This is a very elaborate conception that he sees as true.

A slightly more complex situation is presented by Lukáš, whose belief contains grand narratives like "The Epic of Gilgamesh speaks in the language of the people of the time describing that Gilgamesh was an alien, and his quest for immortality was a quest to get on an alien spaceship."

However, this shows his general rejection of the mainstream interpretation of (historical) events. Within the substantive level, this was the case for most of our respondents. For instance, Jakub believes 9/11 did not happen as the mainstream media tells us, but he does not fully believe in a specific conspiracy narrative. Instead, he is open to new information from various sources, which he sees as trustworthy and would lead him to understand the situation better. While Jakub's and Lukáš's cases seem similar to Filip's in the form of straightforward belief, there is a difference in that Jakub's and Lukáš's beliefs are actually a kind of disbelief in the interpretation of certain (historical) events.

Another example is Tomáš, whose beliefs are more acceptable for the mainstream since he sees a difference between what he is certain of and what he believes is true. He claims that based on his personal experience, he is certain that "(1) telepathic communication is possible, (2) it is possible to predict the future", and "(3) there are lights and objects in the sky which are not caused by known human activity." In contrast, then, he states that he believes there are creatures of unknown origin in the universe, even though his personal experience cannot support this claim. Tomáš states that he must test whether things are true or not by his personal experience, and yet, there are some things that he believes in without it. We will attempt to explain why this is the case while introducing a different level of meaning later.

Even though we could identify a few examples above, it is apparent that the situation is more complicated, and to keep identifying only the substantive level seems unsatisfactory when describing these phenomena. After all, this study points out that perceiving conspiracy theories only within the substantive dimension is insufficient and can lead to misinterpreting the concept of belief in conspiracy theory. Therefore,

SAGE Publications 2003, 440–444.

our intention in this article is to give more space to the other two levels – functionalist and cosmological – and especially to the reciprocal relationship between all three.

The Functionalist Level

When describing their notion of "non-doxastic conspiracy theories", Ichino and Räikkä claim that a person does not have to be persuaded that some theory is completely true. Instead, they can spread it because they merely hope it is true or because through its acceptance, they seek adherence to a specific social group.

In the context of Czechia, the organisation STEM has also shown that there are different types of "seeders" of conspiracy theories based on different types of socio-psychological functions that enable them to approach their surroundings. Therefore, the functionalist dimension is crucial in their relation to conspiracy theories.[45]

The functionalist level appears in several alternative forms; our research allowed us to identify at least a few. What connects these forms is that conspiracy theories are used as means to different ends in every case.

Filip uses conspiracy theories for self-representation. He is a well-known owner of a conspiracist website who describes himself as an investigative journalist and activist. Apart from presenting himself to the world, the conspiracy environment is his way of finding "many friends." However, self-presentation is not the only function conspiracies have for Filip. With his strong online influence, he tries to "set a balance between mainstream and alternative" news. Filip's case shows that conspiracies do not have just one function per person but can have as many functions as people have needs. Some needs are more significant than others and, therefore, more articulated.

Jakub and David use conspiracy theories as a source of amusement. Jakub was joking throughout his whole interview about theories he saw as bizarre, like the Tartaria

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[45] Examples:

Know-it-all – *"The main motivation of the Know-it-all is to show that he has insight, that he is smarter than his surroundings. He wants to get recognition by understanding things better than others. He wants to be the one that others look to as the informed person."*

Lonely senior – *"For this type, spreading misinformation is a substitute for maintaining or strengthening weak social contacts and ties. He mostly forwards emails and debates, is not so demanding of content, does not seek out other sources. The social dimension is primary for him, i.e. the possibility to be in contact partly for fun and to fill his free time. He wants to feel useful (to give advice to others) or interesting (to entertain others)"*

Human of the world – *"A person of higher or senior age, quite successful and secured. Sharing information is for them, primarily, an "extension" of the influence to which they are accustomed, an assertion of status and authority. They have often had respected jobs, are essentially opinion makers in their social environment, and trust themselves. A strong motive for sharing information is nostalgia that "their" world is being lost, and respect for the world in which they are influential."*

Nikola Hořejš, Jitka Uhrová, Michaela Trtíková Vojtková, et al., „Veřejná zpráva z výzkumu: Šiřitelé dezinformací" [online], *STEM*, 2021, accessed June 2022, available online at https://www.stem.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Verejna-zprava-z-vyzkumu-web-STEM.pdf.

theory[46]. His jokes were a tool to lighten up the conversation. On the other hand, David was way more chaotic since his relationship with conspiracy theories was ambivalent. Even though he reads conspiracy theories for fun and is fascinated by them, he also detests them. Everything he said was filled with hate and covered up with many layers of irony. His jokes imitated conspiracy theories and presented them as "idiotic" or "cognitive dissonance". Through this, his approach to conspiracy theories is also a kind of specific self-presentation.

In contrast, Marie and Petr use conspiracy theories to present their disagreement with state and government policies – a typical example of the "skewed critique of the system" mentioned above. Marie was not a fan of conspiracy theories until the Covid-19 pandemic. After that, she started feeling attacked and adopted some conspiracy narratives because they were able to express her emotions. A similar case is that of Petr. He was always suspicious of the state, but like in Marie's case, the Covid-19 crisis escalated these beliefs. He felt attacked by the state, began to speak out against government regulations, and made his disapproval clear to those around him. From the beginning of the pandemic, he did not trust any information the government issued and was convinced that the whole situation was just an exaggeration of the flu season. Here, the conspiracy theories functioned as a medium for his disagreement with the mainstream interpretation of events.

The Cosmological Level

Aupers argues that the modern conspiracy culture is based on "ontological uncertainty" born out of the process of modernisation. Modernity alienated people from their world through institutional subsystems such as bureaucracy, economy, and technology, making it seem like they had no power or influence over the system. According to Aupers, conspiracy theories are "cultural responses." They are "strategies to rationalise anxieties by developing explicable accounts for seemingly inexplicable forces." This, of course, comes hand in hand with the struggle to give the world meaning, which is something that, according to Aupers (supporting his claims with Max Weber's famous "disenchantment of the world"[47]), modernity lost.

Filip's cosmological approach to conspiracy theories would be an example of thinking that seeks to project tangible and meaningful structures to make sense of today's opaque postmodern society. He says: "I have been led to the certainty of a global criminal conspiracy by many years of research into the origins of suffering (wars, disease, poverty, crime...) on planet Earth and in Czechia, by the experience of the utter disinterest of the 'gangster-elites' (powerful, influential and rich) to re-

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[46] At the heart of this belief is that elaborate temporary exhibition sites built for events (e.g. the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco) were actually the ancient capitals of a supposedly fictional Tartarian empire.

[47] Max WEBER, "Wissenschaft als Beruf" (1919), in Max WEBER und DIRK KAESLER (ed.), *Schriften 1894–1922*, Kröner: Stuttgart 2002, p. 510.

duce suffering, and with evidence of how these 'gangster-elites' systematically create suffering and how they systematically parasitise on the majority population."[48] All of his statements are linked to the so-called NWO conspiracy theory, which in itself is explicitly a kind of cosmology structuring the world. A secretly emerging totalitarian world government behind every event, controlling every aspect of our lives, showing seemingly unrelated events as part of one larger scheme.

Conspiracy theories as "cultural responses" and rationalising strategies for the system we live in occur on what Versnel calls the cosmological level of meaning. Here, people are not satisfied with the world and society explained by mainstream social media. They are motivated to accept certain conspiracy narratives because they support their opinions and connect with their general worldview, which is not in agreement with the opinions and worldviews accepted in the mainstream. For example, Tomáš is naturally very careful at accepting facts as true, so he tends not to trust mainstream information. He also considers himself to be an "old-world communist"; therefore, he tends to look for a group of capitalists that controls the world.

While questioning our respondents, it was the lack of an acceptable interpretation of the world around them, which mainstream media did not offer, and the need for a meaningful ordering of the world that led some of them to seek alternative sources of "true" information about the world. Several interviewees wondered why the mainstream media do not portray reality. This led them to the conclusion that it may be due to an intention to distract from the facts or to the purposeful presentation of a biased and untrue reality. Therefore, two questions came to their minds. The first was whose intent it was to deceive us, and the second was the purpose of this complex deception. Some struggled to find sufficient explanations, which often led to speculation about a leading group, such as a superior race or aliens, who seek to dominate the world. An example of this is Lukáš, who presents a complex system of world domination, on top of which are powerful extraterrestrials. While producing a narrative going back to the beginnings of civilisation, his model also has a synchronic dimension represented in the form of a diagram (fig. 1). The complex narrative involving ancient cultures, extraterrestrials and alleged contemporary super-conspiracies has a close resemblance to the cosmology associated with the well-known conspiracist David Icke.

Although such conclusions are already beyond the lines of plausibility for most people, they are driven by logical reflections and the human need for explicable world order. When the mainstream explanation of (historical) events does not resonate with people, such as some of our respondents, they may feel the need to substitute their collapsing world order with a new one to structure their reality in a way comprehensible for them. Some interviewees themselves mentioned their need to find some universal truth to fall back on, which the mainstream media did not offer them.

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[48] „K jistotě o globálním zločineckém spiknutí mne přivedly dlouholeté poznatky z pátrání o vzniku utrpení (války, nemoci, chudoba, zločin...) na planetě Zemi a v ČR, zkušenosti s naprostým nezajmem gaunerelit (mocní, vlivní a bohatí) utrpení snižovat a s důkazy o tom, jak tyto gaunerelity utrpení systematicky tvoří a jak systematicky parazitují na majoritní populaci."

Intermingling and Transition

As shown in previous chapters, conspiracism does not contain only a substantive dimension, where one follows a theory simply because one trusts its content indefinitely. Conspiracism is much more complex, and applying Versnel's theory can bring mainstream society[49] closer to it. However, it is not as simple as identifying a particular theory functioning only on one of the levels. Each level of meaning is accompanied by another of the three since they constantly influence each other. For example, one is not just a functionalist conspiracist. Just as Versnel says that all three dimensions are to some extent represented in all religious ideas, they also appear in some proportion in conspiracy theories.

For instance, one of our respondents, Filip, has all three clearly observable levels in his belief. He believes in specific theories because of their content at the substantive level, presenting a list of historical events to which he gives a non-mainstream conspiracist interpretation (E.g., The Srebrenica massacre did not happen, or The Velvet Revolution was a fraud organised in the West to colonise Czechoslovakia etc.). All these substantive thoughts are arranged together in a structure showing his cosmological approach. Filip's statements are intertwined, putting together the explicit cosmology of a previously mentioned New World Order, a secretly emerging totalitarian world government controlling and, in that way, connecting random events. It is a model example of thinking that seeks to project almost magical forces that control the world behind the scenes of the chaos of today's opaque postmodern society. Finally, the functionalist level is as crucial for Filip as the previous ones since he is a well-known online media person who has set himself the goal of balancing out the mainstream.

With David, however, this is not the case. He has a powerful functionalist dimension and seems to have a minimal cosmological or substantive approach. Nevertheless, when we look at his responses, we see that both are present, just not as explicitly as in Filip's case. The cosmological level of conspiracy theories connects with David's leftist worldview. His inclination to conspiracy theories grows from a hostile position towards the contemporary (capitalist Western) world. Even though he mocks conspiracy theories most of the time and has a primarily functionalist approach to them, he is also fascinated by them and even takes over some of their narratives. His idea (which he presented not as conspiracy but as fact) that corporations knowingly and deliberately destroy the planet with a grander scheme is quite a strong substantive conspiracy thought in itself.

Due to Tomáš's beforementioned sceptical nature, from which his cosmology is constructed, it is generally difficult for him to believe in anything at all. That is why

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[49] Mainstream society may be seen as a relatively static, stable conglomeration of individuals, groups and institutions that throws up more dynamic, deviant groups on its margins. Elizabeth Puttick, "Personal Development: the Spiritualisation and Secularisation of the Human Potential Movement", in Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, p. 202.

he is interested in conspiracy theories in the first place, while at the same time, it prevents him from believing in most of them. In some cases, however, he approaches them and believes in them on a substantive level for which he often needs empirical experience (although in other cases, when he has none, he further subjects his theories to critical scrutiny with the principle of "embrace widely, hold lightly"). An example of this would be his belief that UFOs,[50] which are not human-made technologies, exist. His worldviews, however, operate within the functionalist level as well. He states that conspiracy theories act as a badge of honour and a shield for him when he states: "People have then no interest in pulling you into worldly things, and conversely there may be those with whom you get along, or who will push you further." This serves him to identify people with similar beliefs and to differentiate himself from the mainstream population openly.

Our research also found another aspect of this intermingling relationship between the three levels. That is, one can see a transition between different approaches in space and time.

A suitable example is Petr. Petr's father was an ardent conspiracy theorist who dealt with conspiracies concerning alien extraterrestrials. From an early age, Petr was subjected to a strong substantive treatment of conspiracies, which he resisted during his life. Despite his rejection of them on a substantive level, he still uses them to express disagreement with the government. This suspicion towards the state peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic. He felt attacked by the state's restrictions and returned to the conspiracist vortex of non-mainstream interpretation of events. This shows him transitioning from his early-life contempt of substantive belief in conspiracy theories to using conspiracy theories as means to achieve a specific end (functionalist level), only to return to conspiracy theories on a substantive level but this time genuinely accepting them.

In conclusion, it is essential to emphasise that these three dimensions are not always in a harmonious relationship but sometimes exist in tension, as is apparent in David's case. He primarily mocks conspiracy theories; showing where his ridicule of conspiracies ends and believing in the narrative takes over is challenging. Hence his functionalist dimension (mocking conspiracies) is in direct conflict with his substantive approach (belief in the content of conspiracies).[51]

As shown in this chapter, the three presented levels of meaning do not stand alone but are constantly overlapping, intertwining, transitioning, and influencing each other.

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[50] This term is not necessarily connected to aliens, since in general it means "Unidentified Flying Object".

[51] The cosmological level concerning his leftist worldviews is in this case less visible and does not participate in the conflict between the two others.

Conclusion

Our article has explored the applicability of the three-fold typology proposed by H.S. Versnel on the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. The typology consists of three dimensions of understanding human belief in religious contexts: substantive, functionalist, and cosmological. We have attempted to show that what we call belief in conspiracy theories is rather complex and cannot be reduced to a mere acceptance of certain ideas as true (substantive level). Hopefully, we were able to demonstrate that this is only one aspect of belief and that people participate in conspiracy narratives because they are motivated by other than just literalist reasoning. Conspiracy theories can also provide a particular social or psychological function or support (functionalist level) and articulate their overall worldview without straightforward belief in the conceptions presented in the specific conspiracy theory (cosmological level). These three forms of understanding can go hand in hand but can also create tension. The functionalist and cosmological forms introduce us to a different approach when dealing with conspiracy theories than usual. That enables us to observe this phenomenon without judging its adherents for factual inconsistencies, similar to what we do in religious studies.

Our first question was whether we find representations of all three types. We applied them to the results of our qualitative study composed of in-depth interviews with representatives of the conspiracist subculture. The semi-structured interview format was crucial as it allowed for a discussion about the motivations and reasons underlying the respondents' beliefs. In this way, we could go beyond the mere content of the belief and verify the presence of functionalist and cosmological forms of belief.

Our study discovered that it is a helpful tool for understanding the formation of conspiracist beliefs. As our sample of respondents was very limited, we could not go beyond this basic observation and offer general conclusions about the Czech population – a task for a future study. However, there are still several points illustrated by our study deserving to be mentioned in the conclusion:

1) Thanks to the in-depth interview, we observed functionalist and cosmological levels of belief. We could ask follow-up questions about the motivations and reasons for a particular belief and see the belief content in the context of the individual worldview.
2) Previous researchers (Aupers, Delouvée) suggested concepts similar to the functionalist ("social logic" of Delouvée) and cosmological ("ontological uncertainty" of Aupers) forms of belief. In this way, we helped to add more cases that illustrate these forms of belief; we concluded that Versnel's typology allows for a systematic approach to the issue of belief where three different types can stand side by side.
3) Our limited sample does not allow for far-reaching conclusions about the average distribution of the three forms of belief in the population; however, we find it noteworthy that none of our seven respondents exhibited solely the substantive form of belief. The other two layers of belief were always co-present to a certain

extent and, in most cases, were even more pronounced and essential. A future study could try to falsify our hypothesis by finding respondents who show the substantive layer only. If none are found, it would genuinely affect our understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories: fact-checking and factual refutations of concrete beliefs would be deemed ineffectual (a perspective now getting more and more support from recent studies).[52]

4) Our research also showed that each individual manifests a particular combination of all three studied layers of belief, so any reduction to just one of those types would be misleading.

As our study has a limited scope, it can be seen as an experimental exploration of an area which would profit from larger follow-up research projects. Future studies should focus on a more comprehensive mapping of our preliminary findings by using larger (and more representative) sets of respondents. Using quantitative methods, though, these studies will face the methodological issue of "measuring" the presence of the functionalist and cosmological layers of belief without the option of in-depth dialogue with the respondent.

Even if a future study confirms our findings, we will still face the difficult task of using our knowledge about the existence of three different layers of belief in our public communication – both with the mainstream media and policymakers and with the representatives of the conspiracist subculture.

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