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A comparative analysis of similarities and differences between conspiracy theories and sociological theories

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Abstract

This comparative analysis theoretically examines the differences and similarities between conspiracy theories and sociological theories. While conspiracy theories are often dismissed as false, sociological theories are socially accepted. To foster a nuanced perspective, a juxtaposition of both types of theories is undertaken.

Through precise definitions, typical characteristics of both theories are derived and compared. Central differences lie in the verifiability, which is often limited for conspiracy theories, affecting their logical coherence. The nature of the respectively described phenomena is another typical difference, as well as the agency attributed to individual actors.

Important similarities include that both types of theories are social constructs and can have societal influence. Both can address oppositional themes, exhibit epistemic risks, and are characterized by their provisional nature.

The discussion section is divided into epistemic criteria and inherent themes, demonstrating that a careful examination of characteristics is necessary to recognize legitimate social critique and to conduct scientifically grounded debates.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, sociological theories, definition, comparative analysis, epistemic criteria, social influence

Introduction

Inspiration for this theoretical article arose from discussions during the selection process for the 'Sociology with a Focus on Sociological Theories' professorship at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Technical University of Chemnitz, on April 29th and 30th, 2024, in Germany. The first presentation was delivered by Heiko Beyer on "The Revelations of Q: How and Why the QAnon Conspiracy Theory Captivated American Evangelicalism"^[1]. This presentation sparked a spontaneous question in the plenum about the difference between a conspiracy theory and a sociological theory. This topic remained pertinent throughout subsequent presentations, with each candidate addressing the question:

What is the difference between a conspiracy theory and a sociological theory?

This question reflects not only the need for deeper analysis and reflection on the nature of conspiracy theories and sociological theories but also underscores the necessity of sharpening the sociological perspective on contemporary social phenomena.

Discussions often questioned whether conspiracy theories and sociological theories are even comparable. Some participants argued that conspiracy theories are inherently untenable, as they often lack empirical evidence and are not methodologically verifiable. Others disputed the legitimacy of labeling conspiracy theories as 'theories', suggesting instead that individuals who follow such theories are merely paranoid. Overall, responses suggested a consensus that conspiracy theories are *simply not true*.

This controversial discussion personally motivated me to closely examine the diversity of so-called 'conspiracy theories' and to question whether the term itself is appropriate. In particular, these discussions raise questions about how to conceptually handle conspiracy theories that have been proven true over time, as well as those that are not directly verifiable. Furthermore, the question arises whether it is appropriate to be critical of political decisions and to consider and examine the possibility of certain conspiracies, rather than dismissing them outright as paranoid.

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These discussions clearly highlight the need for a precise definition of the term 'conspiracy theory' and a critical reflection on how we as a society should address such phenomena. This discussion provides an opportunity to gain new insights and expand theoretical perspectives to better describe the complex social phenomena of our time

In this article, I will attempt a comparative analysis between conspiracy theories and sociological theories to elucidate their essential differences and similarities. Drawing on current research literature and theoretical approaches, I aim to support and deepen this discussion.

It is important to note upfront that theories related to conspiracies and sociology are diverse. Therefore, the following discussion partly uses fragments to enable comparison. Alongside explicit examples, meaningful comparison categories will be established to facilitate a broader examination of typical characteristics of these theories.

An examination of conspiracy theories in comparison to sociological theories allows for a critical engagement with both types of theories. Through direct comparison, specific characteristics become apparent, and conspiracy theories as a subject of research can be precisely defined, thereby enabling more nuanced subsequent research endeavors.

Conspiracy Theories: A Theoretical Summary

A theoretical summary of key scientific findings on conspiracy theories aims to establish an empirically supported foundation for the subsequent comparison with sociological theories.

Background

Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon and have historically emerged during periods of social insecurity, such as shortly before the Industrial Revolution and at the onset of the Cold War ^[2]. A global perspective on conspiracy theories also reveals their presence across all parts of the world, attributable to each generation facing some form of social crisis, thus explaining their consistent prevalence throughout history ^[3].

In contrast, the scholarly exploration of this phenomenon is relatively recent and has significantly expanded over the past 20 years ^[4]. Sociological literature often portrays a critical stance towards the definition of conspiracy theories, characterizing believers as individuals who fail to grasp the complexity of power relationships and exhibit paranoid tendencies ^[5]. Many authors ^[6, 7] describe these individuals as seeking simplistic explanations for complex phenomena due to internal factors such as stress, avoidant attachment, and anxiety, as well as external factors like anomie, political alienation, and low external control ^[8]. This 'misguided' perception of truth forms the basis of most debates surrounding this topic.

Definition

At first a more general definition of conspiracy theories is considered to broaden the understanding of what can be classified as a conspiracy. Dentith ^[5] describes conspiracy theories as:

"an explanation of an event that cites the existence of a conspiracy as a salient cause ^[5]."

This general definition allows for a more neutral perspective on conspiracy theories, leaving open the possibility that some may indeed be true. By avoiding premature judgments

and acknowledging that explanations based on conspiracies could be legitimate and well-founded, this definition promotes a nuanced and balanced discussion. For example, collusion between companies and politicians is a recognized phenomenon often driven by conspiratorial behavior. By not categorically labeling conspiracy theories as unfounded or paranoid, but rather considering them as potential explanations for certain events, a differentiated perspective is fostered ^[5].

However, it should be noted that such a broad definition lacks comparative features with other theories. Therefore, the focus should also be directed towards a more specific definition.

During the politically mandated COVID-19 measures, numerous studies spontaneously addressed the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in this context. A common definition was not readily available, leading to inconsistent results and a lack of longitudinal findings ^[4].

"When scales are developed without reference to a stable, reasoned, and explicit definition of conspiracy theories, there will always be the risk of inconsistent measurement, and therefore inconsistent results, between studies ^[4]."

A recent theoretical work ^[4] strives for a neutral definition of the term "conspiracy theory" and analyzes defining characteristics to differentiate it from other theories, thereby supporting consistent theoretical and empirical considerations.

"A conspiracy theory is a belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge. Conspiracy theories (a) are oppositional, which means they oppose publicly accepted understandings of events; (b) describe malevolent or forbidden acts; (c) ascribe agency to individuals and groups rather than to impersonal or systemic forces; (d) are epistemically risky, meaning that though they are not necessarily false or implausible, taken collectively they are more prone to falsity than other types of belief; and (e) are social constructs that are not merely adopted by individuals but are shared with social objectives in mind, and they have the potential not only to represent and interpret reality but also to fashion new social realities ^[4]."

These characteristics can vary in their manifestation depending on the respective conspiracy theory. This definition provides the opportunity for a holistic examination of the phenomenon to draw theoretical comparisons, as these described features are used as comparative categories throughout the article based on a comprehensive theoretical examination of the subject matter.

Psychological Characteristics and Their Limitations

It is challenging to create a psychological profile due to the distinction between a general conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs. Empirical studies reveal significant differences between individuals who generally suspect conspiracies behind events and those who only consider specific conspiracy theories ^[9]. This differentiation is difficult to capture empirically, given the abundance and interconnectedness of conspiracy theories.

The scientifically grounded "Typology of Conspiracy Theory" ^[10] categorizes the intensity of the conspiracist worldview on a spectrum of how reality is perceived, ranging from Type 1 "Something is not in order" to Type 5

"All reality is an illusion" ^[10]. This typology underscores the diversity inherent in the subject matter.

Current research faces several limitations in establishing scientifically validated psychological characteristics of individuals engaging with conspiracy theories. Most studies to date have relied on data from Western countries ^[4]. Initial studies highlight the influence of cultural backgrounds on conspiracy theories. Drawing on Hofstede's ^[11] model of cultural values, a comprehensive study demonstrated that cultures emphasizing collectivism and masculinity tend to engage more with conspiracy theories ^[12]. However, no evidence was found linking the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension to conspiracy beliefs in the same study.

Overall, categorizing individuals who believe in conspiracy theories is challenging, given the inconsistency in existing literature ^[4], such as regarding uncertainty and lack of control, where Stojanov *et al.* ^[13] found no association with belief in conspiracy theories.

Moreover, recruiting participants who genuinely hold strong beliefs in conspiracy theories poses difficulties due to inherent mistrust of scientific inquiry on this topic ^[4] and the stigmatization of believing in conspiracy theories as socially unacceptable ^[14]. Consequently, many studies have relied on samples from the general population, leading to fragmented and disconnected results. Nevertheless, the recent proliferation of studies on the backgrounds of conspiracy beliefs has enabled meta-analyses to summarize fundamental psychological functions of conspiracy theories ^[4].

In times of heightened uncertainty, conspiracy theories appear to provide some individuals with a sense of understanding the true origins of events, offering them a semblance of security amid seemingly senseless, perhaps unconsciously and systemically generated effects ^[15]. Conversely, it is important to note that the idea that conspirators deliberately caused certain events, and no one could stop them, may be even more alarming than considering events as a chain of random occurrences or systemic forces.

Further critical questioning arises regarding whether fears precede or arise from exposure to conspiracy theories and the observation that certain conspiracy theories are true ^[16], triggering a negative spiral of mistrust and further engagement with conspiracy theories and political failures. However, fears, an anxious attachment style ^[17], and uncertainty appear to significantly influence belief in conspiracy theories ^[18].

Additionally, social motives are notable, such as maintaining a positive image of one's own group. Conspiracy theories offer a means to distinguish oneself positively from others by claiming superior knowledge. Furthermore, a distinction is made between one's own group and others who are perceived as conspiring against it ^[15].

Dissemination and Impact

The dissemination of conspiracy theories largely occurs through social media today, where individual posts or topics spread akin to an epidemiological models ^[19]. These theories do not permeate entire social networks but rather propagate within groups where a predisposition to conspiratorial thinking exists ^[20]. Conspiracy theories are likely shared when they align with individual political beliefs and challenge established norms ^[4].

Belief in conspiracy theories can have negative consequences. For instance, believing that political events

are manipulated may lead to passive political disengagement or abstention from voting. Overall, negative emotions such as alienation, powerlessness, hostility, and perceived disadvantage are exacerbated ^[21]. This heightened psychological stress can result in reduced well-being and insomnia ^[22]. Additionally, internalizing conspiratorial thinking and its associated worldview can strain interpersonal relationships and contribute to the stigmatization of conspiracy beliefs ^[23].

In some cases, belief in conspiracies has been linked to increased readiness for violence ^[24] or intensified tendencies toward racism, particularly when certain groups are implicated in conspiracies ^[25]. Belief in specific conspiracy theories can also lead to risky health behaviors, such as complete rejection of conventional medical treatments ^[26], refusal of contraception ^[27], or avoidance of psychological help ^[28].

The impacts of conspiracy beliefs are diverse, and there are also potential positive consequences ^[4]. For example, they can strengthen a sense of belonging among like-minded individuals ^[10]. Furthermore, in cases where certain conspiracy theories prove to be true, demands for transparency in suspicious cases can lead to positive outcomes if responsible parties are indeed involved in illegal activities ^[5].

Sociological Theories: A Theoretical Summary

The following summary of key insights from sociological theories aims to provide a theoretically substantiated foundation for the subsequent comparison with conspiracy theories.

Background

Sociology is a young scientific discipline that emerged towards the end of the 19th century in response to rapid societal changes spurred by industrialization. The profound societal upheavals during this period of modernization brought about extensive transformations such as urbanization, individualization, and the anonymization of society ^[29].

The French Revolution also marked a profound societal shift at that time, leading to the destabilization of social order and demonstrating the power of social movements and collective action. This intensified interest in societal change and social justice. Additionally, the emergence of sociology was facilitated by Enlightenment ideas such as rationality, science, empiricism, education, and progress ^[30].

The described changes were so comprehensive that nearly all aspects of life were affected, including living conditions, education, family structures, work relationships, and political organization. Everyday practical traditions of coexistence underwent massive, sometimes chaotic changes, giving rise to previously unknown social issues and questions. These developments laid the groundwork for the systematic examination of society, social behavior, and interactions between individuals and societal structures. Some analyses also focused on identifying maldevelopments and risks associated with modernization ^[29].

Key figures and exemplary topics from the early days of sociology as an independent discipline included Auguste Comte (Social order and progress), Karl Marx (Social class and economic structures), Émile Durkheim (Social integration and anomie), Max Weber (The significance of culture and religion in modernity), and Georg Simmel (Social interaction and socialization) ^[31].

In the 20th century, sociology established itself as an academic discipline with numerous theories, methods, and approaches (e.g., structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, or critical theory). Sociological theories often adapt to current social challenges^[31]. Examples of contemporary sociological topics include globalization, digitalization, and environmental sociology^[32].

Definition

Sociology and its theories continue to grapple with the fundamental question of how social order is possible. In this regard, three dimensions are particularly relevant for the development of sociological theory. Firstly, it involves the description and explanation of the basic unit of society. Secondly, the dynamics and laws of societal change are central themes in sociological theories. Thirdly, it concerns the practical organization and maintenance of social order and relationships^[29]. A sociological theory, focusing on one of these key areas, can be broadly described as follows:

A theory is a plausible explanation about social phenomena [...], logically construed and systematically organized, that underscores the relationship between [...] well-defined variables. It is more than a hypothesis or speculative reasoning but far from a social law that is supported by evidence^[31].

Drawing on theoretical elaborations and literature reviews by Ward^[33] and Timasheff^[34], Francis Abraham^[31] summarizes the following characteristics for defining sociological theories:

- A theory is couched in terms of well-defined concepts and logically inter-connected propositions.
- A theory is a systematized symbolic construction and does not share the ineluctability of fact. Theory-building is a creative achievement and involves a qualitative jump beyond evidence.
- A theory is provisional in character; it is always open to revision depending on new insights and evidences. It is neither necessary nor desirable for a sociological theory to be a final formulation.
- It is verifiable in a preliminary way, that is, consistent with the body of known facts and available evidences.
- It is systematized formulation that seeks to reconcile the needs of a humanistic tradition (Speculative, creative, etc.) with the demands of a scientific tradition (measurement, rigorous induction, predictive power, etc.)^[31].

Sociological theories are often categorized based on whether they primarily examine macro-level societal processes and overarching social structures or whether they focus on the micro-level, studying individual behavior and interactions within small groups^[31]. Furthermore, there are structure-oriented theories that emphasize how social structures influence individual behavior, and action-oriented theories that focus on the actions and perspectives of individuals and their impact on societal structures^[29].

Additionally, sociological theories can be differentiated into Grand Theories, which describe universal social phenomena using abstract concepts, and Middle-Range Theories, which relate specific scientific findings to concrete social phenomena. The function of sociological theories is to expand empirical findings, provide frameworks for accumulating knowledge, enhance research productivity,

enable prediction, and ensure precision through testability^[30].

Theory Formation and Its Limitations

On one hand, theory formation in sociology goes beyond mere speculation, and a sociological theory should be empirically grounded^[35]. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that "Theory-building is a creative achievement and involves a qualitative jump beyond evidence"^[31]. The provisional nature of sociological theories also means that "it is neither necessary nor desirable to have a final formulation"^[31]. Science, therefore, "is a rather slow process of developing theories, testing them, and then rejecting, modifying, or retaining them, at least until a better theory is proposed"^[35].

This fact, alongside the recognition of social constructivism, suggests that reality cannot be fully represented 1:1 by sociological theories, as they themselves are constructs and deal with selective aspects and simplifications of social reality^[36]. "No theory can quite match the social world"^[37]. Sociological theories should not aim to cover the full complexity of social phenomena, which are extensive and multifaceted, as theories would become overly burdened with categories and explanations^[37].

Furthermore, the plurality of theories in sociology serves as a limitation to the conclusiveness of some theories, considering that certain sociological perspectives directly contradict each other. This heterogeneity can make it challenging to clearly identify the knowledge base of sociology. Moreover, there is criticism that sociological theory has increasingly focused on interpreting or criticizing statements made by deceased sociologists. It is crucial to individually assess whether the ideas and theories of these classics still hold significant relevance for our contemporary world^[36].

Even the inclusion of empirical data does not guarantee a 'true' sociological theory. Research processes are subjective, and the choice of methods alone influences results. Empirical observations are not necessarily neutral and accurate representations of social phenomena^[37].

Sociological Theories and Empirical Research

Theories provide abstract explanatory models for social phenomena, whereas empirical research is based on concrete observations and data. The validity of theories can diminish if they are not supported by empirical findings.

Theoretical assumptions can influence empirical research by guiding the selection of research questions, methods, and interpretations. Conversely, empirical findings can challenge theoretical models or lead to the development of new theories. It is also important to note that the chosen or available methodological approach can impact the results and the theories derived from them^[37]. In sociology, there is often a distinction made between theory and empirical research.

It is true that sociological theory is to a great extent developed independently of any body of continuing research and, similarly, empirical research has seldom concerned itself with theoretical interests. The result is a deep hiatus between empirically minded 'workers' and theoretically oriented 'scholars'^[31].

The consideration of some classic works suggests that in some cases, the development of classical theories was

driven more by philosophical analyses and worldviews than empirical evidence [36].

In the first place, sociology is an outgrowth of social philosophy. Early masters of social thought were speculative philosophers who never bothered to establish any empirical base for great conceptual schemes they expounded [31].

In sociology, there are theories that are difficult or even impossible to empirically verify, especially when they are imprecisely formulated or deal with topics that are hard to capture empirically [36]. An example is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus [38], which includes constructs such as internalized dispositions, cultural capital, or symbolic violence that are not easily observable [37].

Theory and empirical research should be considered together to continuously reflect on and verify the interactions between abstract concepts and real social phenomena. This approach aims to promote a balanced and well-founded understanding of social realities.

Conspiracy Theories and Sociological Theories: A Comparison

The two tables presented here are central to the theoretical analysis comparing conspiracy theories and sociological theories. The idea is to select characteristic features typical of one type of theory, which can then be compared with the other type of theory. It should be noted that these are theoretical comparison categories, generally typical of each type of theory, but there may be individual variations depending on specific theories.

The first table uses the components of the definition of a conspiracy theory as comparison categories. This definition is derived from Douglas and Sutton [4], who in a theoretical work, inclusive of a comprehensive literature review, extensively engage in developing a clear definition of conspiracy theory. The background to crafting this definition was to establish clear and uniform comparison and linking categories for subsequent scholarly works as a shared basis.

Definition of conspiracy theories in comparison to sociological theories

Comparison Categories	Conspiracy Theories	Sociological Theories
“are oppositional, which means they oppose publicly accepted understandings of events” [4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present alternative interpretations for complex events • Attempt to correct a ‘false reality’ • Interpretations deviate from the official, widely recognised version • Characterised by mistrust of authorities and established institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are not always oppositional, but can still question norms or power structures • Critical theory, in particular, scrutinizes prevailing assumptions and ideologies to uncover social inequality
“describe malevolent or forbidden acts” [4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe and criticize power structures as secretive, immoral (against public interest), and consciously established • Always engage with themes of evil and forbidden acts as central content • Suspect that the backgrounds of power are intentionally kept out of the public eye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe and criticize power structures more as a social phenomenon based on structural causes and societal dynamics • Engage with a variety of topics, some with a particular focus on forbidden behaviors such as criminal sociology • Suspect that the backgrounds of power are initially unconscious and can be methodically uncovered
“ascribe agency to individuals and groups rather than to impersonal or systemic forces” [4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on the ability of individuals or small groups to trigger significant events of public interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention is directed towards systemic or reciprocal factors to explain societal phenomena, which can simultaneously be impersonal and unconscious
“are epistemically risky, (...) taken collectively they are more prone to falsity than other types of belief” [4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are not inherently false, but they are difficult to falsify because the backgrounds are presumed to be secret, making data collection challenging or impossible • They rely on leaks, whistleblowers, or errors by conspirators • Knowledge is often gathered through pragmatic, journalistic means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the complexity of social phenomena, theoretical diversity, and subjective research methods, sociological theories can also be epistemically risky • However, overall, they are more empirically supported through scientific methods and are continuously developed through ongoing scrutiny • Some of the classical theoretical frameworks initially relied purely on philosophical ideas
“are social constructs that are not merely adopted by individuals but are shared with social objectives in mind, and they have the potential not only to represent and interpret reality but also to fashion new social realities” [4]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are socially constructed on one hand and pursue social objectives on the other • They are often disseminated in large groups and can become a collective representation • Due to their collective nature, they can influence society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On one hand, they are socially constructed and can, on the other hand, pursue social objectives • Insights are shared within the scientific community, thereby creating a shared interpretive framework for social processes • Some can shape new social realities by critiquing existing social processes (e.g., the social construction of gender)

The columns ‘Comparison Categories’ and ‘Conspiracy Theories’ are based on Douglas and Sutton [4]. The column on sociological theories is based on Francis Abraham [31].

In the second table, the comparison proceeds conversely, with comparison categories oriented towards typical

characteristics of sociological theories. The comparison categories used for definition are based on the theoretical elaborations of Francis Abraham [31], who in a foundational work outlines typical attributes of sociological theories. This influential work in sociology provides not only an

introduction to fundamentals and classical theories but also diverse perspectives and critical analyses on the application

and limitations of sociological theories.

Definition of sociological theories in comparison to conspiracy theories

Comparison Categories	Conspiracy Theories	Sociological Theories
Are “couched in terms of well-defined concepts and logically inter-connected propositions” ^[31]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual key terms may be specific, but outside the community, they are often not accepted Some concepts are vague and poorly defined (e.g., the elite) Within the theory, a network of supporting statements can emerge, often lacking falsifiability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have clearly defined terms (e.g., social class), allowing for clear intersubjective understanding Statements and conclusions are logical, consistent, and coherent, forming a cohesive whole
are “systematized symbolic constructions and [do] not share the ineluctability of a fact” ^[31]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To describe social phenomena, symbolic construction is employed in a creative process Theories are interpretative constructs and not facts, often lacking falsifiability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic symbolic construction is applied in a creative process to describe social phenomena Theories are interpretative constructs and not facts, but they explain and interpret the facts
are “provisional in character (...) [and] always open to revision depending on new insights and evidences” ^[31]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are provisional and can evolve as new information emerges New information may necessitate revisions to theories, which can be challenging when belief systems and convictions are attached to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are provisional and can evolve as new insights and societal changes emerge New research findings can lead to systematic revisions of theories
are “verifiable in a preliminary way, that is, consistent with the body of known facts and available evidences” ^[31]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are sometimes unverifiable because data collection on covert phenomena can be impossible Consistency with known and recognized social reality can be exceeded. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are provisionally verifiable, meaning they can be tested Consistency with existing data and facts can be checked Consistency with previously known social reality is intended
are “systematized formulation(s) that seek to reconcile the needs of a humanistic tradition (...) with the demands of a scientific tradition” ^[31]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human experience and subjective meanings are central, but their lack of connection with empirical data often complicates scientific approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They consider human experiences and subjective meanings, integrating these with empirical data and scientific methods.

The columns ‘Comparative Categories’ and ‘Sociological Theories’ are based on Francis Abraham^[31]. The column on conspiracy theories is based on Douglas and Sutton^[4].

Results

Following this comparison, we can outline key similarities and differences in an exemplary manner.

Differences

Firstly, *verifiability* can be cited as a central distinguishing characteristic. Due to the clandestine nature of the backgrounds in conspiracy theories, gathering data to verify the theory is considerably more challenging or sometimes impossible. In contrast, sociological theories generally find it easier (Depending on research interests) because methodological procedures are available to test and further develop theories, whereas conspiracy theories rely on whistleblowers, informants or leaks.

Furthermore, examining the *type of phenomena described* by each theory reveals significant differences. Conspiracy theories heavily focus on secretive and unethical actions, whereas sociological theories address a broader range of social phenomena.

Sociological theories tend to describe structural causes of phenomena rather than attributing significant *agency* to individuals or small groups.

It is also noteworthy that *conceptual and logical coherence* is limited in conspiracy theories when vague terms are used, whereas clear definition of terms and logical coherence are central characteristics of sociological theories.

Similarities

Commonalities between both types of theories primarily exist concerning social construction and influence, as both are *socially constructed* and have the *potential to influence society* and create new social realities. Both describe social phenomena as constructions and are thus classified as interpretative constructs rather than pure facts.

Furthermore, both types of theories can be in *opposition* to public explanations. Both to some extent question existing assumptions or power structures, with conspiracy theories explicitly being oppositional and sociological theories potentially being so, depending on the approach.

Although sociological methods offer greater assurance, both types of theories entail *epistemic risks*. Both may relate to complex and difficult-to-verify phenomena, and neither can directly mirror reality 1:1.

Another shared characteristic of both types of theories is their *provisionality* and potential for revision upon the emergence of new information or insights.

Discussion

Based on the categories of similarities and differences established in the comparison, the results are critically examined and contextualized. The discussion on this topic aims to encourage critical reflection on dealing with conspiracy theories and sociological theories, while also highlighting limitations in the findings.

Epistemic Criteria

A portion of the categories concerning similarities and differences

between theories pertains to epistemic criteria, which are standards for assessing the validity, reliability, and ultimately the credibility of knowledge described, in this case, by conspiracy theories or sociological theories. The relevant categories for the comparison can thus be interconnected: The epistemic risks of a theory can be reduced if it is verifiable, possesses conceptual and logical coherence, and acknowledges its provisionality.

Due to their often lacking verifiability, conspiracy theories are generally viewed with suspicion, whereas sociological theories, which also offer alternative perspectives on societal phenomena, are considered academically legitimate. However, even though sociological theories tend to meet epistemic criteria more readily, critical scrutiny remains essential. Conversely, conspiracy theories should not be hastily dismissed as paranoia, as exceptions exist in both cases.

Generally, sociological theories have the advantage of being more verifiable compared to conspiracy theories. If a theory is verifiable and withstands empirical scrutiny, it is often concluded to be 'true.' Here, "The Myth of True Theory" ^[31] can be cited to challenge this construct.

In the behavioral sciences, the quest for a true story could be a futile intellectual exercise; every theory holds some pieces to the picture puzzle of the social world. [...] No theory is absolutely true, for there is *no absolute truth in the first place* ^[31].

It is crucial to adopt a reflective approach when addressing the concept of truth, especially concerning the definition, evaluation, and limitations of specific theories. To counteract this circumstance effectively, both conspiracy theories and sociological theories should aim for transparency regarding their scope and depth through efforts towards inter subjective comprehensibility, demonstrating to what extent a theory attempts to neutrally depict social phenomena and events.

For illustrative purposes, cases can be described here that are often overlooked in the scholarly examination of conspiracy theories: conspiracy theories that have proven to be true and sociological theories that have been shown to be false or inadequate.

Several classic examples of conspiracy theories that posed epistemic risks at the time and were later confirmed as well-documented historical facts include the Operation Mockingbird from the 1950s. This covert CIA operation aimed to manipulate reporting on US foreign policy in favor of anti-communist propaganda ^[39]. Similarly, the secret CIA program MK Ultra, active between the 1950s and 1970s, examined consciousness-control techniques often involving the use of drugs ^[40]. The Watergate scandal is another example of a conspiracy now recognized, involving members of the Nixon administration in a break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters and subsequent cover-up ^[41]. Following World War II, Operation Paperclip brought many German scientists to the United States to work in the space program and military research ^[42]. More recent examples include the NSA scandal exposed by Edward Snowden, revealing extensive surveillance programs, the Cambridge Analytica data misuse for targeted political influence ^[43], or the confirmation of a far-reaching pedophile ring with connections to influential individuals ^[44].

The question of 'false' sociological theories is complex, as it depends on various factors for assessment. Nevertheless,

there are theories today that we would describe as 'false' or highly inadequate.

An example is the outdated theory of Social Darwinism, demonstrating that there are sociological theories that have proven pseudoscientific and ethically untenable over time. Without empirical evidence, Darwin's principles were applied to human society, implying a naturalness to social structures and legitimizing social inequalities ^[45]. Another example is the Marxist theory of revolution, which posited that the working class would lead a revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism and establish a classless society. This notion of an inevitable revolution has been refuted by history, as many capitalist societies have evolved through reforms and social change rather than being overthrown by revolution ^[46].

This highlights another issue with some classical sociological theories, suffering from a lack of connection between theory and empirical evidence and being more akin to philosophical elaborations ^[36]. For instance, parts of the class theory ^[31] or habitus theory ^[38] are based on speculation or unobservable traits, undermining the epistemic relevance of certain theories due to insufficient empirical evidence.

Other factors that can undermine the verifiability of sociological theories include replication problems ^[47], inadequate methodology, or political bias. Therefore, it is essential to remain critical and evaluate epistemic criteria for both types of theories.

Inherent Themes

Under this overarching category, central and fundamental themes within the described theories are bundled for critical examination. This involves not only investigating the typical nature of described phenomena but also central aspects of relevant comparative themes such as agency and opposition. Furthermore, the fundamental nature of theories as social constructs will be discussed.

While sociological theories tend to address a broad range of topics and conspiracy theories focus more on phenomena involving elements of malevolent behavior, it is important to raise awareness that there are exceptions. For instance, within the field of sociology, criminology examines societal conditions and consequences of criminal behavior. Within this subdiscipline, several sociological theories are utilized to comprehend malevolent and unethical behavior. According to the anomie theory, crime may increase when societal norms are weak or contradictory ^[48]. The theory of differential association describes the adoption of criminal values and techniques through social surroundings ^[49], while conflict theory attributes crime to social inequalities and power relations ^[31], to name a few examples.

In contrast to common portrayals, Dentith ^[5] suggests that conspiracy theories do not always concern the malevolent intentions of individual actors for personal gain. It is argued that there may be other reasons to keep certain activities secret, such as safeguarding privacy, political maneuvering, or preventing inappropriate behavior. Secret government meetings are cited as an example, initially concealing potential positive changes for residents to prevent premature expectations and inappropriate behavior ^[5]. These could include secret peace negotiations, humanitarian missions, or the protection of whistle-blowers. Even when positive intentions underlie a conspiracy, the moral question remains open.

It becomes evident that the described phenomena within theories can vary. Regarding agency, it has been asserted that sociological theories tend to understand phenomena as outcomes of social structures, whereas conspiracy theories often perceive individual actors and small groups as instigators.

To challenge this conclusion, methodological approaches of individualism and holism are considered for sociological theories. Structural theories align with holism, attributing individual actions to societal structures. The development of these structures follows its own laws and influences individuals from top-down perspectives, typical for theories such as structural functionalism. In contrast, action theories adhere to individualism, describing actions of individual actors and their intentions as bottom-up factors relevant to the formation of societal structures. Rational choice theory, for example, assumes that actors always seek to maximize their own interests. A balanced examination of these approaches would likely propose a middle ground, acknowledging the reciprocal interaction between individual actors and societal structures. The attribution of influence to political actions, societal structures, or individual actors heavily depends on the perspective [29].

Considering how the wealth gap widens and how much money individual actors accumulate due to capitalist financial flows, it should at least be considered that individual actors can influence societal structures [50]. Similarly, individual conspiracy theories consider larger societal structures influencing society, such as the theory of the Deep State. Here, an invisible and undemocratic power structure is suspected to influence political decisions in its own interest. The Deep State can be termed a systemic problem that extends beyond individual actors [51].

A central question posed concerning the development and dissemination of theories is that of social constructivism: How is social reality constructed through human interactions and interpretations? [52]. The complex dynamics involved are briefly outlined below.

Both sociological theories and conspiracy theories are social constructs that shape the perception and interpretation of the social world in specific ways. Both are interpretations and simplifications of complex social interactions and their effects. The extent of influence of respective theories depends, among other factors, on whether they are recognized as 'true' or credible by a larger number of actors. In social sciences, the agency of forecasts can be described on this topic. If forecasts are derived from sociological theories accessible to a larger number of actors, this can lead to self-perpetuating dynamics and unintended consequences. On the other hand, the relevance of sociological theories can greatly diminish when theoretical directions become self-contained, focusing solely on insider discussions of detailed issues. Similarly, there is a challenge when sociological theories provide descriptions without explanations. Such theories quickly lose relevance in the public sphere, as deriving actionable implications from them is difficult [36].

Overall, whether a theory has influence depends on how many actors reconstrue it as credible. If enough actors are convinced of its credibility, conspiracy theories can have greater influence than sociological theories, as seen, for instance, in the Capitol Hill riot [53].

It is important to differentiate the shared aspect that both conspiracy theories and sociological theories can address oppositional content. The question to consider here could

be: How do the impacts of conspiracy theories, which fuel mistrust in governmental institutions, differ from sociological theories that uncover social injustices and power structures?

To exemplify, critical theories in sociology can be utilized. The examination of power structures and social injustice are central research subjects. A close connection to the construct of opposition exists, as uncovering dominant ideologies or cultural hegemony aims for social change or empowerment of marginalized groups. Contemporary derivatives of this stance are reflected, for example, in feminist theory, postcolonial theory, or conflict theory [54]. The inclusion of ideology and description of circumstances as they should be morally and ethically, as opposed to the neutrality in science, may lead [35].

Thus, both types of theories can lead to critical questioning or even mistrust in governmental institutions, with sociological theories, including critical theory, addressing specific power structures to promote a nuanced understanding and targeted political measures. Conspiracy theories can generate a broader and diffuse mistrust due to their often-limited verifiability through specific data.

In summary, the term 'conspiracy theory' should be scrutinized as such. Once proven, a conspiracy theory can be referred to as a theory. Until this point, strictly speaking, it remains a conspiracy hypothesis. To mark narratives as not yet proven, it is advisable to strictly distinguish between theory and hypothesis.

Conspiracy theories, conspiracy hypotheses, sociological theories, sociological hypotheses-all challenge prevailing assumptions and contribute to a critical engagement with society, stimulating potential social changes. All can be 'true' or 'false'.

Conclusion and Outlook

This paper has explored the central differences and similarities between conspiracy theories and sociological theories. Through clear definitions and the derivation of typical characteristics of both types of theories, epistemic criteria and inherent themes were analyzed and compared.

A central distinguishing feature is verifiability, which proves initially challenging for many conspiracy theories when necessary falsification information remains hidden. This can lead to a lack of logical coherence when complex phenomena are attributed to a few actors wielding substantial agency.

Nevertheless, both types of theories also share significant commonalities. They are social constructs that influence societal perceptions and actions. Both can challenge established viewpoints and entail epistemic risks. Furthermore, both are provisional, continuously challenged and developed by new insights and perspectives.

The discussion of differences and similarities between conspiracy theories and sociological theories demonstrates the need for a nuanced examination of both. While typical characteristics have been elucidated, it is evident that certain theories defy categorization. Both types encompass highly heterogeneous phenomena and backgrounds, necessitating individual scrutiny of each theory. Rather than uncritically accepting sociological theories or dismissively stigmatizing conspiracy theories as mere paranoia, they should be rigorously evaluated for their epistemic and methodological merits. Such a nuanced approach is essential for recognizing

legitimate critiques of social phenomena and promoting informed scientific analyses and debates.

Consequently, scholarly engagement with conspiracy theories demands a thorough exploration of each theory and its underpinnings. Additionally, distinguishing between conspiracy theories and hypotheses is helpful in accurately assessing the level of empirical support for each theory.

Future research in this field could extensively examine how 'knowledge', credibility, and trust are established for conspiracy hypotheses where verification is impossible due to individual circumstances. This trust in the credibility of information could serve as a central factor in the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

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