SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

http://social-epistemology.com
ISSN: 2471-9560

Why a Pejorative Definition of "Conspiracy Theory" Need Not Be Unfair

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Räikkä, Juha. "Why a Pejorative Definition of 'Conspiracy Theory' Need Not Be Unfair." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (5): 63–71. https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7Pf.

SERRC
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12 (5): 63–71. 2023.
https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7Pf

Abstract

Because of the pejorative connotation of the concept of "conspiracy theory", many philosophers have proposed that the concept should be redefined. Their worry is that if conspiracy theories are considered implausible by definition, then the theories cannot get fair treatment and will be rejected for just being conspiracy theories. In this paper, I argue that this worry is unfounded. Accepting a pejorative definition of the term "conspiracy theory" allows for individual conspiracy theories to be investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices. However, not all conspiracy theories deserve further investigations. For example, it would be irrational, unethical, and unrewarding to study the alleged conspiracy of space lizards.

In ordinary language, words may have many different meanings, but there is little doubt that the term "conspiracy theory" usually has a pejorative meaning, suggesting that conspiracy theories are implausible (Napolitano and Reuter 2021; Douglas, van Proojien and Sutton 2022; Hill 2022). Because of this pejorative connotation, many philosophers have proposed that the concept of "conspiracy theory" should be redefined. Their worry is that if conspiracy theories are considered implausible by definition, then they cannot get fair treatment and will be rejected for just being conspiracy theories. Their defenders are considered irrational. In this paper, I aim to show that this worry is unfounded. Accepting a reasonable definition that appropriately reflects pejorative connotations of spoken (ordinary) language does not mean that individual conspiracy theories could not be investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices.

The Worry about Underrating

Philosophical debate on conspiracy theories has focused on four main questions:

> (1) The conceptual question of the appropriate definition of the term "conspiracy theory";
>
> (2) The epistemic question regarding the rationality and justification of conspiratorial beliefs;
>
> (3) The moral question of the ethical status of conspiracy theorizing, and;
>
> (4) The practical question of how decision-makers should deal with conspiracy theories (Räikkä and Ritola 2020, 56).

The debate on the pejorative definition of the term "conspiracy theory" has focused on both the conceptual and epistemic questions. However, the debate also has an ethical dimension, as we will see.

Consider an example of a definition of "conspiracy theory" that (rather accurately) reflects ordinary language. The definition is based on three criteria. According to this definition, a "conspiracy theory" is an explanation of an event or phenomenon that

> (a) Refers to an actual or alleged conspiracy;
>
> (b) Conflicts with the generally accepted explanation of the event (if there is one), providing an alternative to the "official" expert view (which can be a view that the issue is open), and;
>
> (c) Offers insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation, and is not considered an interesting competing theory (Ichino and Räikkä 2021).

In ordinary language, the claim that the first Moon landing was faked is called a "conspiracy theory." According to the (explicitly pejorative) definition above, this is correct.[1] The theory (a) refers to a conspiracy, (b) conflicts with the official view of epistemic authorities, such as researchers, and (c) is poorly supported by evidence (according to the relevant epistemic authorities).

Critics of the pejorative definitions of "conspiracy theory" often argue that the rationality and acceptability of conspiracy theories should not be assessed without considering the details of particular conspiracy theories and that pejorative definitions (according to which conspiracy theories are unlikely) lead to such general assessment (Buenting and Taylor 2010, 568-569; Dentith 2016, 581; Clarke 2023). The worry is that pejorative definitions encourage an inappropriate rejection of conspiracy theories. In other words, the whole class of ideas considered "conspiracy theories" is likely to be regarded as unwarranted if a pejorative definition is adopted.[2]

The defenders of the theories are considered irrational or even "pathological". Many critics prefer a non-pejorative minimalist definition, where "conspiracy theory" refers simply to theories about conspiracies: conspiracy theories should not be distinguished from ordinary historical explanations that refer to real conspiracies (Pigden 2007, 221; Dentith 2016, 581, 587; Duetz 2022, 1; Clarke 2023).[3] In the critics' view, this is the way to guarantee that

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[1] Although the pejorative element of the pejorative definition is primarily a matter of implausibility, it is useful to notice that sometimes the negative attributes go beyond implausibility and include terms such as "crazy" or "wild".

[2] Dentith (2016, 581) writes: "Restricting the definition of what counts as a conspiracy theory ends up making conspiracy theories relatively unlikely, because the interesting cases of warranted conspiracy theories get defined away as not being *proper* conspiracy theories. However, if we keep to the general definition, then we can analyse conspiracy theories with respect to the evidence which either warrants or does not warrant them, rather than dismissing conspiracy theories out of hand for just being conspiracy theories". According to Dentith, accepting a pejorative common sense definition of the term "conspiracy theory" does not allow for individual conspiracy theories to be investigated properly.

[3] Notice that a person who opposes pejorative definitions need not support a minimalist definition. There are definitions that are non-pejorative *and* non-minimalist. For instance, one might say that conspiracy theories are explanations that refer to a conspiracy and conflict with official accounts. But such definition is problematic:

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people would not rule out a conspiracy theory simply because it is a conspiracy theory. Rather, each conspiracy theory would be evaluated on its own merits (cf. Hagen 2022, 30, 233).

A Partial Analogy between Conspiracy Theories and Implausible Hypotheses in the Sciences

I do not share the critics' worry. I do not think that a pejorative definition of "conspiracy theory" must have dramatic or undesirable consequences. At the risk of being boring, I will simply list the reasons why a pejorative definition of the concept of conspiracy theory need not be problematic. I communicate my point by referring to academic research, but I do not mean to imply that, in general, investigations that aim to reveal conspiracies specifically follow the standards of academic research.

Section 1

In the sciences (e.g., in biology), some hypotheses are considered clearly implausible. A hypothesis that falls into this class has been evaluated, and it is usually found that it conflicts with the established facts. Thus, it is found implausible. Similarly, some claims about conspiracies are considered implausible. A claim about a conspiracy that ends up in this class is evaluated, at least to some degree, and typically relevant experts more or less unanimously conclude that the claim is unlikely in light of the facts that are presently known.[4]

Other people (who do not have the relevant data) then make use of the evaluation or evaluate the claim themselves and recognize that it conflicts with common knowledge (produced by experts). Such claims that (a) refer to a conspiracy, (b) conflict with the best available knowledge, and (c) are poorly supported by the evidence are then called "conspiracy theories." Indeed, people shun conspiracy theories simply because they are conspiracy theories, but this is unproblematic, as it indicates that the relevant experts (e.g., investigative journalists, various state authorities and agencies, the scientific community, and professional historians) consider the merits of the theories poor. It is acceptable to shun a claim that is implausible in light of the best available knowledge.[5]

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the claim that Pharaoh Tutankhamun was murdered by conspirators refers to a conspiracy and conflicts with the official account, but it is not considered a conspiracy theory but a competing theory (as there are some relatively good reasons to think that he was indeed murdered).

[4] As Neil Levy (2007, 181–182) points out: "The typical explanation of an event or process which attracts the label 'conspiracy theory' is an explanation that conflicts with the account advanced by the relevant epistemic authorities. […] [B]oth for the layperson and for the intellectual, it is almost never rational to accept such a conspiracy theory." […] "[E]pistemic authorities, when properly constituted, are far better positioned to explain event than are isolated agents." See also Levy (2019). For a discussion, see Hagen 2022, section 2.8.

[5] Yes, experts can be wrong, and productive change sometimes comes from the margins, not from the established experts. Cf. Uscinski and Enders 2022, 7.

Section 2

When a scientist (e.g., a geneticist) formulates a hypothesis that clearly conflicts with the present established knowledge, the hypothesis is unlikely to be validated. However, this does not imply that the hypothesis should not be considered in any circumstances. In some cases, there may be observations that encourage the study of the hypothesis despite its implausibility. Further, the importance of the topic may justify the study of a clearly implausible hypothesis. Great achievements in science have often resulted from brave research based on implausible hypotheses that are later found to be warranted (to everyone's surprise). The same is true of clearly implausible claims that concern conspiracies. The fact that they are known to be merely conspiracy theories does not justify the conclusion that they need not be studied in any circumstances. The implausibility of a conspiracy claim does not mean that it must be unjustified, and in certain circumstances the claim may deserve further investigation.[6]

Section 3

When a professional researcher (say, an archeologist) decides to start investigations on the basis of a hypothesis that is known to be unlikely, she studies the hypothesis carefully and in accordance with good research practice. Obviously, the fact that the hypothesis is understood to be implausible does not influence a professional's research practices and procedures. So, when a professional researcher starts to study an implausible hypothesis (because there are some legitimate reasons to do so), she does not think, "let's approach the study negligently, as the hypothesis is implausible." The same is true of unlikely claims that concern conspiracies. If there really is a serious reason to start further investigations of a particular conspiracy claim that is known to conflict with established knowledge on the issue, then the investigations should be made carefully and fairly. Recognizing that conspiracy theories are (by definition) implausible does not influence their acceptance or rejection if the investigators act professionally.

Of course, both plausible and implausible hypotheses are sometimes investigated unprofessionally. This problem concerns all research, in academia and elsewhere. The problem does not concern study of (implausible) conspiracy claims in particular.

Section 4

In the sciences (say, in biochemistry), only a small portion of implausible hypotheses are considered to deserve further investigation. People understand that it is not reasonable to study *all* implausible hypotheses—the list is endless. Research projects tend to be expensive, and resources are scarce. Further, the credit that a researcher gets from showing that an implausible hypothesis was really unwarranted (as people supposed in advance) is not

[6] Someone could say that people "use power" when they identify something as a "conspiracy theory". This kind of "power" is similar to that of the "power" of the scientific community (which can put aside clearly implausible ideas).

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particularly remarkable. Thus, the motivation to start to study a "brave" hypothesis that looks clearly mistaken is low, unless there are convincing reasons to start such investigations (and take a risk).

Usually, implausible hypotheses are not rejected (i.e., found unwarranted) *after studies*, as there are excellent epistemic, moral, and psychological reasons *not to study them in the first place*. The same is true of implausible conspiracy claims. It is not the case that they all deserve further investigations; on the contrary, only a small portion of conspiracy theories deserve further scrutiny.[7] For example, it would be irrational, unethical, and unrewarding to study the alleged conspiracy of space lizards. It is unproblematic that people are not eager to start further investigations about such claims (see, however, Dentith 2022, 243).

No doubt, some implausible hypotheses are probably left aside, although they should have been investigated properly (in order to see whether they are warranted or unwarranted). But, again, this problem concerns research in general, not only research of unlikely conspiracy claims.

Section 5

When academic researchers (e.g., historians) study implausible hypotheses, they estimate them one by one, unless the hypotheses happen to be closely linked. It would be unreasonable to study implausible hypotheses as a group; obviously, each of them should be evaluated on its own merits. The same is true of implausible conspiracy claims. It would be strange to think that conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering their individual details (Dentith 2016, 581; Dentith 2019, 2244; Hagen 2022, 39, 233).

When relevant experts have more or less unanimously determined that a particular conspiracy claim conflicts with established facts, the claim is certainly implausible, but if there are serious reasons to investigate the claim despite its implausibility, then it should be estimated on its own merits. Implausible conspiracy claims should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis—that is, if the circumstances are so special that the unlikely claims should be subject to (expensive and time-consuming) investigations in the first place. A conspiracy theory cannot be presupposed to be unwarranted (let alone false) *before* any investigation, however implausible it may be (Hagen 2022, 30). Accepting this idea is compatible with endorsing a pejorative definition of the notion of a conspiracy theory.[8]

[7] So, there are two forms of "rejecting" an implausible conspiracy hypothesis: (1) the claim can be left outside of further investigations, when it has been noticed that the claim conflicts with established facts, or (2) the claim can be found *unwarranted* after the further investigations. (An example of the latter is the claim that biological warfare expert David Kelly was murdered in 2003.)

[8] Clarke (2023) adopts a non-pejorative view that a conspiracy theory is any explanation of an event which cites a conspiracy as its salient cause. He notices that "[t]his definition departs from ordinary use", as the "ordinary usage is pejorative". In Clarke's view, a pejorative definition leads us to think that if something is a conspiracy theory, then "it is unwarranted and should be dismissed out of hand". For this reason, Clarke claims, "any credible definition of conspiracy theory needs to be non-pejorative". I do not share Clarke's view: accepting a

Section 6

If a scientist (say, a medical scientist) says that "we should try to examine this problem," she does not mean that all people should try to solve the problem—and not even that all medical scientists should try to solve it. What she means is that a group of relevant experts should start investigations on the topic. Similarly, the requirement that "we" should analyze conspiracy theories should not be understood as a demand that *all* people should start their own investigations concerning the technical details of, for example, Princess Diana's death. If a theory (for some reason) deserves further investigation, then there are experts who can investigate it. Lay persons are largely dependent on the experts' judgment (Hardwick 1985; Levy 2007; Guerrero 2016).

Certainly, when it comes to the study of socially and politically important issues, public discussion may play some role, as it can force the experts to clarify and further explain the information they have. However, this does not mean that it would be wise if "we" start our own investigations, alone or with our friends. The critics of the pejorative definition sometimes say that "we" or "people" or "individuals" should investigate conspiracy theories because we do not know who the experts are and whether we can trust them (cf. Hagen 2022, 54).[9] But this claim sounds unlikely. Usually, it is relatively easy to identify relevant epistemic authorities, and it is reasonable to trust them when they (more or less unanimously) say that climate change is a fact, that the Moon landing was not faked, that there are no space lizards, that Elvis Presley is dead, that Obama's actual birthplace was not Kenya, that vaccines do not contain microchips, that 2020 election was not stolen, and so on. Experts can disagree and they can be wrong, but this does not imply that we should give up the presumption of trustworthiness when a consensus is clear enough.

The Lesson

I have argued that accepting a pejorative definition of the term "conspiracy theory" is not unfair. A pejorative definition allows for individual conspiracy theories to be investigated properly and in accordance with good research practices. It is an empirical question how often this happens in real life: both plausible and implausible hypotheses are sometimes investigated unprofessionally, in academia and elsewhere. It is also an empirical question how often implausible hypotheses are left unstudied even when there are good reasons to study them, despite their implausibility. Perhaps this is relatively common. Perhaps conspiracy claims that should be investigated do not always actually get investigated.

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reasonable definition that appropriately reflects pejorative connotations of ordinary language does not mean that individual conspiracy theories could not be investigated properly.

[9] Coady (2007, 200) writes that the official views of the epistemic authorities are accounts that are "propagated by an institution which has power to influence what is widely believed at a particular time and place". Hagen (2022, 55) argues that "quite often who counts as epistemic authorities is contested, as is the neutrality of 'epistemic authorities' favoring official stories".

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Probably, the number of investigations that concern implausible conspiracy hypotheses would increase if investigative journalists and authorities who try to reveal conspiracies started to *think* that implausible conspiracy claims are plausible (although they conflict with established facts). However, it is unclear why and how philosophers' new definition of "conspiracy theory" would cause such a change. Why would people accept a new and misleading definition? Furthermore, it is unclear whether such a change would be desirable. Surely it is important that investigators do not suspect public knowledge – although their trust in shared knowledge will discourage the study of implausible conspiracy claims.[10]

It is not a good idea to blur the distinction between conspiracy theories and explanations that refer to real conspiracies, such as the one that led to the assassination of Julius Caesar. Explanations of the latter type are certainly not "conspiracy theories" but rather ordinary historical explanations. When we ponder what kinds of effects conspiracy theories have on democracy or how we should deal with the increasing conspiratorial thinking on social media, we are not thinking of the usual justified historical explanations and the "official" views of the relevant epistemic authorities. It is important that we rely on a pejorative meaning of "conspiracy theory" in our discussions and *do not change the subject*. We need to describe conspiracy theories accurately so that the concept reflects ordinary usage. Conspiracies happen, and it is (usually) important to try to prevent and reveal them. Investigative journalists who follow early rumors of possible conspiracies and authorities who fight against corruption and deception are not conspiracy theorists. They are the actors who usually reveal conspiracies. It would be counterproductive and unethical to stigmatize them and call them "conspiracy theorists," although the non-pejorative minimalist definition (that "conspiracy theory" refers simply to theories about conspiracies) encourages researchers to do so (see e.g. Duetz 2022; Clarke 2023).

Conspiracy theories offer insufficient evidence in support of their allegations. Still, there is always a chance that further evidence will be found in support of some unlikely conspiracy claim and that the claim could turn out to be less implausible. The general observation regarding the implausibility of conspiracy theories does not mean that one could safely conclude that a particular theory will *always* be implausible. At least in principle, a theory may cease to be a conspiracy theory and prove to be an interesting alternative to present knowledge. While this kind of evolution is rare (if it ever happens), it would be inaccurate to suggest that it cannot happen.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Johanna Kaakinen, Jan-Willem van Proojien, and other participants of the "FINSCI" symposium on conspiracy theory research (Helsinki, November 2022) for their helpful comments. I am also thankful to Susanne Uusitalo and Jukka Varelius who both

[10] It can be argued that, although a pejorative definition does not literally prevent proper investigations, it *discourages* the study of implausible conspiracy claims (cf. Husting and Orr 2007). However, this is a welcome result, as scarce resources should be used carefully and ethically.

read the paper. I introduced a version of this paper in Tiberias, Israel, in March 2023. I am grateful to Saul Smilansky for his instructive comments. I would also like to thank the participants of the History of Science and Knowledge Seminar for the clarifying discussions in March 2023 at the University of Turku, Finland. I presented the paper in Gargnano del Garda (Italy, May 2023). I would like to thank the audience, especially Clotilde Calabi, Melina Tsapos, M Dentith, Judit Szalai, Eric Devall, Keith Harris, Carolina Flores, Anna Ichino, and Paul Noordhof, for excellent remarks.

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