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Three Ways to Define Conspiracy Theories: A Response to Räikkä on Pejorative Definitions, Part I

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This is the first in a series of three essays in which I address the following issues:

- (1) The pros and cons of the so-called “minimalist” definition of conspiracy theories, compared to more complicated alternatives.
- (2) Whether taking implausible conspiracy theories seriously is somehow contemptable.
- (3) Whether an apparent consensus among ostensible epistemic authorities is a good proxy for truth or warrant.

I frame these discussions as responses to a recent article published on *SERRC* by the philosopher Juha Räikkä (2023), who explicitly defends defining “conspiracy theory” pejoratively. In this essay, I address Räikkä’s critique of non-pejorative definitions of conspiracy theories, and I call into question the validity of research predicated on a pejorative definition.

In the second essay, I challenge Räikkä’s defense of pejorative definitions, his characterization of a prominent worry about pejorative definitions, and the aptness of his analogy involving implausible scientific hypotheses upon which his defense of a pejorative definition is based.¹ And in the third essay, I question the epistemic value of an apparent consensus of epistemic authorities, a consideration that is important to Räikkä’s analysis.² Taken together, these considerations militate against defining conspiracy theories pejoratively.

Minimalist, Descriptive, and Pejorative Definitions

Many scholars have treated conspiracy theories as inherently problematic beliefs, often with the implication, whether explicit or implicit, that such beliefs should be dismissed or avoided.³ Other scholars, primarily philosophers of a particularist bent (including myself),

¹ See Hagen, “Implausible Conspiracy Theories,” hereafter referred to as “Part II.” That essay addresses Räikkä’s arguments supporting the notion that pejorative definitions are not unfair to conspiracy theories, since they don’t prevent fair investigation of such theories in accordance with good research practices. I maintain that Räikkä’s arguments rest on implicit equivocations, and that his analogy with implausible scientific theories is inapt.

² See Hagen, “Conspiracy Theories and Relevant Epistemic Authorities,” hereafter referred to as “Part III.” That essay outlines several layers of concern regarding the reliability of expert opinion: Are the ostensible experts truly experts? Are they biased? Are they fully honest? Are there other experts that are being ignored or discounted? The unfortunate reality is that conflicts of interests, structural biases, and institutional incentives and disincentives (both formal and informal) can severely undermine the value of the opinions of the (ostensible) relevant epistemic authorities. Importantly, the *degree* to which this is a problem is both difficult to judge and can vary from case to case.

³ Examples include Daniel Pipes (1997), Robert Brotherton (2013), and M. Giulia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter (2021).

have argued against pejorative and pathologizing understandings of conspiracy theories.⁴ There seem to be three types of definitions relevant to this debate:

Minimalist: A simple and broad definition according to which conspiracy theories are defined as *theories that posit conspiracies as a salient cause of some event or phenomenon*.

Descriptive: More narrowly qualified but purely descriptive definitions.

Pejorative: These typically resemble descriptive definitions but with an explicitly pejorative component.

In this essay I compare these types of definitions, focusing on a tension between two issues: (1) the degree to which a proposed definition has the “proper” extension, that is, whether it captures the “right” cases. And (2), the degree to which it can be objectively operationalized.

Specifically, the minimalist definition of conspiracy theories seems least problematic to operationalize,⁵ but its extension is the farthest from what is commonly thought to be ordinary usage. Descriptive definitions and pejorative definitions both can be made to better capture the “right” cases, but they are not as easy to operationalize. I suggest that this difficulty can be overcome in the case of descriptive definitions, but not in the case of pejorative ones. Thus, I favor descriptive definitions, provided that an adequately operationalizable definition of this kind can be developed and widely agreed upon.

Räikkä’s critique of the non-pejorative minimalist definition focuses on its *minimalist* aspect not on its *non-pejorative* aspect. Räikkä maintains the “non-pejorative minimalist definition” doesn’t work as a definition, at least not for the concept that most people using the phrase intend to refer to, since it “change[s] the subject” (Räikkä 2023, 69).⁶ I tend to agree. Räikkä does admit that non-pejorative definitions need not be minimalist. However, his limited critique of a non-minimalist non-pejorative definition (what I call a “descriptive” definition) does not imply that an adequate definition of this kind is unobtainable.

Below, I argue in favor of the development of a descriptive definition, but I also acknowledge that, while the common critique of the minimalist position has merit, the

⁴ Particularist philosophers argue that each conspiracy theory ought to be judged on its own particular merits. Particularist philosophers who have criticized pejorative definitions include Charles Pigden (2006), David Coady (2018a), M Dentith (2022), and myself (Hagen 2022, 19–22; 44–47). Keith Harris, who is critical of particularism, has also criticized pejorative definitions (2022, 4–6). In addition, much of the book *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously* (Dentith 2018a) addresses the topic of whether conspiracy theories are inherently pathological. The relevant chapters include Basham and Dentith (2018), Basham (2018), Husting (2018), Hagen (2018a, 136–137), and Orr and Dentith (2018).

⁵ Elsewhere I’ve called this “the constituent parts definition.” See Hagen (2022, 16–19), for my earlier critique of this type of definition.

⁶ Many others have made this last point as well: Cassam (2019, 2–6), Stokes (2016, 35), Dieguez et al. (2016, 22), Napolitano (2021, 95–96). See also Napolitano and Reuter (2021, 22) and Hagen (2022, 16–19). Hereafter I will refer to Räikkä’s article with just the page numbers, without repeating “Räikkä 2023.”

minimalist position does have one very significant advantage, at least for the possibility of scientifically valid investigation of conspiracy beliefs and of conspiracy theorists. Namely, its inclusion and exclusion criteria are relatively clear. Pejorative definitions, in contrast, leave it debatable whether an alleged “conspiracy theory” really ought to count as a “conspiracy theory.” If it is unclear which theories count, how is one supposed to do objective research on people who believe those theories?

Räikkä’s Critique of Non-Pejorative Definitions

Räikkä defines “conspiracy theory” as an explanation that has the following features.

Criterion 1: “Refers to an actual or alleged conspiracy.”

Criterion 2: Conflicts with an official or generally accepted account.⁷

Criterion 3: “Offers insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation, and is not considered an interesting competing theory.”⁸

Criterion 1, by itself, is essentially the minimalist definition. Criteria 1 and 2, together, would count as a relatively simple (and perhaps not quite adequate) descriptive definition. Keith Harris seems to favor a definition with two components resembling these; he calls such definitions “counter-authority definitions” (2022, 6–9). Adding Criterion 3 makes the definition pejorative. In my view, it would be best to drop Criterion 3 but retain something like Criterion 2, adding perhaps a couple additional criteria to fine tune it. More on that later.

Räikkä contrasts his pejorative definition with the minimalist definition, which is favored by some scholars who oppose pejorative definitions. He finds that alternative faulty, mostly for including theories that don’t belong. He writes, “It is important that we rely on a pejorative meaning of ‘conspiracy theory’ in our discussions and *do not change the subject*” (69; emphasis in original). He is suggesting that scholars who defend “the non-pejorative minimalist definition (that ‘conspiracy theory’ refers simply to theories about conspiracies)” (69) thereby change the subject by substantially broadening its scope. This makes it (too) easy to infer that the category as a whole is unproblematic. However, according to this line of critique, this is accomplished by diluting the category, pouring in unproblematic cases that are not ordinarily thought of as part of the category. But this creates a significantly different

⁷ Räikkä puts this criterion this way: “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)” (64). In another formulation, he writes, “[It] conflicts with the official view of epistemic authorities, such as researchers” (64).

⁸ An alternative formulation of Criterion 3 suggests that the theory “is poorly supported by evidence (according to the relevant epistemic authorities)” (64). It seems that the ostensible opinion of the so-called “relevant epistemic authorities” is doing a lot of the work. For it seems that by “insufficient evidence in support of the alternative explanation” Räikkä means insufficient *to persuade these experts*, and that it is “not considered an interesting competing theory” *to them*. (See Part III of this series for a discussion of “relevant epistemic authorities.”) Räikkä often uses the word “implausible,” seemingly as shorthand for the inadequacy pointed to in Criterion 3. (See Part II of this series for a relevant discussion of implausibility.)

category. A defense of this larger category, which includes some official stories as well as petty crimes and surprise parties, is not a legitimate defense of the smaller one. Patrick Stokes (2016) puts the critique this way:

[A] standard move in the epistemological literature on conspiracy theory [is to] define “conspiracy” in a very formal and minimal way, and then show how there is nothing intrinsically irrational, or even unreasonable, about explanations of that form. Conspiratorial activity is at least sometimes, perhaps even often, the best available explanation to infer to. Indeed, once we’ve taken that definition on board, as several writers in this area have noted, it turns out we’re *all* conspiracy theorists: we all believe that conspiracies are the best explanation of many historical events, from the murder of Julius Caesar to Stalin’s show trials to Watergate (35).

I agree that the minimalist definition substantially changes the subject from what is commonly meant by the term. However, it should be noted that the scholars who support this type of definition do point to examples that have been dismissively called “conspiracy theories” (e.g., Pigden 2006, 62–166 citing Coady 2003, 199) and to true theories that were treated dismissively.⁹ So, they don’t base their argument on clearly out-of-category cases, at least not entirely, and they do discuss sub-types of conspiracy theories that have seemingly problematic features (e.g., Dentith 2022). In addition, there are recent examples of (seemingly plausible) theories that were dismissively called “conspiracy theories,” such as the lab leak hypothesis regarding the origin of SARS-CoV-2, which could be cited.¹⁰ There are also additional historical cases that could be cited in this context. These include suspicions of vast government surveillance, which was confirmed by Edward Snowden (Hagen 2022, 96–98), and suspicions of covert efforts by the FBI to undermine peace activists and civil rights activists, which was uncovered by the conspiracy theorists who exposed COINTELPRO (Hagen 2022, 103–104; Coady 2018b, 297–298; Medsger 2014).

⁹ Watergate is probably the most often cited example of a conspiracy theory that turned out to be true. Steve Clarke, for example, writes, “the Watergate conspiracy has gained acceptance as a successful conspiracy theory” (2002, 136). While some scholars do not treat Watergate as a *genuine* conspiracy theory (see e.g., Thalmann 2019, 156–158), it was a theory that started out speculative (as is typical of theories in early stages) and had most other descriptive elements required to typically count as a “conspiracy theory.” If those circumstances were to repeat today, there would probably be some effort to dismiss the theory as a “conspiracy theory.” One purported difference is that it was investigated by legitimate journalists. But theories investigated by journalists are sometimes still treated as conspiracy theories. The reporting of Gary Webb regarding CIA-assisted cocaine importation is an example. As another example, Lee Basham cites the cover-up of the dangers of the radioactive fallout associated with early nuclear bomb testing (2018, 280). And M Dentith discusses the Dewey Commission’s conspiratorial account of the Moscow show trials, which was dismissed by authorities. According to Dentith, “At the time, the Dewey Commission’s claims were not just pooh-poohed by the USSR but also by the governments of the USA and the UK” (2015, 38).

¹⁰ As another example, Rico Hauswald points to the case of Johnson & Johnson’s baby powder product containing asbestos. Rumors of this preceded court cases that confirmed it. Hauswald points out that, “As late as 2018, Johnson & Johnson referred to such allegations as ‘an absurd conspiracy theory’” (Hauswald 2023, 502).

Although the minimalist definition of “conspiracy theories” doesn’t *specifically* target the cases that people who use this term are talking about, if some scholars nevertheless want to research and discuss this larger category, it is certainly legitimate for them to do so (though I’m not sure why this category is particularly interesting). In any case, this category *should not be confused* with the one to which most people using the term intend to refer. Perhaps a different label should be used for the category of explanations involving conspiracies, such as “conspiratorial accounts.”¹¹ That being said, there are some significant concessions to the minimalist account that should be made, which will be covered in the following section.

The main point of the current section is that pejorative definitions are properly contrasted with non-pejorative ones, not specifically with the *minimalist* non-pejorative one. If a non-pejorative definition has the proper extension, capturing the right cases, then the above objection will not apply. It would be unreasonable to expect this to work perfectly since people differ in their usage and conceptions, and some vague perception of family-resemblance is likely playing a role. Nevertheless, an adequate¹² descriptive definition may be achievable. My own strategy has been to use qualifying characteristics that relate to common criticisms of conspiracy theories. For example, I agree with the suggestion of David Coady (2003), which has been accepted by some other scholars, that conspiracy theories contrast with official accounts (see Hagen 2022, 24–27).

Räikkä also seems to accept this descriptive feature as part of his definition (it is Criterion 2, above). One reason to include this is that a common criticism of conspiracy theories rests on the assumption that it conflicts with the consensus of the (ostensible) relevant epistemic authorities, which are assumed to support the official account. One can add this to the definition without the definition being pejorative because it remains possible that the (ostensible) relevant experts are not the only relevant experts, that the privileged experts are biased by incentives or ideology, and/or that they are dishonest. (I discuss these considerations in Part III of this series).

¹¹ A similar labeling problem arises for those interested in studying irrational belief in absurd theories. For example, Napolitano and Reuter write, “the complete elimination of the evaluative *conspiracy theory* would interfere with the progress of outlining and understanding a phenomenon which has attracted the interest of many scholars and institutions” namely, the “phenomenon of irrational belief in certain absurd theories” (Napolitano and Reuter 2021, 22). But not all so-called conspiracy theories are irrational and absurd. So, they too have changed the subject. While the phrase “conspiracy theory” is often *used* by the speaker to imply absurdity, the theories that are commonly classified as conspiracy theories include theories that are not absurd, or at least whose absurdity is forcefully contested. If scholars want to study absurd theories in particular, they may certainly do so. But they should not attach a label that is already in use for a different concept. They would, of course, also need to be very clear about how they determine which theories are absurd or irrational. This may not be as easy as it may seem. Perhaps they could focus on the most outlandish cases. But, if they do, they shouldn’t imply that such research tells us something about less outlandish cases.

¹² One may reasonably ask, “Adequate for what purpose?” Perhaps such a definition may be adequate for use in dictionaries, and for contributing some clarity. However, it may also, even at the same time, turn out that there is no way to define this term that is adequate for the purposes of doing objective scientific research on conspiracy theories and on the people who believe them. For more on this point, see the section, “Concessions to the Minimalist Definition,” below.

Räikkä suggests that merely adding “conflicts with official accounts” to the minimalist definition would be inadequate, providing a counterexample: “[T]he 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)” (65, n3). However, it is not clear that this is a good example of conflicting with an official account. An official account is not merely the generally favored theory among other “respectable” theories. It contrasts with “conspiracy theories” which are *treated* dismissively by prominent ostensible authorities (whether they truly deserve to be or not). Perhaps the phrase “official story” would make this clearer.¹³

Further, defenders of any particular conspiracy theory will likely argue that “there are some relatively good reasons to think” that it is indeed true. The fact that some such theories are regarded as conspiracy theories and others are not must involve something other than their being “some relatively good reasons to think” that the theory is true. Perhaps it is that the “right people” must acknowledge the alternative theory is a reasonable contender. That might be due to the *degree* to which the evidence for it is good, or it might be for other reasons. In any case, most such counterexamples might be addressed by adding further descriptive qualifiers to the definition. My own characterization of conspiracy theories included the notion that they are “appalling to a significant segment of the most relevant population” and/or “typically imply scandalous conduct on the part of Western governments or elites (perhaps extending to democratic allies such as Japan and South Korea)” (Hagen 2022, p. 16). This is a variation on Charles Pigden’s suggestion that conspiracy theories are “morally suspect, at least to some people” (Pigden 2006, 157).

I don’t insist on any of these specifics for my present purposes. The point is that a purely descriptive definition can probably be made to better capture the cases that are commonly thought to count as conspiracy theories, with fewer glaring false positives than the minimalist definition. However, introducing an evaluation of the plausibility of the theories into the definition makes it harder to determine which theories genuinely qualify. This tends both to hinder discussion and to render the validity of research on conspiracy theories dubious. And, if the degree of implausibility required is left ambiguous, it invites unfairly stigmatizing equivocations (as discussed in Part II of this series).

It seems plausible that some reasonable qualifying terms would adequately capture the “right” cases.¹⁴ And perhaps some slippage is tolerable. Alternatively, perhaps it is impossible

¹³ See Hayward 2023 and Mittendorf 2023 for discussions of “official stories.” Also, Part III of this series, discusses closely related matters, such as the epistemic implications of an (ostensible) consensus of the (ostensibly) relevant (ostensible) epistemic authorities.

¹⁴ I asked ChatGPT to offer an operationalizable definition of “conspiracy theory,” and found its suggestion potentially useful. It suggested:

A conspiracy theory is a belief or explanation that asserts the existence of a secretive collaboration among specific individuals or entities, with the following characteristics:

- 1. Secrecy:** It posits that the alleged collaboration is hidden from public knowledge or concealed from mainstream awareness.

to come up with an adequate definition. And perhaps that is precisely because the word so often operates as a selectively used slur, not a category with *any* clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. If so, there is a major problem with research on so-called “conspiracy theorists.” As Harris observes, “[O]ne could not study the causes, effects, and warrant of conspiracy theories without first being able to identify what theories belong to this class” (2022, 3).

Concessions to the Minimalist Definition

I do appreciate a point that those who favor the minimalist position are often trying to make: conspiratorial activity is ubiquitous, and so there is nothing suspect about appealing to it in an explanation of events (Pigden 2006, 157–166). However, one does not need to define conspiracy theory in a minimalist way to make this point.

There is, however, a more significant point favoring a minimalist definition that is not so easy to brush aside, at least with regard to its use in scientific studies. The *simplicity* of the minimalist definition is itself a significant merit. Adopting it avoids the potentially endless quibbles and disagreements regarding the details of descriptive components of more complex purely descriptive alternative definitions.

The problem with adjudicating which theories should count as conspiracy theories is particularly acute when we consider the social science research on conspiracy theories. How can one objectively investigate phenomena associated with belief in conspiracy theories if it is not clear which theories should count? Currently, the “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” method seems to prevail (see Dentith 2023).¹⁵ Typically, social science papers on this subject may

2. Malevolence or Deception: It suggests that the individuals or entities involved have malevolent intentions, aim to deceive, or act in a way that harms a particular group or society as a whole.

3. Unproven Claims: It relies on claims or assertions that lack substantial and verifiable evidence, and often contradicts widely accepted facts or explanations.

4. Hidden Agenda: It proposes that the collaboration is driven by a concealed or ulterior motive, typically inconsistent with the publicly stated goals or official narratives.

5. Limited Mainstream Support: It is not widely accepted by authoritative sources, experts, or institutions and is frequently rejected or criticized by established authorities or the mainstream consensus.

I first prompted it as follows: “Define ‘conspiracy theory’ in a way that can be operationalized.” Then I prompted for revision: “Don’t words like ‘typically’ and ‘often’ and ‘usually’ make it hard to operationalize this definition?” Its response, above, may be revisable into an adequate descriptive definition. Criteria 1 and 4 could be combined to make it more succinct. In my view, the “unproven claims” category, while labeled fairly enough, requires further clarification. But could scholars come to agreement on such specifics? Also, a potential problem is that the above definition leaves out non-conspiratorial “conspiracy theories,” which some people may insist should be included (though I would disagree).

¹⁵ In a 2013 paper entitled, “Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” Robert Brotherton, Christopher French and Alan Pickering provide long lists of theory-statements used to develop a “Generic Conspiracist Beliefs” scale. But which of these statements truly should count as being connected to conspiracy theories (or “conspiracist beliefs”), and by what criteria? It is not at all clear. Most of the statements are amenable to multiple interpretations. And, for many of the statements, there are reasonable interpretations that are somewhere between fairly plausible and historically true. For example, “The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret” (2013, 8). Some considerations that might make this statement reasonable to believe are as follows: The CIA certainly *tried* to kill Castro (a well-known public figure) and kept that secret for a long time. They may have succeeded in killing

include a perfunctory definition, but often no serious attempt is made to assure that the cases studied conform to that definition (see Hagen 2022, 19–24, 44–47; Hagen 2018b). And cases that *do* conform to the stated definition, but that wouldn't be considered “conspiracy theories,” are simply ignored (see Hagen 2022, 111, 123, 199). They also tend to assume that controversial cases (such as certain famous assassinations), or even some seemingly true cases (such as CIA-facilitated drug trafficking), are false or unwarranted.¹⁶

If a minimalist definition is used, researchers could more objectively distinguish theories that are conspiracy theories from those that are not. Compared to the minimalist definition, even purely descriptive definitions that include such criteria as *opposition to an official account* are subject to some comparatively greater degree of potential contentiousness. (What counts as an “official account”?) But when what counts as a conspiracy theory depends also on an assessment of the theory's plausibility, objective study of belief in such theories seems all but hopeless, especially if the degree of implausibility required is ambiguous, since the interesting cases will resist objective classification. It won't suffice to study only the classifiable extreme cases—involving lizard people and such—since this, in effect, also changes the subject.

Conclusion

While the minimalist non-pejorative definition does seem to change the subject from what is commonly meant by the phrase “conspiracy theory,” it does have the advantage of being fit to be operationalized for scientific research. I have suggested that an adequately operationalizable non-pejorative descriptive definition could probably be developed which would adequately capture the right cases. In contrast, a pejorative definition is always going to result in significant cases being contestable, even cases that would otherwise seemingly be paradigmatic cases.¹⁷ Pejorative definitions not only make communication between those who disagree on the assessment of a theory difficult, it renders the relevant science invalid.

I favor developing a consensus around a descriptive non-pejorative definition that provides tolerably clear inclusion and exclusion criteria that picks out the cases that are disparaged as

others, such as Salvador Allende or Patrice Lumumba, and succeeded in keeping it secret. The Phoenix Program murdered plenty of innocent Vietnamese citizens (the statement doesn't specify what *kind* of citizen). The killing of Fred Hampton (an American citizen) sure seems to have been murder, and this is still not admitted. As another example, consider the plausibility of this: “A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest” (2013, 8). How much is “a lot”? Surely this happens at least *sometimes*.

¹⁶ Coady puts the point this way, “Unfortunately for these researchers their lists of purported conspiracies invariably include at least some real conspiracies. For example, belief in a conspiracy by American government agencies to bring crack cocaine into American inner-city communities is regularly cited in this literature as evidence of conspiracist ideation, despite it being true” (2023, 757). While I can't independently vouch for the truth of this conspiracy (though I'm inclined to think it is true), it is at least fair to say that it should not be treated as though it is clearly unwarranted, false, or beyond the pale.

¹⁷ Making a related point, Orr and Dentith cite Michael Butter and Peter Knight who “argue that we cannot produce *value-neutral* research on belief in *conspiracy theories* if we are working with *value-laden* definitions” (Orr and Dentith 2018, 144, emphasis in original).

“conspiracy theories” without prejudging their warrant. However, this strategy may not satisfy social scientists who wish to study absurd and irrational theories, for some theories commonly classified as conspiracy theories are not absurd and irrational. And belief in some conspiracy theories may have explanations that are not very interesting; they might be believed for ordinary reasons.

Alternatively, I may be overly optimistic about the feasibility of developing an agreeable purely descriptive definition. If an adequately operationalizable purely descriptive definition is unobtainable, and a pejorative definition is necessarily worse in this regard, then it seems the only way forward for those wishing to study something called “conspiracy theories” will be to accept the minimalist definition. However, since the minimalist definition “changes the subject,” researchers are entitled to ask: “Is this new subject one that we are *interested* in?” It seems to me that most social scientists are not interested in investigating conspiracy theories in the minimalist sense. After all, there is little question that it is often reasonable to believe such theories. So, why people sometimes believe such theories is not a mystery that requires research to explain it.

In the next essay of this series, I address the aspect of Räikkä’s argument that depends upon an analogy with implausible scientific theories. I argue that the analogy does not hold, and that the argument trades on ambiguities in various key words, including “implausible,” “pejorative,” and “shun.”

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