



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

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

Is ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Harmful? A Reply to Foster and Ichikawa

Scott Hill, University of Innsbruck, hillscottandrew@gmail.com

Hill, Scott. 2023. “Is ‘Conspiracy Theory’ Harmful? A Reply to Foster and Ichikawa.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 12 (9): 27–31. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-86M>.

Some terms are harmful. Take slurs. The use of slurs can promote and sustain connections between concepts and stereotypes that harm innocent people. A slur for African Americans, for example, may be harmful even if that slur does not license strict entailments from the use of that term to particular stereotypes. The widespread use of the slur is consistent with users of the slur having an African American friend. And it is consistent with the existence of African Americans who are not in the extension of that slur. Nonetheless, the term may still be very harmful because the concept users associate with that term is tightly, if not infallibly, linked to the relevant stereotypes.

Jen Foster and Jonathan Ichikawa (2023; hereafter ‘F&I’) extend this observation to a wide range of terms and concepts beyond slurs. One innovation of their view includes the introduction of degrees of association a concept might have with various stereotypes. Sometimes, in the literature on conspiracy theories, for example, opponents of the pejorative account of conspiracy theories suggest that there is an implausibly tight connection between the use of ‘conspiracy theory’ and various stereotypes that lead to harms. F&I point out that the connection isn’t as strict as such proponents sometimes suggest. Nevertheless, F&I argue that the point of such contributors may be more plausibly developed in a different way.

F&I show that strict entailment is not necessary for there to be an interestingly tight connection between a term and its associated stereotypes. Just as a slur for African Americans may be tightly linked to various harmful stereotypes even if it does not strictly logically entail those stereotypes, it may nevertheless be tightly enough connected to the stereotypes to do real harm. And in the same way, F&I argue, stereotypes associated with ‘conspiracy theory’ are in some ways quite tight even if they do not strictly entail the relevant stereotypes.

I will begin by summarizing the observations F&I cite in favor of the claim that ‘conspiracy theory’ as it is ordinarily used is harmful.¹ I will then argue that the hypothesis that ‘conspiracy theory’ is instead beneficial is able to explain the relevant observations at least as well as the hypothesis that it is harmful. Finally, since ‘conspiracy theory’ is just one of the many topics F&I address in their fascinating paper, I explain why I think focus on ‘conspiracy theory’ in particular is worthy of sustained reflection and discussion in its own right even if I am in agreement with many of F&I’s other ideas.

The Evidence that ‘Conspiracy Theory’ is Harmful

The view F&I advocate is that given the ordinary use of ‘conspiracy theory’, being a theory that merely posits a conspiracy is tightly conceptually linked to being a conspiracy theory. And being a conspiracy theory is tightly conceptually linked to being false, crazy, or unbelievable. And so, given the way in which ‘conspiracy theory’ is ordinarily used, the stereotypes associated with merely believing a conspiracy occurred will cause one’s views to

¹ F&I frame the discussion as about concepts rather than terms. But I follow the general convention in the literature of talking about terms.

be prematurely dismissed. F&I cite two sources of evidence in support of the claim that merely positing a conspiracy is tightly conceptually linked with being a conspiracy theory. First, they note that in an *NPR* segment the term ‘conspiracy’ is used to talk about stereotypical conspiracies. Second, they note that some dictionaries define ‘conspiracy theory’ in such a way that being a theory that posits a mere conspiracy is sufficient to count as a conspiracy theory.

Regarding the *NPR* interview. F&I note that the subtitle of the interview is ‘the Psychology Behind Conspiracies’. The interview primarily concerns QAnon. In the interview, the term ‘conspiracy’ is used to talk about conspiracy theories. A former QAnon member is said to have once believed conspiracies and asked about his experiences. Listeners are invited to call in with their stories about themselves or loved ones’ experiences with conspiracies. As F&I note, no one calls in to talk about the conspiracy by Barack Obama that led to the death of Osama Bin Laden or the conspiracy by American Rebels that led to the writing of the Declaration of Independence. All the examples callers brought up were all about stereotypical conspiracy theories such as QAnon. As F&I put it:

We see similarly tight conceptual connections along these lines in colloquial discussions involving conspiracy theories. To take but one recent example, on January 18, 2021, a *National Public Radio* segment about “the psychology behind conspiracies,” motivated primarily by discussions of QAnon, repeatedly demonstrated the assumption that accepting a “conspiracy” *ipso facto* amounts to conspiracy theory and its associated irrationality. For example, it featured an interview with a self-described former conspiracy theorist; the interviewer introduced him by pointing out that he “used to believe in some conspiracies,” then asked what had changed. Later in the program, the host asked listeners “if any of you know anyone who believed in a conspiracy.” No one called in describing the al-Qaeda’s conspiracy that led to 9/11, or the American revolutionaries’ conspiracy that led to the Declaration of Independence (18)!

I do not think that this is evidence that mere conspiracies are tightly linked with conspiracy theories by ordinary speakers. Adapting an example from M. Giulia Napolitano and Kevin Reuter (2023; hereafter N&R), consider the term ‘cloud computing’. N&R use the example to make a point about the perils of inferring the meaning of a term by breaking the term down into smaller terms and combining the meaning of the smaller terms as a way of discovering what the larger term means. So, for example, the way to find out what ‘cloud computing’ means is not to take the word ‘cloud’ and its meaning and then put it together with the word ‘computing’ and its meaning. Similarly, the way to figure out what ‘conspiracy theory’ means is not to first consider the meaning of ‘conspiracy’, then the meaning of ‘theory’, and then to put the two meanings together.

I think we can appropriate N&R’s ‘cloud computing’ example in a way that will help us understand the *NPR* example. Imagine Google recently developed a new and especially interesting cloud computing system. Imagine *NPR* conducted an interview with someone

who had worked with Google’s new system. Imagine that the subtitle of the segment was ‘Google’s New Cloud’. And imagine that ‘cloud’ was frequently used in the interview to talk about cloud computing. Imagine listeners were asked to call in and describe their experiences with clouds during the interview. Finally, imagine that all of the people who call in talk about examples of cloud computing. No one calls in and says: ‘I recently observed a cloud hovering over Google’s headquarters.’ No one calls in and says: ‘There is a cloud over my house right now’ or ‘Once I saw a storm cloud.’ Everyone who calls in instead says things like ‘My wife is a tech wiz and works with the cloud at her company.’ Or, ‘I have reservations about using my office’s cloud. I feel like it infringes on my privacy.’ If this were to happen, it would not provide evidence that the concept ordinary speakers associate with ‘cloud computing’ is tightly connected with stereotypes about actual clouds. It would instead provide evidence that ordinary speakers understand these to be quite different things. There might be some contexts in which ‘cloud’ is used as shorthand for ‘cloud computing’. But in such contexts, every competent user of English knows that it is cloud computing rather than the disjunction of clouds and cloud computing that is being talked about.

In the same way, it seems to me that F&I’s example may be accommodated by the view that the concept associated with ‘conspiracy theory’ is not tightly linked to merely positing a conspiracy in the minds of ordinary English speakers. The hypothesis that these concepts are tightly linked predicts that many callers would bring up things like the role of Al Qaeda in 9/11 or the role of American Revolutionaries in producing the Declaration of Independence. The hypothesis that they are not so tightly linked predicts F&I’s observation that listeners only bring up stereotypical conspiracy theories like QAnon and never bring up mere conspiracies like the conspiracy of American Rebels to produce the Declaration of Independence.

There is a second piece of evidence F&I cite in favor of the claim that ‘conspiracy theory’ is tightly connected with merely positing a mere conspiracy. They point out that some dictionaries define ‘conspiracy theory’ in a way that includes many reasonable conspiracies in its extension. As F&I put it:

It’s not impossible to posit a conspiracy while disclaiming the label ‘conspiracy theory,’ but doing so, we think, would require special pleading. One might attempt to define ‘conspiracy theory’ by building irrationality in by definition — effectively attempting to deny the input rule above, insisting that one can only describe something as a conspiracy theory if it is an unsubstantiated theory positing a conspiracy. But many dictionaries actually encode the simpler definition; here is *Merriam-Webster*’s: “a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators” (18).

I do not think the fact that some dictionaries such as *Merriam-Webster* (*MW*) define a word in such a way that the word has an extension implies that ordinary use of that word has that extension. To reframe an example that I developed (Hill 2022), consider *MW*’s definition of ‘poison’: ‘A poison is a substance that through its chemical action usually kills, injures, or

impairs an organism.’ Notice that this definition implies that some bombs are poisons. Imagine a substance that through its chemical action explodes when it touches an organism. It is a bomb rather than a poison. But it is a substance that through its chemical action usually kills, injures, or impairs an organism. So, the *MW* definition implies that it is a bomb. However, that is not evidence that the extension of ‘poison’ as it is ordinarily used includes bombs. And it is not evidence that the concept ordinary users associate with ‘poison’ is tightly connected to stereotypes about bombs. Everyone knows they are different.

I think the lesson of the *MW* example is this: people are bad at coming up with definitions that match the extension of the words they use. They often do not realize how widely the extension of their definitions would, if widely adopted, make the words. And such mistaken definitions come radically apart from the extension of the words as they are actually used.

Why Care About ‘Conspiracy Theory’ In Particular?

Above, I addressed just one of the many valuable points made by F&I. The overall view they defend could be true even if I am right that F&I are mistaken about ‘conspiracy theory’. For this reason, one might wonder why I would focus on what F&I say about ‘conspiracy theory’ in particular. When I look at the philosophical literature on conspiracy theories, I often find myself unmoved by examples in which the pejorative use of ‘conspiracy theory’ is alleged to be harmful. But when I see the examples in which conspiracy theories do real harm, I am much more convinced. Quassim Cassam (2019) and Neil Levy (2021) discuss examples in which conspiracy theories do real harm. They discuss examples in which people have died because of conspiracy theories. Cassam discusses an example in which conspiracy theories about AIDS led South African President Thabo Mbeki to delay the use of aid in the form of medication for HIV in South Africa causing numerous deaths. Levy discusses an example in which conspiracy theories about the ability of alcohol to cure COVID-19 led to numerous deaths in Iran. I find the harm in these examples easy to spot. I think that this is evidence that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is working just as it should. It is useful for individuals and groups to be able to label ideas as preposterous. The term ‘conspiracy theory’ is one way to exercise that ability.

Acknowledgements

Work on this paper was funded as part of the Euregio Interregional Project Network IPN 175 “Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond”.

References

- Cassam, Quassim. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories*. Polity.
- Foster, Jen and Jonathan Ichikawa. 2023. “Normative Inference Tickets.” *Episteme* 1–27.
doi: 10.1017/epi.2023.43.
- Hill, Scott. 2022. “Substantive Disagreement in the *Le Monde* Debate and Beyond: Replies to Duetz and Dentith, Basham, and Hewitt.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (11): 18-25.

Levy, Neil. 2021. *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People*. Oxford University Press
Napolitano, M. Giulia and Kevin Reuter. 2023. “What is a Conspiracy Theory?” *Erkenntnis*
88: 2035–2062.