

Exercise 8

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Background

When researching the cultural evolution of narratives, a valuable source of data are the stories themselves. Researchers will often collect stories for coding and further analysis. Examining stories which have disseminated naturally can also be a good way of generating hypotheses about this dissemination which could be tested experimentally.

The Exercise

To complete the exercise, read the examples of conspiracy theories provided in the Conspiracy Theory Material document. These have been collected from various sources and represent versions of some of the most widely known and believed (in the USA) conspiracy theories from over the last sixty years. Complete the exercise sheet by identifying the conspiratorial agent or agents in the theory and by summarising the nature of the alleged activity (the outcome of the conspiracy). For the final column ('ingroup') consider the social group identity of the alleged conspirators, then consider what groups might consider this an outgroup i.e. which group or groups of people would this conspiracy theory appeal to based on outgroup negativity bias? You can then compare your coding to the model answer. After completing the exercise, reflect on the key questions below.

Key questions:

Why do you think coding such as this would be useful?

This kind of coding can be useful for getting a better understanding of the narratives you're interested in as they exist in the 'real world', without experimenter manipulation. They are the products of natural cultural evolution and transmission. By identifying key aspects of the versions common themes may be found which could inspire further research.

What further research could you conduct based on this kind of exercise?

One area of interest might be seeing how much consistency there is across different versions of the same conspiracy theory. For example, there are many versions of conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, with many different conspiratorial agents and motivations proposed; conspiracy theories about water fluoridation are also very varied. What might cause this diversity? And what versions are likely to be most successful and why? Cultural evolution provides an excellent research framework to answer these kinds of questions. Another area of interest would be simply testing if the conspiracy theories presented here are more successful with the social groups identified as the ingroups. This would be a good way of testing if the ingroup negativity bias is influential in the successful cultural transmission of conspiracy theories.