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They Call Me Crazy: Factors to Conspiratorial Participation

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THEY CALL ME CRAZY:
FACTORS TO CONSPIRATORIAL PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the public perceptions of conspiracy theories and the level and types of participation of those who believe such theories. It addresses the research questions of: (1) Under what conditions would a person speak openly about conspiracy, and under what conditions would they remain silent? (2) What are the social factors that draw a person into joining with others who believe a particular conspiracy has occurred? And (3) is there any relationship between a person's education and profession that would increase or hinder a conspiracist's visible participation of his or her beliefs? A total of thirty interviews were conducted, ten each in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the 9/11 site in New York City, and West Virginia. By using qualitative content analysis, data were analyzed and variations by demographic and socioeconomic status were noted. The theoretical perspective applied to the findings included critical conflict theories as well as Goffman's stigma. The findings confirm there are sociological implications for beliefs in conspiracy theories and suggest that negative social consequences can result in taking part in activities in which conspiracy theories are openly discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables

"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

President George W. Bush, September 20, 2001

The emotionally-laden sentiment shared by President George W. Bush on September 20, 2001 after the 9/11 attacks continues to be fresh in the public's mind when being exposed to skeptical or conspiratorial beliefs. Although the sensitive nature of the September 11, 2001 attacks cannot and should not be ignored, the political and social events that followed would reshape national identity into a black/white dichotomy of Good versus Evil; either with the United States or with the terrorists. The United States public bought into this ideology whole-heartedly, which caused and continues to cause grave consequences for individuals showing any behaviors of dissent, which for those following the new national rhetoric would put dissenters on the "Evil" side of the battle. Those who were skeptical about the events surrounding 9/11, or who offered alternative interpretations that differed from the official account were labeled suspect and were guilty by association with others who also questioned the official story (Warner, 2008). Labeled as "Truthers," 9/11 skeptics are still stigmatized for their beliefs in different interpretations of what happened on September 11, 2001.

Truthers are just one group of many skeptics who fall under an umbrella of stigmatization for their beliefs in conspiracies. Other groups can include individuals who question the official stories about politics, aliens, assassinations, oil spills, national security, etc.; the realm of conspiracy is large. Conspiracists, people who believe in conspiracy theories, are labeled and stigmatized as "conspiracy nuts" or "crazy," and can face negative consequences if they share this identity with others. If both of these

sentiments are known social facts throughout our culture, why do conspiracists choose to share their views with some people and not others?

Conspiracists are considered to have a distorted view of reality that is dangerous to mainstream values and a collective world view (Kay, 2011). Conspiracy theories also have been characterized as having weak arguments and producing distorted judgments, and are dismissed with having circular reasoning and lack of hard evidence for their claims (Hofstadter, 1964). In reality, it can be argued that the real controversy is not if there is a valid conspiracy or not, but how many people actually *believe* there is a conspiracy to begin with. Believing in a conspiracy, depending on how radical it is, can be socially unacceptable and can conflict with mainstream American thought, regardless of the amount of evidence a conspiracist presents to an argument. At the same time, these theories are incredibly popular without certainty of the validity of the conspiracy, even if the beliefs are unwarranted, and a considerable amount of people either believe or entertain the notion of conspiracies. Each type of conspiracy carries its own weight on its shoulders, some being more radical, believable, and politically distraught than others. Nonetheless, all types of conspiracies flourish and mature in the public sphere, fed by popular mass media that can take either side of the conspiracy, and consequently influencing the private spheres and the daily lives of individuals (Keeley, 1999).

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of a conspiracy, or to conspire, acknowledges the secrecy behind doing something unlawful or wrong as the result of a secret agreement among a group of conspirators. The topic and types of conspiracies is extremely broad, ranging from political conspiracies, to space exploration, assassinations, natural disasters, and others. Because the topic is so extensive, this

research has primarily focused on conspiracies surrounding Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 for the New Orleans and New York City respondents, whereas the West Virginia respondents were not pinpointed to specific theories. Although these conspiracies have main reference because of their cultural impact, the respondents could express any interest in other theories as well during the interview sessions. This research is meant to analyze the individual's attitudes and actions concerning conspiracy theories, so additional questions were asked regarding their participation and comfort levels when talking openly about conspiracy.

The controversial issue of conspiracy theories in the United States has only been touched briefly by research and has been left to be interpreted by philosophical means. This research is important because it addresses public attitudes toward the controversial issue of conspiracy in modern culture by talking to conspiracists themselves and taking a critical look into how they interact with others. Believing in conspiracy also suggests a lack of trust in the government or authority and can ultimately lead to underground movements and social revolutions. In a country where socialization and nationalism rely on the importance of media to feed and shape American values, to believe and speak of conspiracy is to defy these ideals and could put a person in a compromised position in society, in the workplace, or on government "watch lists" (ACLU, 2004).

Although different conspiracies may appear to have different levels of extremities depending on content, the ideas they embrace can create a negative social stigma if discussed openly, and could even be considered dangerous depending on the nature of the conspiracy (Kay, 2011). Among this negative umbrella conspiracists fall under, conspiracies and their believers have also became a type of funny and humiliating punch

line for conversation, often seen in movies and other media outlets. For example, after Whoopi Goldberg questioned the validity of landing on the moon in a 2009 episode of *The View*, websites exploded with humor and disbelief at her declaration (*The View*, 2009).

The purpose of this research is to make a critical examination of the public perception surrounding controversial political conspiracy theories, including the people who believe in them, and to analyze and compare participation among different levels of education and socioeconomic statuses. Public perception is a social phenomenon in itself, where the absolute truth can mix with popular opinion and have a direct impact on a person's reputation and life (Pollick, 2010). For data collecting and measurement purposes, public perceptions include, but are not limited to, media showing the conspiracies in a positive or negative light, backlash against those who openly speak in agreement with controversial ideas, popularity concerning these ideas with the public, and the comfort level of an individual when talking openly about these issues. To participate, or the actual act of participating, is the state of being related to a larger whole, to take part or share in something; in this case, the larger whole would be any conspiratorial movement and how conspiracists take part and share conspiratorial beliefs (Merriam-Webster). For this research, participation can be any form of agreement with conspiratorial thought that exists along a spectrum, leading up to respondent participation at conspiracy-related activities, rallies, conferences, expos, meetings, etc.

There are three main questions this research has addressed: (1) Under what conditions would a person speak openly about conspiracy, and under what conditions would they remain silent? (2) What are the social factors that draw a person into joining

with others who believe a particular conspiracy has occurred? and (3) Is there any relationship between his or her education and profession that would increase or hinder a conspiracist's visible participation of their beliefs? Chapter two explores and makes note of previous literature on this topic, including some empirical research and philosophical arguments on rationalism and paranoia, in reference to conspiracies. Some arguments to make note of include the presence of conspiratorial behavior among minorities (Abalakinda-Paap et al., 1999; Crocker et al., 1999; Hirsh & Levert, 2009) and that conspiracists and skeptical thinkers are often times more analytical (Buenting & Taylor, 2010; Hofstadter, 1964).

Chapter three introduces the theoretical perspectives used in this research which included conflict theory and Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma. Goffman's approach to stigma has been applied to conspiracists' behavior in which stigma is socially discrediting and stigma management controls the amount of information (or stigma-identifiers) that person shares with others. Chapter four presents the research methodology which includes thirty in-depth interviews from three locations: New Orleans, LA; the 9/11 site in New York City; and in West Virginia. The respondents have been coded by location and number (ex: WV01, NYC07, NOLA09).

Chapter five provides an analysis of all three interview groups and a developed typology based on the participation habits of the respondents (Engaged Theorist, Cautious Theorist, and Hidden Theorist). Chapter six presents a discussion and conclusion based on the findings. The findings confirm there are sociological implications and stigma for beliefs in conspiracy theories, and suggest that negative

social consequences can result in taking part in conspiracies. An emphasis is made for the separation of paranoia from psychiatric illness and to be considered as a social issue.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Although few empirical studies have been done to measure participation among conspiracy theorists, one study addressed the socioeconomic status of African Americans and college students and their levels of conspiratorial beliefs (Crocker et al., 1999). Though rare among the literature, this study used specific examples in relation to race, politics, and governmental policy to determine conspiratorial beliefs, and found that African American college students are more likely to believe in U.S. conspiracies than white college students. The researchers used regression analysis to determine that belief in conspiracies among African American college students is directly related to discrimination, system blame, and racial self-esteem, as well as conspiracies that might target a racial group. This research also used polls from popular newspapers to measure the importance of conspiracy in reference to race, which also describes African Americans as believing in these types of conspiracies more than Caucasians (Crocker et al., 1999). Dividing conspiracists by race to look at more systematic and historical issues have shown that African Americans are more likely to believe in conspiracies than Caucasians, although some Caucasians still believed as well.

Some studies have topic-specific research criteria concerning conspiracies to look at unique situations and how skepticism emerges, and thus conspiratorial thought patterns, from specific instances. Bradley's study told of his personal experience during the 2004 election and the controversial media coverage that followed concerning the voting count between President George W. Bush and Democratic candidate John Kerry

(Bradley, 2005). Bradley shared his feelings of being considered a "loony leftist" when thinking the election was unfair and also explained how suspicion of an event can easily turn into paranoia and being labeled as such. Another topic-specific study analyzed pre- and post-Katrina voting patterns to analyze the values and importance of rebuilding in New Orleans between white and black individuals in the city (Hirsh & Levert, 2009). The authors noted that the conspiracy theories that emerged from these elections, in relation to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, are a result of political and economic tension between upper class whites and lower class blacks in New Orleans, much like the issue of powerlessness that reoccurs in conspiratorial research with Hoftstadter (1964) and Heins (2007).

The majority of writing found concerning conspiracy has been published by philosophy journals, analyzing rationalism and cultural "delusions," although there have been very few empirical studies done on the subject. Epistemologists and the philosophical realm have tried to pin down the rationality behind conspiracies and those who believe them. If you follow Buenting and Taylor's model (2010), there are two ways of looking at conspiracies: the *generalist view* and the *particularist* view. The *generalist view* considers the rationality of conspiracy theories without analyzing any specific or particular conspiracies; it acts almost like a blanket term to determine the rationality of all conspiratorial thinking. On the other hand, the *particularist view* considers specific conspiracy theories to determine rationale, whereas one conspiracy might provide more rational evidence than another, proving that all conspiracies cannot be deemed irrational (Buenting & Taylor, 2010). Without using empirical data, there exists a need to analyze rational reasons as to why someone would believe in conspiracy theories, particularly

political conspiracies, based on historical events and U.S. policy - events that have an *official story* and a known group that opposes that story. Rationality, irrationality, and fortuitous values and data (evidence) attached to believing certain conspiracies can explore motives behind conspiratorial thinking (Buenting & Taylor, 2010). For example, if one considered the conspiratorial discussion that surrounds the World Trade Center attacks and Watergate scandal, it can be concluded based on this "rational" model that conspiracies cannot be deemed publicly irrational on the mere basis of being conspiracies, but considers the rationality of these theories as well (Buenting and Taylor, 2010).

Hofstadter (1964) explored rationalism and also the idea of *paranoia* to explain the "paranoid style" political groups have as well as individuals. He used the term "paranoid" not in a clinical sense but as a way of seeing the world differently where an individual may feel persecuted and has to navigate through this conspiratorial world differently than others. In fact, Hofstadter (1964) emphasized the rationalistic patterns to this "paranoid style" of thinking:

> It is nothing if not coherent – in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities. It is, if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic; it believes that it is up against an enemy who is infallibly rational as he is totally evil, and it seeks to match his imputed total competence with its own, leaving nothing unexplained and comprehending all of reality in one overreaching, consistent theory. (p.36-37)

If it can be agreed upon that conspiratorial thinking is in fact rational in its roots, then what other elements take the "paranoid style" of thinking into a critical view by normative society? A conspiracy theory armed with evidence, rationalism, and consistency can quickly go from undeniable to unbelievable with imaginative leaps it

may take (Hofstadter, 1964). Although imagination may be an ambiguous term in relation to politics and society as a whole, it does an important part to the believability of conspiracy theories as portrayed by conspiracists. Hofstadter (1964) used the Illuminati as an example for this pattern, where a simple conspiracy might show merit through rationalism and then explodes into irrationalism when determined that the Illuminati, or any large conspiracy group without plausibility, was really in control. This process causes the paranoid, or the conspiracists, to participate in a pattern of suffering when these ideas are rejected because it also rejects their worldview and self-expression.

Because of the basis of rationality in some conspiracy theories, and showing that they are not necessarily wrong; the existence of possible explanations keep conspiracies alive and very popular among certain groups of people (Keeley, 1999). Additionally, it is recognized that the public implications of conspiracy theories on a critical level, are normally negative to an individual or that group of conspiracists when deemed irrational. Heins (2007) acknowledged the magnitude of conspiracy theories among U.S. citizens who are "politically alienated" and seeking some sort of truth in everyday life. Conspiracists are quickly labeled as “evil-doers” and face social, political, and economic consequences for sharing their beliefs. Often times, some conspiracists have felt alienated or disadvantaged before their conspiratorial nature takes off, leading them to having conspiratorial beliefs, and producing a cycle of alienation and feelings of powerlessness. In a study done by Abalakinda-Paap, Stephan, Craig, and Gregory (1999), 156 students participated in a survey that measured their attitudes and beliefs toward specific conspiracies, as well as questions about their self-esteem and need for cognition. Their results showed that people who do not accept the prevailing societal views will often not

support official stories and seek other explanations. Similarly, those who feel powerless can believe in alternative scenarios to help explain why they lack power in their own lives, or to place that blame on something (or someone) else. The same can be said be minority groups and others who have low trust in authority and give way to skeptical thinking patterns (Abalakinda-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999).

On an individual level, conspiracy theorists are quickly linked to being paranoid and cannot accept things at "face value" or how they are presented in normative society. Paranoid persons are often thought of as having inadequate social learning skills, extreme amounts of stress, and incompetent social reactions (Lemert, 1962). For the sake of analyzing conspiracies and conspiracists in the social area and not as a psychiatric disease, paranoia is the product of conspiracies, not the other way around. Paranoia can be viewed as fluid pattern, rather than a pathological identity, where it is also a dynamic response to a complex world (Harper, 2008). Looking at "paranoia" as a social issue, not strictly a psychological one, can tone down the radicalization of every conspiracist considered "paranoid" and thus deemed irrational and incompetent; this also distracts from the conspiracy itself.

More recently, psychological research has explored cognitive and beliefs patterns unique to skeptical thinkers. In a 2005 study on Finnish students with paranormal beliefs, it was determined that students with higher analytical thinking were less likely to believe in paranormal beliefs. Yet students with high beliefs in the paranormal were considered to have higher levels of intuitive thinking patterns (Aarnio & Lindeman, 2005). Although there are no quantitative studies for conspiratorial (political, or with specific conspiracies), this methodology can be applied to conspiracists as well by placing the

paranormal believers with fellow skeptics, conspiracists. It could be argued that conspiracists fit into both categories of having high analytical and intuitive thinking patterns.

Another recent research endeavor for skeptical thinking patterns has proposed that atheists, along with skeptics in general, have a different cognitive pattern than those who believe in a God or identify with a religion. Atheists, like all who have skeptical thinking patterns, have significant cognitive and personality traits that include high intellectual achievement based on analytical and systematic reasoning, as well as being individualistic and nonconformist (Caldwell-Harris, n.d.). These traits are similar to those who are considered paranoid or believe in conspiracies since they are skeptics, too, but changing narratives cause these traits to appear negative in nature. For example, instead of highly analytical, conspiracists would be considered irrational or "trying to make something simple, complicated." Also, the same can be said in place of individualist, conspiracists are paranoid or socially inept (Lemert, 1962).

September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks

When thinking of recent conspiracy theories, the "9/11 conspiracies" are among the first to come to mind. The September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City in 2001 incited a magnitude of shock and confusion, as well as skepticism, felt throughout the world. When the official story presented two Boeing 767's from American Airlines that hit each of the two WTC towers and the Pentagon (with an additional WTC building falling later that evening), causing their destruction along with 2,749 people confirmed dead, distress and disbelief took hold of the United States

(McConnachie & Tudge, 2008). The media response was so fast that the public could actually watch the second tower being hit on their televisions (CNN, 2001). At the time, the only concrete facts about what happened on 9/11 were what the public could grasp and see for themselves: two airplanes destroyed the World Trade Center and many lives were lost; all else seemed like speculation after that. Of course, there were two other incidents related to the WTC events, including a plane crashing into the Pentagon, and another crash-landing near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In reference to all 9/11 attacks that day, media announced it was a series of terrorist attacks by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization (CNN, 2001). A year later in 2002, al-Qaeda member Khalid Sheikh Mohammed claimed that they "did it," and again in 2006, tapes were released of Osama Bin Laden stating he was responsible for entrusting the 19 hijackers with those attacks (McConnachie & Tudge, 2008). Once again, ten years after the attacks in 2011, al-Qaeda representatives opposed pro-conspiracy sentiment expressed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about the "mysterious September 11 incident" (McGreal, 2011).

The 9/11 Commission was established in 2002 to examine any speculation the public might have about the events that day, chaired by New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean. The sum of the Commission Report focused on al-Qaeda's involvement, and the CIA and FBI's failed preventative measures against the attacks (9-11 Commission, 2004). Although the 9/11 Commission was initially set up to ease fears and answer questions about the attacks, the Commission Report was actually not taken very seriously because of its discrepancies, partisanship, ties to the White House, and the open criticism it received (McConnachie & Tudge, 2008).

With a war in the Middle East following the 9/11 attacks, conspiracies started to take off concerning what really happened on September 11, 2001. Almost all prominent conspiracy theories concerning the federal government believe there was motivation for the 9/11 to urge the United States into war with Afghanistan and Iraq (Barkun, 2003). A popular theory concerning the WTC suggests that controlled demolition, with pre-planted explosives, brought the WTC buildings down instead of solely by the airplanes, called Controlled Demolition Theory. In a scientific study by Dr. Steven Jones from the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Brigham Young University, Jones investigated the controlled demolition hypothesis and proved that it was a more feasible answer to the towers' collapse (Jones, 2003). Other engineers, architects and physicists that also follow this hypothesis formed an organization called the Architects & Engineers for 9/11 Truth, providing scientific evidence to support this hypothesis. Of the many witnesses in New York City that watched both towers fall, a reoccurring theme in a lot of testimonies was of back-to-back explosions at ground-level, sometimes during the initial plane hits (McConnachie & Tudge, 2008). Despite the evidence for the controlled demolition hypothesis, there are few theories as to how the explosives were placed in the buildings.

Another popular theory concerning the attacks was that a missile, not an airplane, hit and destroyed part of the Pentagon. French journalist Thierry Meyssan, a known 9/11 conspiracy theorist and proponent of this theory who wrote *9/11: The Big Lie*, argued for the theory that a missile hit the Pentagon, and that the U.S government was behind the attacks. Structural engineers, such as Mete Sozen from Purdue University, have commented on the size of the impact "hole" on the Pentagon, estimating it to be smaller than expected from a plane impact (Purdue News, 2002). There are other elements that

add to the suspicion surrounding this conspiracy, including a MASCAL (Mass Casualty) exercise drill at the Pentagon in 2000 to provide emergency scenarios if a plane ever crashed into the Pentagon (Ryan, 2000). Another vital piece of information that fuels this theory is that there is no actual video of the airplane hitting the Pentagon. Shortly after 9/11, videos that were made public by CCTV security cameras, security videos from nearby businesses, and home videos of the aftermath were all confiscated by the FBI and taken off the Internet. However, in 2006, a video was released due to lawsuits from public interest group Judicial Watch, which shows an unidentifiable object hitting the Pentagon and causing an explosion (CNN, 2006).

Media responses to 9/11 conspiracies have been far from accommodating. Newspapers and magazines, including *Science, The Daily Telegraph, Time*, and *National Geographic* and mainstream media have all made claims to debunking the conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 attacks, and any government involvement suggested. *Popular Mechanics* online magazine also provided a special report specifically disproving each 9/11 conspiracy one-by-one (Popular Mechanics, 2005). Even Thierry Meyssan felt the heat from the press in the UK and in France for his book *9/11: The Big Lie*, in which the press completely dismissed Meyssan's claims even though the book sold 20,000 copies within two hours of being on sale (Henley, 2002). More recently, author Jonathan Kay released *Among the Truthers* (2011), which takes a disparaging look at conspiracists, especially 9/11 conspiracists, claiming that while they are normal people with very organized beliefs, they have also crossed the line into a distorted reality and not to be taken seriously (Kay, 2011).

In 2004, film maker Michael Moore released *Fahrenheit 911*, a documentary that takes a critical look at the 9/11 events including the War on Terror. Shortly afterward, a surge of media concerning 9/11 erupted causing the release of more documentaries on 9/11 conspiracies including *Loose Change* (2005), *In Plane Sight* (2006), and *Between the Lies* (2009). The 9/11 conspiracists quickly took on the name of the 9/11 Truth movement with its participants referred to as Truthers. Under this banner, organizations have formed and still function today by continuing to release news, updates or additions to existing theories, new research, as well as organize meetings and demonstrations. Some of these organizations include World for 9/11 Truth, 9/11 Truth, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, Firefighters for 9/11 Truth, and Scientists for 9/11 Truth.

Despite the overall debunking of 9/11 conspiracies, public opinion polls show that American citizens do not fully believe the media claims of the official explanations on what happened on September 11, 2001. One polling group, Zogby International, has done a series of polls in 2004, 2006, and 2007 that deal with questions regarding 9/11. In 2004, 41% of New York City residents said they believed that United States officials "knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around September 11, 2001, and that they consciously failed to act" (Zogby International, 2004). In the 2007 poll, sponsored by 911truth.org, found that 51% of Americans want Congress to investigate President Bush and Vice President Cheney's actions before and during the 9/11 attacks (Zogby International, 2007). Yet, in the most recent poll regarding 9/11 conspiracy by Angus Reid Public Opinion in March 2010, 74% believed that the controlled demolition theory is not credible and 76% believed a missile hitting the Pentagon was also not credible (Angus Reid Global Monitor, 2010).

Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana

"I ain't tryin' to make no excuse,
But they running from the truth,
We know they blew them levees,
But we ain't got no proof."

Free Agents Brass Band, *We Made It Through That Water* (2010)

Though not as prominent as the 9/11 conspiracies, skepticism due to racism and decades of mistrust has been reawakened after its own catastrophe in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana on August 29, 2005, with strong winds, breached levees, and flooded communities. Many of the worst affected areas were already low-income sections of the New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina, and their neighborhoods suffered being destroyed. Six years later, many of these communities remain devastated, largely due to slow or drained federal aid for rebuilding. Because of the social make-up of the now-destroyed Lower 9th Ward, conspiracy surrounds the implications of the actual occurrence of the hurricane and which levees were breached to save the French Quarter and wealthier parts of New Orleans. The African American community felt targeted not only because of the slow federal response to their disaster, but also due to the history of systemic racism and governmental mistrust located in the deep south, such as in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana.

Hurricane Katrina formed on August 23, 2005, over the Bahamas and crossed Florida and the Gulf of Mexico before landing in Louisiana on the morning of August 29th as a Category 3 Hurricane, and finally dissipating on August 30, 2005. The storm caused destruction along the coast from Florida to Texas, but New Orleans, Louisiana, suffered the most deaths from flooded and failed levees surrounding the city (Swenson,

2006). The property damage was assumed to be $81 billion in all areas hit by Hurricane Katrina, and more than 1.2 million people were under some form of evacuation (Knabb, Rhome, & Brown, 2005). Industrial Canal and 17th Street Canals were breached and the levees protecting eastern New Orleans, Treme, Bywater, Arabi, Gentilly, Chalmette, the Upper 9th Ward, and the Lower 9th Ward fell and flooded those and nearby communities.

Most of the communities closest to the levees, including the Lower 9th Ward, were considered to be the "poorer" communities - predominantly African American or those having a low socioeconomic status. Of the damaged neighborhoods, 45.8% were African American and 20.9% of the households were under the poverty level (Logan, 2006). The housing in the Lower 9th Ward was completely destroyed with similar conditions in the other communities affected by flooding. Because more than 50 levees were breached in the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina, human error has been blamed along with deeming it the worst engineering disaster in the United States (Mcquaid, 2005). Communities such as the French Quarter, Uptown, and Garden District, "nicer" or wealthier communities, suffered little damage or were relatively untouched by the storm or flood water.

Some conspiracy theorists attribute natural disasters, such as hurricanes like Katrina, to the HAARP (High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program) in Alaska which was established in 1993 to study the properties and behaviors of the ionosphere with "particular emphasis on being able to understand and use it to enhance communications and surveillance systems for both civilian and defense purposes" (HAARP, 2010). Although being considered a "civilian project," conspiracy theorists have focused on the need for funding from the US Department of Defense, Air Force and

Navy participation, and a roll call of academic bodies involved with the program. One of the HAARP's projects includes the association of weather modification and weather-altering weaponry (McConnachie & Tudge, 2008). The suspicion of weather modification and weaponry has placed HAARP at the forefront of conspiracies trying to explain tsunamis off the coast of Asia, major earthquakes in the Americas, and devastating hurricanes such as Hurricane Katrina. Although this conspiracy may seem farfetched in the grand scheme of things in New Orleans, the idea of this type of government participation and government mistrust is alive among some New Orleanians.

Although Hurricane Katrina can be associated with the HAARP as well, it has more sociopolitical motives attributed to it than other natural disasters. Many believe that the levee was intentionally breached so that the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, prominently African American and lower class, would flood and save the upper-class neighborhoods from any devastation (Marable & Clarke, 2007). Of the 7,700 public housing units available before Hurricane Katrina in these communities, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced in 2006 that over 5,000 of the public housing units would be demolished, some of which were completely unaffected by the storm. Congressman Richard Baker (R-LA) said, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." (Whitney, 2007).

CHAPTER III

Theoretical Ideas

The social implications behind conspiracies have a history in liberal thought, conflict, and social exchange theories. The premise of almost any conspiracy theory starts with class conflict or opposing social groups - the idea that one group has more power or control over another. Early German philosopher Georg Hegel specifies that all personal relationships can be reduced to master and slave, powerful and powerless constantly trying to prove themselves, and can be projected to describe interactions between groups, even nations (Popper, 1996). Karl Marx, who was very influenced by Hegel's ideas, made a foundation of ideas on his dialectical methodology, an idea that the material world is reflected by the human mind, and in turn, can be seen as the base of class conflict (Marx, 1998 [1846]). Although Marx's ideas mainly focus on economic forces within society, his analysis of class structure and conflict can clearly influence the politics behind the modern conspiracy. In Marx's *The German Ideology* in 1845, he wrote under the Ruling Class section, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force" (Marx, 1998 [1846], pg. 61). This idea links the social and economic power of the elite class over lower classes, also giving them control over societal ideas; in this case, control over conspiracies, the acceptability of conspiracists, and producing "Good vs. Evil" mantras.

A modern look at conflict theory is Neo-Marxism; Marxist and class conflict ideas that can apply to the twenty-first century and globalization. Neo-Marxism looks at

social inequality and social control on a global level, much like that of Immanuel Wallerstein's, *The Modern-World System* (Wallerstein, 1974). Other theorists can attribute social control to elite class power and the use of mass media to project and instill ideas and images on the lower classes (Debord, 2000). Although these theories seem to be scattered throughout history, their reoccurring themes of domination-subjugated relationships help analyze the modern-day relationships between who has the power of mainstream thought, especially concerning controversial issues. The group holding power over ideas or has control over a given situation also has the same power of dictating levels of social acceptability. By this relationship, all who oppose this mainstream thought are automatically placed in lower social positions, either through direct persecution or a more subtle stigmatization.

Social exchange theories can be used to analyze the individual reactions and group interactions with conspiracy theories. In social exchange theories, social stability and group interactions are explained by process of a giving-receiving methodology where each party strives for a positive reward (Moideenkutty, 2005). According to George Homans (1961), social approval is the basic reward one person can give another and is the reward most sought after. This idea can be used to describe a person or group's reaction to a conspiracy, depending on how radical and socially acceptable the conspiracy, or how stigmatized it is in normative society. It can also determine the comfort level for conspiracists, in determing which groups of people are “safe” to talk to about their beliefs, and which will stigmatize them further.

Labeling Theory and Social Stigma

Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma, where *stigma* is defined as a gap between virtual and actual social identity, links social identity and behavior together, and is also seen as a *moral* status in society. A person's social stigma, or behavior that does not flow with the attributes society has selected, can be socially discrediting and provoke a negative stereotype and status for that person, resulting in labeling according to that stigma (Goffman, 1963). The key element here is the negative implications of having a stigma, which has also been created and reinforced throughout history. A stigma, once referred to in the medical sense, now has been applied figuratively and socially but with the same disgust and shame as associated with in the past, creating a labeled group with a stigma attached to it. This labeling clearly relates to what kind of societal pressures a person may feel when being verbally open about conspiracy. Once a person recognizes that a stigma has been placed on him or her, they often control the amount of information he or she presents. Although some conspirators choose to plunge head first, without regard for any social stigmas, some people choose to keep their beliefs inside and regulate the amount and quality of information they choose to speak about.

Goffman (1963) recognized that there are three types of stigmas, which refer to physical deformities, blemishes of individual character, and ascribed stigmas such as race or religion. For purposes concerning conspiracy, only the second type of stigma is applicable, whereas "blemishes of individual character" can refer to beliefs patterns or radical ideologies - stigma identifiers that are not easily identifiable.

In reference to social identity and status, having a stigma placed on a person (such as being labeled a "conspiracist") causes that person to be discredited in his or her

behaviors and as members of society. Goffman (1963) referred to those who are not stigmatized as *normals* and explained that the stigmatized person, having a now spoiled identity, has to be reclassified by social categories because he or she no longer fit "our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be" (p.3). Much of how normative society, or the *normals*, treats conspiracies and conspiracists, marginalizes them and their beliefs, labeling them as different once their beliefs are revealed. The stigmatization causes social alienation where it has a two-fold effect on the stigmatized: first, they are a discredited person who is cut off from normative society and will face "an unaccepting world"; on the other hand, he or she is still strong in their beliefs and feel like they are no different than the *normals* (p. 19). This two-fold concept is apparent in conspiracies because of their stigmatized nature and how they are portrayed in the media showing societal alienation, but they maintain dedicated followers by various types of people who blend in and out of normative society. For example, JFK conspiracists or 9/11 Truth followers who know they may be marginalized for their beliefs, but feel right and "normal" in their convictions, stay dedicated to these conspiracies for years, or possibly decades.

Social interaction and stigma are very much correlated with first impressions, especially if the stigma is something physical. For conspiracists, the stigma will only be noticeable by others depending on how much information they choose to share during interaction with others. Goffman (1963) recognized the importance of first impressions and stigma management, "Stigma management is an offshoot of something basic in society, the stereotyping or 'profiling' of our normative expectations regarding conduct and character…" (p. 51). Conduct and character are part of the important signifiers for

conspiracists, since it is not seen as a physical affliction. During the initial meeting, there is a heavy emphasis on uncertainty from the stigmatized, causing their behaviors to range from cowardice to hostility as the meeting develops (Goffman, 1963). While this is certainly the case for physical stigmas, conspiracists have a more complicated time with uncertainty because they will not know the others' reaction until they provide them with stigmatizing information about themselves.

Stigma management, or managing the amount of the stigmatizing information a person reveals about their self, is influenced by the personal relationship the stigmatized has with those surrounding them, and how knowledgeable they are of their belief system that could cause *stigma*. Close relationships can often times be difficult to maintain because of fear of the stigma spreading to other individuals, as often seen with societal outcasts (Goffman, 1963). This "guilty by association" mindset can also apply to paranoid individuals, or known conspiracy theorists, isolating them to a small group of friends or having very limited personal connections. However, if the stigmatized individual practices information control, they can manage many acquaintances, and feel accepted in informal social gatherings or in the workplace (Goffman, 1963).

As stated previously, the stigmatized individual knows that he or she are marginalized for their beliefs but are determined to live a normal life, "normal" to mainstream society. To do this, they have to resocialize themselves to learn how to be normal, and what is defined as normal in response to living with a stigma. Stigmatized individuals might have already been through the "stigma learning" phase of their lives, often taking place during socialization as a child, by being teased or taunted for their difference (Goffman, 1963). Sometimes stigma can occur later in life, causing the

stigmatized to have to re-identify their place in society while they have already been socialized of the separate identities *normals* and stigmatized individuals have. This process is especially true for conspiracists, who were not born with a specific stigma but developed conspiratorial ideas later in life. They might have been socialized to feel a certain way about conspiracies and their believers; conspiracies are not rational, calling conspiracy theorists "crazy," or using conspiracies as humor. During this "post-stigma" phase, acquaintances and personal connections can see the newly stigmatized individual as "a faulted person," the beginnings of being seen as a discredited individual in society (Goffman, 1963 p. 35). Relating this process to social interaction, it is easy to see how conspiracists can be socially isolated with few personal connections.

Stigmatized individuals are not always socially isolated from everyone; they have other stigmatized groups to make contact with and become organized in various ways. This group membership, whether on a very small scale or nationally recognized group, provide a stigma "group" where individuals can identify themselves as "we," or "our people" in a collective sense (Goffman, 1963). Some group organizations find a speaker for their cause, or a representative to help them with their case. Normally, this process is meant for Goffman's medical or ascribed stigmas, such as the deaf or racial groups. Conspiracy theorists can find others who believe in the same conspiracies as they do, and they can organize as groups, but may not organize on the national level, or find a representative or for their cause. The more they can organize for their beliefs or stigma, they take on a "professional" role and soon their social participation can either credit or discredit their stigma.

Goffman provides a substantial amount of insight on social stigma, stigmatized individual, and their social interactions. However, his focus on physical and ascribed stigmas, with a brief mention of radical political behavior, leaves much to interpret for conspiracists and social skeptics. Conspiracists are not as easily identifiable as those with physical deformities or a stigmatized race and thus do not have "stigma identifiers" or a visible defect to denounce. Changing societal values of what is "normal" and what is considered "crazy" socially can causes the stigma surrounding conspiracies to fluctuate over time. Conspiratorial thinking is a much harder stigma to diagnose because of the information control an individual has, the "visibility" of the stigma, and fluctuating social values.

Additional scholarship to apply theoretical social stigma has included stigma attached to unwed parents leading to adolescent criminal behavior (Kendall et al., 2010), adoption practices (Fisher, 2003), and the homeless population (Phelan et al., 1997). Still, the concentration of stigma research continues to analyze and interpret mental illness (Phelan, 2005) and health issues (Fife & Wright, 2010). Although stigma has been applied to better understand deviancy and health concerns, there is little research on the relationship between social stigma and conspiratorial behavior, other than what I have identified in this paper.

CHAPTER IV

Methodology

The overall purpose of this research is to make a critical examination of the public perception and social engagement surrounding conspiracy theories, including the people who believe in them, and to analyze and compare participation among different levels of education and socioeconomic statuses. There are three main questions this research has addressed: (1) Under what conditions would a person speak openly about conspiracy, and under what conditions would they remain silent? (2) What are the social factors that draw a person into joining with others who believe a particular conspiracy has occurred? And (3) is there any relationship between a person's education or profession that would increase or hinder a conspiracist's visible participation of their beliefs?

A total of thirty interviews was conducted to compare participatory patterns and engagement among those with different demographic backgrounds, taking place amoung three separate interview groups: 10 people interviewed in New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA) during August 1-6, 2011; 10 interviewed at the 9/11 site in New York City (NYC) during the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, September 10-11, 2011; and 10 interviewed in West Virginia (WV), August 16-December 31, 2011. The interview groups in NOLA and NYC have been incorporated to include regional and situational-specific analyses of the September 11th, 2001 attacks and the Hurricane Katrina 2005 flooding in New Orleans. Although the West Virginia interviews are not situation-specific, their 'general' beliefs in varying conspiracies also add to the regional analysis. To protect respondents' anonymity, they have been coded by their location and

numbered 1-10 accordingly (ex: WV01, NYC07, NOLA09). The 9/11 site respondents are coded as NYC, but that does not mean all the respondents are from New York City, as seen in Chapter V under section "9/11 Site Respondents (NYC)."

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews allowed flexibility and personal experiences that would not have been achieved through surveys because of the complex nature of why people are skeptical, the number of conspiracies that exist, and the need for intimacy for people to share their stories. An interview guide corresponding for each interview set was designed in advance to include event and location-specific questions. For example, the interview guide for New Orleans respondents included questions in reference to Hurricane Katrina, race, and disaster aid response[1]; likewise for 9/11 site respondents, the interview guide included questions about September 11, 2001, how often respondents participate in event anniversary activities, and conspiratorial ideas concerning the event and Building 7[2]. Since there are no specific events addressed for the West Virginia respondents, the interview guide was designed to include questions concerning belief in any conspiracies and when they started feeling that way in life.[3] Respondents were also asked age, sex, race, marital status, religion, political identity, occupation, and education. Respondents had the freedom to include any information not addressed in the interview guides, and those responses have been included in the interview transcripts. See Table 3.1 for demographical characteristics of respondents.

Table 3.1: Demographical Respondent Characteristics

[1] See Appendix B: Interview Template for New Orleans Respondents
[2] See Appendix C: Interview Template for 9/11 Site Respondents
[3] See Appendix D: Interview Template for West Virginia Respondents

	NOLA	NYC	WV	Total	Percent
	Number	Number	Number		
Demographics					
Total	10	10	10	30	
Age					
Less than 25	2	0	4	6	20%
26 through 35	4	7	5	16	53%
36 through 45	1	1	0	2	6%
45 and older	2	2	1	5	16%
Did not answer	1	0	0	1	3%
Sex					
Male	7	7	6	20	66%
Female	3	3	4	10	33%
Race/Ethnicity					
African American	1	0	0	1	3%
Mixed Race	1	0	0	1	3%
White	4	7	9	20	66%
Other	1	0	0	1	3%
Did not answer	3	3	1	7	23%
Marital Status					
Married	2	1	2	5	16%
Single	7	9	8	24	80%
Widowed	1	0	0	1	3%
Religion					
Christian	6	3	2	11	36%
Atheist	1	0	3	4	13%
Other/None	3	7	5	15	50%
Politics					
Liberal	3	0	1	4	13%
Conservative	0	0	0	0	0%
Other/None	7	10	9	26	86%
Education					
Less than H.S.	2	0	0	2	6%
H.S. or G.E.D.	2	3	0	5	16%
Some College	3	5	5	13	43%
Bachelor's Degree	0	0	2	2	6%
Higher	2	1	3	6	20%
Did not answer	1	1	0	2	6%
Occupation					
Service Industry	7	3	3	13	43%
Construction/Trade	1	3	0	4	13%
Professional/Career	1	3	5	9	30%
Full-Time Student	0	0	2	2	6%
Unemployed	1	0	0	1	3%
Did not answer	0	1	0	1	3%

The overall demographical information presented in Table 3.1 puts the majority of respondents as single, white males between the ages of 26 and 35. Two-thirds of the respondents were male at 66% and, although the researcher approached males and females alike, it was often males who were introduced during snow-balling for respondents. Religious beliefs were placed into three categories: Christian (all Christian denominations, including Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, and Protestant); Atheist, for respondents who identify as "atheist"; and Other/None (includes respondents who identify as Wiccan, Agnostic, Buddhist, or preferred to answer as having no religion. The majority of religious beliefs, with half of the respondents, fall under the Other/None category. Likewise with politics, three categories were made that include: Liberal (respondents who identify as Liberal, Democrat, or "Left"), Conservative (for those who identify as conservative, Republican, or "Right"), and Other/None (includes Libertarians, Independents, and those who replied with having no political leaning). The majority for political beliefs also falls into the None/Other category with 86% of the respondents. Finally, the majority of the respondents have some college (43%) and work in the service industry (43%).

People were interviewed in New Orleans, Louisiana August1-6, 2011. Because no respondents were initially known to the researcher, interviews were conducted by approaching people in more popular areas around New Orleans, including in the French Quarter and surrounding areas. Some common places that respondents were found included coffee shops and outside areas, such as benches, throughout the city or by the Mississippi River. Most people that were approached randomly declined to be interviewed, with the most common response that they did not, "want to talk about the

storm." A couple of respondents provided names of others who had conspiratorial leanings, to allow the snowball technique to be used of finding additional respondents.[4]

People were interviewed at the 9/11 site in New York City, N.Y. September 10-11, 2011 during the weekend of the 10th anniversary of September 11, 2001. Websites such as world911truth.org were previously checked to see where 9/11 Truthers would be gathering, and to determine if a demonstration would be organized at a specific location. There were centralized gatherings and demonstrating on Church Street, Vessey Street, and Broadway near the National September 11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan.[5] All interviews were conducted outside on site during the demonstration on site.[6] No one refused to be interviewed, most likely due to their already existing willingness for participation from being at the 9/11 site.

Respondents in West Virginia were interviewed August 16-December 31, 2011. Because there were no time constraint, respondents could be located through snowball technique and interview times were scheduled to the respondents' convenience. The interviews also did not have a centralized location, but respondents varied in residence from Huntington, Charleston, and smaller towns in southern West Virginia. The most common interview locations were in respondents' houses or in a neutral meeting place such as a library. Only a handful of people, once contacted, refused to be interviewed.

[4] Although there are no statistics that most conspiracists are men, this pattern started off early and by the 7th respondent I started to only approach women to be interviewed, who most refused.
[5] The Truthers had to keep moving to each street due to police barricades and changing traffic patterns.
[6] Because of the location and anniversary events, some interviews were rushed. NYC07's interviewed had to be stopped twice for moments of silence at 8:46am and 9:03am.

Participant Observation in New York City

Participation observation was the most appropriate methodology for conducting research at the 9/11 site in New York City during the 10th anniversary of the September 11th events because of the specific events that were happening that weekend. There was no single formal organization to represent the people standing for 9/11 Truth (or Truthers, as often referred to), but a collection of groups and individuals who found each other to assemble one large grouping of hundreds of people. Some of the groups included World for 9/11 Truth, 9/11 Firefighters for Truth, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, Remember Building 7, Scientists for 9/11 Truth, as well as smaller factions and individuals who came without an official affiliation.

After my interviews were complete, I continued to stay with the protest group and picked up a sign with a wooden handle to hold which said, "Remember Building 7." Up until this point, I found New York City extremely friendly and hospitable, quick for strangers to offer smiles and volunteer subway directions. By this point, I had associated myself with the 9/11 Truth Movement by constantly being in their "protest area" interviewing people, engaging in conversations, and now actively participating by holding a sign with the movement. As I listened to others' conversations, they mostly talked about 9/11 conspiracies, sharing their own ideas about what happened, and were glad to meet like-minded people. Some of the older group members would compare their 9/11 Truth experiences with previous conspiracies, such as the John F. Kennedy assassination and Watergate scandal.

My participation was received very warmly when most of the crowd was starting to recognize my presence from the previous day as well. The two-day experience had a

very communal feel to it, where everyone was very open with each other and extremely trusting of their new friends. In relation to this "community" setting, being a young female traveling alone, the group took to me quickly, almost in a protective manner, making sure I had a place to stay and that I was taking every precaution to be safe around New York City. During this time, I was offered many buttons and stickers, one button that I did put on which was set up like a math equation to say, "3 Buildings – 2 Planes = WTF??" Also being associated with the Truth Movement, I was interviewed by two separate media sources about why people were protesting and further questions regarding United States occupations in the Middle East.

I wore my button for the rest of the day, including when I left for dinner by myself and traveled back to Brooklyn to where I was staying. Public reception was not nearly as warm as it had been previously, and more people stopped to read my button or stare at it on the subway. Although reactions were not overtly aggressive, I was asked, "Did you see those nutbags?" and also, "You don't really believe them or think like that too, right?" Both were referring to the 9/11 Truthers and the Truth Movement in a negative and stigmatized approach.

CHAPTER V

Analysis and Results

The analysis of this research containing thirty transcribed interviews from three interview locations, New Orleans, LA., the 9/11 site in New York City, NY., and West Virginia, are presented in that order followed by an analysis of overlapping trends and of the research questions: (1) Under what conditions would a person speak openly about conspiracy, and under what conditions would they remain silent? (2) What are the social factors that draw a person into joining with others who believe a particular conspiracy has occurred? And (3) is there any relationship between a person's education and profession that would increase or hinder a conspiracist's visible participation of their beliefs? First, each respondent set will be analyzed to include common themes and modes of participation, followed by a development of typology to assess different styles of participation found among the respondents: the Engaged Theorist, the Cautious Theorist, and the Hidden Theorist.

New Orleans, Louisiana Respondents (NOLA)

Conspiracy theories unique to New Orleans, and Hurricane Katrina, provide for a whole hidden subculture to the conspiracy realm. Likewise, they are not as popular or as romanticized as pop-culture conspiracies such as alien cover-ups or the JFK assassination, both still explored and re-explored by the media. After interviewing ten people in New Orleans, there are reoccurring themes of race, a "corrupt" city government, and how the town has vocally "moved on" from Katrina. It should be noted

that not all ten of the respondents believed in conspiracies concerning Hurricane Katrina specifically, but did believe in other conspiracies or have heard of Katrina conspiracies from other people in New Orleans. However, this brings to attention of why conspiracy in New Orleans is so unique: the blurred lines between paranoia, conspiracy, and a mistrust in the government start to defy traditional stigmas because these definitions are not so clear cut anymore.

A History of Racism and a Corrupt City

The issue of racism in New Orleans cannot be ignored from a historical standpoint and in post-Katrina New Orleans. Disaster has hit the "poorer" neighborhoods time and time again, which are majority African American. Historically, during flooding and hurricanes, the levees were intentionally breached in the poor, black neighborhoods in order to save the richer parts of the city. When first asked thoughts on what happened to the levees, NOLA02, a 55 year-old man who has lived in the 9th Ward of New Orleans his entire life said, “Okay, during Hurricane Betsy, they blew the levees over there to stop Canal Street, St. Charles Street, and all the other high-class neighborhoods from getting flooded out, so they open down here on us.” He has seen the same patterns now with Hurricane Katrina with no upkeep on the levees and the prejudice that exploded after the hurricane. According to NOLA02, part of the reasoning for the slow aid response was racism: "..they did what they did is they don't want the blacks back in the 9th Ward."

Although NOLA02 was the oldest New Orleans respondent at the age of 55 and lived through previous detrimental hurricanes, NOLA06, a 29 year-old male also from New Orleans, reflected on conversations with older people in New Orleans who have

carried these Hurricane Betsy sentiments through Katrina as well. NOLA06 is one respondent who claimed to not believe in any conspiracies surrounding Katrina, and when asked where he has heard others who have he replied,

> I think if you talk to older people who have been here, that comes from the previous floods and Betsy, there was a very strong belief that the levees were actually blown... I think a lot of that feeling carried over from that experience.

It was reflected among other respondents as well, of the importance of Hurricane Betsy and the levees that were intentionally breached during that time in relation to Hurricane Katrina.

The idea that levees were intentionally breached and intentionally built weaker during Hurricane Katrina has stayed in step with similar sentiments concerning previous floods, which most respondents felt was embedded in racism. When asked about race issues in post-Katrina New Orleans, NOLA10, a 32-male from New Orleans, said,

> Literally a month ago I heard someone say on a local talk radio that there needs to be another hurricane because of how much trash is living in New Orleans. People have that kind of attitude now. The city is more affluent now than before storm.

NOLA09, a 30 year-old female, also felt that "they purposefully breached the levees" to sacrifice the poor neighborhoods to keep other areas from flooding. Like NOLA10, it was very much a race issue for the levees being built weaker, breached intentionally, and having a slow aid response during the flooding.

Eight of the ten New Orleans respondents also felt strongly that New Orleans has a "corrupt" city government that has played into the Katrina disaster and as well as other city events. Even before Katrina, NOLA06 believed that money has been rerouted that was supposed to be used for levee repairs. He described it as, "Generally you will find

things that always move around... it gets handed off all over the place." For some respondents, the disaster was seen as a catalyst to allow for more "crooked" behavior from the city, especially with money and the slow aid response with recovery funds. NOLA07, a 22 year-old male from Shreveport, described it as, "...they did a lot more structural damage to buildings and can jack up the check to the contractors."

Funds were a big issue for why a city would purposively flood some of its neighborhoods, but some also thought they were a part of bigger, social experiments. These ideas are now not just limited to the local city government but addresses social experiments from a governmental national response. NOLA07 described his theory that slow aid response was also "more disruption, an easier redistribution of land ownership, more ability to test the average American under Martial Law." NOLA08, a 39 year-old male, felt that the aftermath of Katrina was, an opportunity to create a laboratory. He explained, “FEMA has gone into cities, all over the country, to run drills... when they saw the opportunity, they seized the opportunity to exasperate the problem. So then they could roll in at a later date and conduct their military exercise." Although not every respondent interviewed felt this way, it was a common practice to provide some structured reasoning as to why the city seems so corrupt, and why there was so much confusion during Katrina.

As a consequence of the slow aid response and the explosion of racism that followed Hurricane Katrina, three respondents raised the issue of the rest of the country not caring about what happened to New Orleans. Both NOLA01 and NOLA10 felt that, if

any other part of the country was devastated, help would have come much sooner.[7] NOLA01 shared,

> I really sincerely believe the local and federal response, if we had been San Francisco this would not have happened. If we had been New York, D.C., it wouldn't have happened that way. I really think that New Orleans isn't that important to the rest of the country.

Likewise, NOLA10 felt that, "if it was the country capitol of the world, everyone would have been trying to save the city and rebuild it."

The immediate response that came to New Orleans, was not funding for repairs, but was a military presence in the city. NOLA09 felt that Katrina awakened some deep social issues in New Orleans, such as racism and corruption, a part of that seen through the heavy military presence in the city. Concerning the troops in the city, NOLA09 described, "I think they were trying to keep people down rather than help them. Why did they even have troops here? Was it a war against the people of New Orleans?" The paradoxical combination of overbearing military presence and lack of federal national concern for New Orleans has created a collective feeling that people "just don't care" about New Orleans.

Talking about Katrina

Although Hurricane Katrina is a fairly recent disaster, happening fewer than seven years ago, there is a common belief that theories surrounding Katrina, and talking about Katrina itself, is slowly dissipating with time. There are three themes surrounding talking openly about Katrina: 1) there is less belief in Katrina conspiracies, 2) people "don't care" to talk about it anymore, but once were active in these theories, and 3) Katrina is

[7] Note, both NOLA01 and NOLA10 are not from New Orleans, but are transplants to the city.

easy to talk about in New Orleans because of how many people believe in Katrina conspiracies. These themes also include respondents who did not personally believe in Katrina conspiracies, but are aware of people who do and talk about their participation in these theories.

Because Hurricane Katrina was an event that spired conspiracies, unlike ongoing conspiracies concerning surveillance or government policies, there is an issue with time causing conspiratorial beliefs to fade away. NOLA01, a 32 year-old female, believes that both 9/11 and Katrina are being talked about less because of how much "time has passed." Specifically with Hurricane Katrina, NOLA01 feels that people are talking about it less because of the city trying to move forward and forget about it completely,

> I just feel like people don't talk about Katrina so much. Everyone's more focused on recovery, more than trying to uncover something, and people are trying to get their lives together and move forward from it. I think there's less of a belief that they did anything deliberate during Katrina.

The focus of recovery after Hurricane Katrina, with addition to the amount of time that has passed, has slowly pulled people away from thinking there was anything intentional about Hurricane Katrina and the theories that followed.

Similar to the first theme, the second is that time continues to limit the number of people talking about Katrina conspiracies, but the belief is there. Unlike the first category, time does not dissipate any conspiratorial beliefs; it just curbs the rate at which it is brought up in day-to-day conversation. NOLA09 remembered after the storm, when everyone shared their theories in New Orleans. When asked why they stopped, she replied, "I don't think it's too sensitive of a subject, but I don't know why anyone doesn't talk about it anymore." NOLA09 herself does not continue to talk about conspiracies because she does not want to be met with criticism. Similarly, NOLA02 used to be vocal

about Katrina but does not talk about it anymore because people "don't care," a sentiment also felt by other respondents.

The third theme includes respondents who feel that talking about Katrina conspiracies is easy. This group includes respondents who have heard others talk about these conspiracies, indicating that there is openness throughout New Orleans that these ideas are still being talked about. NOLA07 has no problem talking about conspiracies in New Orleans because the people in the city, "really seem to believe it." NOLA03, a 47 year-old male Deputy Sheriff who worked during Katrina, has heard people share that the levees were blown on purpose, although he personally does not believe in them. When asked if he still heard these, he replied, "I think they're still strong."

It should be noted that some respondents who felt that it was easy to talk about Katrina conspiracies in New Orleans, were comfortable with sharing other ideas of conspiracy with anyone as well. These respondents, like NOLA05, NOLA07, and NOLA08, are comfortable sharing and talking about conspiracies with anyone if approached on the subject, but will rarely bring it up to strangers for fear of arguments, criticism, and being thought of as "crazy."

The Gulf Oil Spill

The 2010 British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was referred to by four respondents in terms of conspiracy and public response. Two respondents, NOLA09 and NOLA06, did not see a direct link to Hurricane Katrina but both felt there were injustices and foul play. NOLA09, indicated that although it was not related to Hurricane Katrina,

there were still corruption and secrecy surrounding the event, exclaiming that, "they tried to keep it covered up." "They" was not defined by the respondent.

Although only four respondents referred to the oil spill in their interview, the recentness of the oil spill allows for strong feelings among the respondents and the people of New Orleans. Also, as indicated by NOLA06, the oil spill did not happen *within* New Orleans, nor had the appearance of being a natural disaster.

> I think it's easier for people to talk about the oil spill because they see it as a foreign attack. It's something that happened off the coast, not actually in the city, it was being managed by British Petroleum. It's not really the same as it was, I want to call it Mystery Oil, when they had a spill in St. Bernard parish that was much more internal and people felt much more betrayed. It's always easy to talk about what feels like an outside incident.

The oil spill provided for someone to blame, and was considered an "outside incident" or an "attack" on New Orleans. It is much easier for New Orleans residents to talk about the oil spill because of how recent it is, and also because a "they" is more definable in the situation for blame.

The other two respondents, NOLA05 and NOLA08, believe that conspiracy has a much bigger part in the 2010 BP spill. NOLA05, a local chef in New Orleans, believes that Hurricane Katrina and the oil spill were not coincidences. He referred to both events as a way of displacing New Orleans residents because the area is needed, "It could be some type of oil that we don't know about, something that's here that they want and they need the people to leave. For us to move out of their way." NOLA08 also feels that the oil spill was intentional, because of the political structural changes BP saw before the spill. NOLA08 noted that the previous BP CEO "started selling off all his stock in BP. As

soon as he left on January 1st, Tony Hayward came in, and started selling off his BP stock, almost indicating that something was coming."

Transplants

"Transplants" are referred to people who are not originally from New Orleans, and have "transplanted," or relocated, to the city. NOLA10 is the only respondent who used this terminology and refers to himself as a "transplant." I wanted to determine if being a Transplant would have any effect on believing in Katrina conspiracies or the participation patterns that New Orleans resident display. NOLA10 refers to transplants as "generally more progressive. You don't get a ton of transplants who are from right-wing areas; they don't want to come to New Orleans." There are four respondents in total who are transplants to New Orleans, NOLA01, NOLA05, NOLA08, and NOLA10 (who does not identify as a theorist, but recognizes corruption in local governments); and there is no known disruption in their conspiratorial beliefs or theory engagement with others. The transplants are actually more vocal about their beliefs than New Orleans residents and tend to believe in additional conspiracies such as 9/11, FEMA, and weather modification theories.

Defining Conspiracy in a Corrupt City

Conspiracies about Hurricane Katrina and the oil spill are unique because of how conspiracy is defined. Conspiracy theories outside of New Orleans include this view of *normative* society and *abnormal* society where normative is defined by "normal" values of obeying and having a trust in authority figures, such as the government or the media;

abnormal would include rejecting these values, resulting in the mistrust of authority, often paralleled with conspiracy. In New Orleans where corruption is so common, the new norm *becomes* questioning the city government and having a collective, known knowledge of this corruption. Common phrases heard from the New Orleans respondents include, "I believe that it's possible," "I wouldn't put it past them," and "It wouldn't surprise me."

Where does that leave conspiracies? On more than one occasion a respondent would follow up a story of city corruption with, "But that's not a conspiracy." By doing so hints at the fact that normally city corruption would fall under a conspiratorial category, but not in New Orleans where this behavior is normal. Concerning the levees, NOLA06 indicated, "Well that's not a conspiracy, it's pretty known that they were supposed to do repairs to those levees over the years and they money never got to them." Although disappearing or rerouted government money would be considered a conspiracy under "normal" circumstances, it is not rare behavior in New Orleans and is no longer considered conspiracy. This acceptance can also be applied to the overwhelming knowledge of racism in New Orleans. The correlation of racism and building weak levees was common throughout the interviews but was not often directly stated as conspiracy. Once again, it was seen as common knowledge, and not seen as the rare occurrence of a conspiracy.

This presents a larger question concerning conspiracists in New Orleans. If you consider this model that the norm in New Orleans is having mistrust in the local government that they would build weaker levees and do intentional harm because of racism, this would mean that conspiracies, and conspiracy theorists, are now relative

because of the location. Although this is not seen as having conspiratorial beliefs within New Orleans, it could be considered conspiracy on a larger, national scale. The four respondents who identified as not believing in any Hurricane Katrina conspiracies should now be addressed. Two of these respondents, NOLA03 and NOLA04, did not show any mistrust in the local government other than describing the levees as "poor planning." Because they did not mention corruption, they will not be considered to have any conspiratorial beliefs about Hurricane Katrina.[8] The other two respondents, NOLA06 and NOLA10, both have a deep mistrust for local governments and have extensive knowledge about city corruption. For the purpose of analyzing participation patterns and community engagement, they will be included as having conspiratorial beliefs for this research.

9/11 Site Respondents (NYC)

Conspiracy theories surrounding the September 11, 2011 events are arguably the most popular, current theories of our time. What makes 9/11 conspiracies unique is the transformation from a group of likeminded conspiracists to a social movement – the 9/11 Truth movement, referring to the participants as Truthers. Ten people were interviewed at the 9/11 site in New York City during the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks (September 10-11) and all respondents were actively participating in the 9/11 Truth demonstration near the World Trade Center Memorial site. On the basis of conspiracy, the interview transcriptions reflect that different respondents believe in different theories concerning 9/11, and that distinction is worth noting. The importance of media has also

[8] NOLA04 is not excluded as a conspiracist for the rest of the study, because of her beliefs in additional conspiracies such as 9/11.

had a lot of influence on the types of theories that exist within the movement, creating a documentary subculture on 9/11 and also fueling research interests for conspiracists. Another major theme is the act of participation and engaging in the movement, by coming to anniversary events and continuing the education back in their hometowns. Last, the 9/11 Truth movement exists like a social movement; it has a collective identity and a strong sense of community as well as faces pressure from mainstream society that presents a "you're with us or with them" framework.

It should be noted that none of the respondents interviewed are from New York City but are from various states and four are from outside of the United States.[9] Throughout the main themes and trends presented, the respondents from outside of the United States do not reflect any unique behavioral patterns other than feeling more comfortable talking about 9/11 theories and having faced less discrimination than the United States respondents.

Who Believes What?

There are varying levels of belief and different types of 9/11 conspiracies represented in the respondent group. However, all ten of them started out the same way: they believed in the official story presented by the media, then something changed, either being exposed to media or another's influence, that caused them to seek out 9/11 Truth. Once each respondent there was "more to the story" about 9/11, he or she took his or her own approaches to believing what happened; some respondents were specific, others only indicated that September 11th needs to be reinvestigated. Some respondents also

[9] Through conversation, I did hear many other Truthers say they are from New York City. I did not ask the respondent where they were from before starting the interview.

identified the "mainstream" theories about 9/11, providing a distinction between the normal, most common theories and "crazier" theories.

Every respondent went through the same thought patterns from September 11th, 2001 to present - from believing into the official story presented by mainstream media to now seeking more answers about what happened. Two respondents, NYC05 and NYC07, were skeptical at first, but still believed the official story. NYC05, a 31 year-old female from London, remembers her experience during the attacks,

> ...when it first happened I never suspected anything about it when it was announced. Within a few days after that they identified the hijacker from a passport they found in the rubble and I thought, 'hang on a second, surely this can't be right.'

NYC05 felt something was amiss but did not start believing in 9/11 conspiracies until a few years later in 2003. NYC07, a 53 year-old man from Rhode Island, also felt something was amiss on September 11, 2001, "When I saw the first tower collapse and the smoke coming out of it, I was very astonished because I know that no steel building in the history of the world has come down due to fire." Although NYC07 felt this way, he did not become a Truther until later when a friend presented him with evidence that the World Trade Center buildings fell due to controlled demolition theory. However, NYC07 initially felt the urge to want to enlist in the military right away, but did not once he was presented with evidence that the September 11th attacks were an "inside job." NYC03, a 28 year-old male from Iowa, also considered joining the military. He remembered, "Yeah I believed it all. I believed the Al-Qaeda lies. I even thought about joining the military because I believed in it so much but I'm glad I didn't." NYC03 did not join the military because he felt that he would not make it back home alive.

The other respondents did not start questioning the September 11th events until much later, starting in 2005. Much of the exposure came from a curiosity from the respondents - the "entertainment" of conspiracies drew them in. For NYC02, a 37 year-old man from New York, he also believed in the official story until he looked into countering information in 2005, "I was more curious than anything, I didn't expect to believe in it. Really who wants to believe this? I thought it would be entertaining to watch documentaries on conspiracy theories." NYC04, a 33 year-old female from London, was fascinated with watching 9/11 television programming until she started to do her own research as well. Once she started to question the events of 9/11, she also noticed how media programming presented their image in a way to deride alternative theories. She explained,

> I was fascinated with this and I was drawn into it. …When I heard about the conspiracies, a couple years later, when I started to read this I read about some really good things and I started to think it was interesting but also thought it was a load of rubbish, and now I know that was the way they wrote the story and they do this with a lot of debunking programs. They'll start with some really good evidence, assassinate some people's characters, they just twist it around so by the end of the program you come to the conclusion that the conspiracy is a load of rubbish.

NYC04's insight was shared by other respondents who often mentioned the how the Truth movement and 9/11 events are presented by "corporate media" with a biased view of the official story, or do not show any alternative theories at all anymore. NYC06, a 29 year-old male from Rhode Island, expressed there has been a "total black-out on information" available to those seeking truth about 9/11.

Of all the conspiracies that surrounded the September 11, 2001 events, they are usually lumped into one category: "9/11 conspiracies." Three of the ten respondents

included in their interviews that there are distinctions made between normal, or mainstream, theories about 9/11 and the "crazier" ideas. NYC03 and NYC04 both identified the "no-plane" theories as being radical in the 9/11 schema of theories and is not a part of the mainstream theories. Even then, there are many more theories to consider. When asked what theories NYC05 believed in, he explained, "There's so many and I don't believe in all of them, especially not any of the crazy alien ones where Obama is a reptile and Bush is a space invader. I go for the way the buildings came down." Like NYC05, other respondents also focus on a combination of mainstream evidence (two planes present) and their own research findings.

Although not all respondents were specific on what exactly they believed happened on September 11, 2001, more than half did provide their own theories that pointed to existing mainstream 9/11 theories. Those who were not specific indicated that 9/11 was an "inside job" and that there was more to the story than the public knows. NYC08, a 29 year-old male from Australia, admitted that he does not know what happened on September 11, 2001, which is why he was a part of the Truth movement. He explained, "It's not about what I believe or what I think. I just don't know and that's why I'm here. I don't know exactly what happened. After this many years we should know." The other respondents who were specific with their findings present the following as common 9/11 theories: Controlled demolition took down World Trade Center buildings 1 and 2 (with knowledge of planes being present), World Trade Center building 7 was also destroyed by controlled demolition (no plane present), a missile was fired into the Pentagon, Flight 93 was shot down, the CIA had prior knowledge about the attacks, the 9/11 events were a catalyst for war in the Middle East, and the 9/11 events were a catalyst

for a one world government. The most popular of these theories is that the World Trade Center buildings 1, 2, and 7 were all destroyed by controlled demolition. An overlying theme is that the government had knowledge, or perpetrated these acts, and is lying about the official story.

The Impact of Loose Change *and Other Media*

Nine of the ten respondents have watched documentaries about 9/11 conspiracies since their decision to reject the official story. The popular phrases in response to which documentaries have been watched was, "I've seen them all" or "most of them," as well as noting they've watched "too many to count." The inclusion of documentaries and the high number that have been produced indicates the importance that media has in the Truth movement.

The most notable documentary for 9/11 conspiracies is *Loose Change*. Six of the ten respondents mentioned *Loose Change* in their interviews, and some attributed the documentary as a gateway to the Truth movement. *Loose Change* was the first documentary NYC02 saw; he described it as, "…the best way to be introduced to it [9/11], like a crash course. It gets right to the point and the heart of the matter." NYC03 accredited the documentary for pushing him into questioning the official story. When asked what changed his mind he responded, "I watched the very first *Loose Change*. It just blew my mind, I couldn't believe it, then I started researching things myself." Likewise, NYC08 had similarly started questioning the official story in 2006 when he saw *Loose Change*. NYC09, a 28 year-old female from Tennessee, had a slightly similar, but also differing experience with the documentary. Her gateway into believing in 9/11

conspiracies was through her boyfriend, already a member of the movement. He is also friends with Dylan Avery, who was the director of *Loose Change*.

Doing internet research has been an integral part of 9/11 conspiracies, where most respondents did their own research initially, after rejecting the official story being presented by the media. *Prison Planet* with Alex Jones was mentioned twice out of the interviews, as a way for respondents to keep up to date on news, or anything new about 9/11 Truth. The website for *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth* was also mentioned twice as a way to keep informed about new 9/11 truth, and also for information for upcoming presentations. NYC04 has seen Richard Gage, an architect from *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, speak twice and frequents the website regularly. NYC04 also continues to do research regularly on other conspiracies she believes in, such as on pharmaceutical companies.

Some respondents have found that they do not research as much as they used to. NYC05 explained, "I can keep an eye out for things new. I'm not really doing any more research because I've done it all, but I keep an eye out for new stories or get a heads up from friends." Likewise, NYC06, a 29 year-old male from Rhode Island, also continues to research to check new, alternative news sources, but doesn't do it as much as he used to. Unlike the other respondents, NYC06 takes information from these websites and passes them out as leaflets. But like NYC05, he also hasn't done that in a while because it "drains" him. Two respondents, NYC03 and NYC09, have also not researched as much but identify as working on the problem, allowing no time for new research. NYC03 described his research as, "Not so much in the last six months, but for three years before that I was on those websites every single day. Lately I haven't been able to since I'm

working." NYC09 has the same dilemma, blaming her work schedule for keeping her from 9/11 updates.

Spreading the Truth

The 10th anniversary for September 11th was described as "the big one," and "the" anniversary to attend in New York City. Of the ten, it was two respondents' first time at a 9/11 Truth event, although the rest have attended events in New York City before or in their hometowns. Only one respondent, NYC01, identified as being there as a part of a larger organization, World for 9/11 Truth.[10] Other respondents traveled there in a group or traveled by themselves to participate in the anniversary event. Outside of the anniversary events, the respondents found other ways to spread information for 9/11 truth. Back in London, NYC04 gave out leaflets and talked to people about the 9/11 events. Similarly, NYC06 found importance in talking to strangers on the streets and striking up conversation. He explained, "Any chance to speak with people who really don't know or haven't looked into any of it." Back in Syracuse, New York, NYC02 also likes to burn DVDs and hand them out to people.

Merchandise is also a big unifying factor in the movement as well as a way to spread information about its cause and beliefs. Aside from passing out burned copies of DVDs, NYC02 also likes to wear hats, shirts, and bumper stickers to spread awareness. NYC07 also wears his "Investigate 9/11" shirt at home in Rhode Island as a way of spreading information. Outside of the respondent group, most of the 9/11 Truthers wore

[10] There were additional organizations represented at the event, including Firefighters for 9/11 Truth, Scientists for 9/11 Truth, and other countries with Truth organizations.

"Investigate 9/11" shirts, passed out leaflets, free DVDs, bumper stickers, and various 9/11 Truth buttons.

A main reason for the continuous spread of information about 9/11 is because it is also seen as fulfilling a civic duty. Over half of the respondents felt that it is their *sense of duty* to continue to educate themselves, as well as others about 9/11 truth. When NYC02 started to reject the official story and do research on his own, he put everything in his life second to spreading the truth while he describes the rest of the world is trying to move forward and forget about 9/11. He explained,

> How long can we do that? When are we going to say that enough is enough? We need to put these guys on trial. Whether that's going to happen or not, I go to bed and sleep better at night knowing that I am doing the best I can to get the information out. If I die tomorrow I can die saying I did my best trying to make it a better world. For me as an individual, I am nobody, I am a working class nobody. I'm not going to change the world by myself. My small contribution to the whole will hopefully make a difference.

Likewise, NYC05 felt like she cannot sit around while the official story is still being told; she has "to do something." Another common feeling among the other respondents included the need to "bring justice for the victims of 9/11" by spreading the truth about 9/11 events. Additionally, some respondents are "proud" to tell others they believe in 9/11 truth, furthering their cause of spreading information and not being ashamed to be a of investigating the 9/11 events.

Talking about 9/11

As explained, the respondents have spread information about 9/11 truth in their hometowns and to strangers they meet in their travels. The biggest activity for spreading

9/11 truth is by having conversations and talking to people about these issues. Some themes among the respondents indicate that (1) people are slowly becoming more open-minded now and are receptive for 9/11 truth, especially in New York City; (2) 9/11 truth is still a sensitive issue in New York; (3) people "don't care" to hear about 9/11 truth; and (4) despite discrimination, respondents will spread their message to anyone who will listen.

Three respondents felt that talking about 9/11 truth is becoming easier with time.[11] When asked whom he feels most comfortable talking about his views with, NYC01 said, "I never had problems talking about it. People are much more open-minded to this than before." NYC01 was aware that that some people are judged for their beliefs, but felt that "more and more people wake up to this and it's becoming less true." Although facing discrimination in the past, NYC04 felt that it's much easier to talk about these issues in New York during her visit for the 10th anniversary. She explained,

> A lot of people are open to it. I'm actually surprised that since I've been in New York I've talked to people about this and they're very open to the facts of what happened that day, the anomalies, and listening to it.

This was NYC04's first time in New York City and she felt that it was easier to talk about it the anniversary event than in London. Likewise, NYC09 also felt that it is easier to talk about 9/11 truth in New York City. She described an experience she had on the day before the interview, on September 10th, 2001, "My boyfriend was wearing his 'Investigate 9/11' shirt yesterday and no one said anything bad, some people actually said, 'Hey, nice shirt' or would ask questions about it."

[11] It should be noted that two of these respondents are from outside of the United States

On the other hand, some respondents explained that it is still hard to talk about 9/11 truth in New York City. Although NYC08 did not face any backlash in New York City during the anniversary events, he still felt that it's harder to talk about since the issue is "still a real soft spot" for New Yorkers. Similarly, NYC03 was worried about offending family members who lost someone on September 11th, but did not feel talking about the issue was easier and or harder than normal.

At home in Iowa, NYC03 also talks about 9/11 to his friends and family but feels that people do not care as much as before. NYC04 also explained the same experience happening between her and her friends. She explained, "I've tried to talk to them but I can just see they're not interested in even listening." NYC04 also continues to talk to her family about 9/11; although they still believe the official story, she feels that they are "coming around to something" concerning the 9/11 events. NYC02 has also had trouble talking to his family about it, which he describes as "beating a dead horse," and that they do not care to listen to him.

Despite some respondents facing discrimination for their beliefs, nine out of the ten respondents are comfortable talking to anyone about 9/11 conspiracies. In fact, most of them prefer to talk to strangers as a way of spreading information to those who may not have been exposed to these ideas before. NYC07 explained,

> The people who want to hear it the least are the people I want to talk to about it the most. They give you funny looks, holler and swear at you, but I feel it's important for them to hear the other side of the story.

NYC02 has also been called "crazy' and faced discrimination at work, but still finds it easy to talk to strangers, "I got over if people think I'm crazy or whatever." Of the nine

respondents who feel comfortable sharing their beliefs with anyone, three of them prefer to talk to strangers.

The Truth Movement

Conspiracy theories that surround the 9/11 events take on many forms and various ideas but prove to have an organized conspiracist community. In fact, they reject the idea that it is still considered *conspiracy* because of the number of facts that have been presented by 9/11 truth organizations to further their cause. NYC06 explained that the Truth Movement is "pointing out information" and should not be confused as theories. Likewise, NYC01 recognizes that there are *theories* about what happened on September 11, 2001, but he is interested "in facts, based on science."

The Truth Movement has many organizations to further its cause as well as an event for all Truthers to join together for each year. *Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth*, as well as *Scientists for 9/11 Truth*, provide the movement with credibility that is hard to gain as a conspiracy. Although nine of the ten respondents did not identify as being a part of any organization, their community functions in a very organized manner; they have merchandise to promote their cause, websites they frequent for research, and documentaries about their beliefs. They are also very collective under this banner of seeking truth, appropriately called the Truth Movement. Some common phrases heard among the respondents include that that 9/11 was "an inside job," the official story "doesn't add up" and "doesn't make sense," there are too many "unanswered questions," and there needs to be a "new investigation." There is much solidarity in the movement,

which disbands the notion of being conspiracies, but rather a group seeking truth about what really happened on 9/11.

Starting with initial news coverage of the September 11, 2001 events, mainstream media has had a large impact in the making *and* criticizing 9/11 conspiracies. The media's coverage and lack of coverage on certain events has caused speculation. Going back to NYC05's first problem with the official story, she was confused and felt unsure when the media released that it found the hijacker's passport in the destruction rubble shortly after the attacks. Although she did not reject the official story for a few more years, it was the first indication something was not right with the official story. The media's *lack* of coverage of World Trade Center Building 7 has also sparked belief that the building was destroyed by controlled demolition and there was something else going on for the media to not cover it. Building 7 remains a mystery to the movement as well as to those who believe the official story. NYC09 explained,

> Building 7 is a complete mystery and there is no information on it. They never did any research on it, or committed any time on it, nothing in the commission report about it. A lot of people don't know anything about Building 7, then when you ask them you get a lot of weird looks.

The government released video of the Pentagon also caused speculation in NYC02. After analyzing the photographs and the government released video, he has concluded that the Pentagon was hit by a missile, not an airplane. The type of video that was released was also questionable to NYC02. He explained, "The most protected building in the world has still-frame cameras? They use those in gas stations." Although the media has promoted an official story to what happened on September 11, 2001, their lack of coverage and discrepancies has actually fueled 9/11 conspiracies among the respondents.

Not only are criticism and ridicule the norm for Truthers, the mainstream media has also promoted this "us or them" framework concerning 9/11 conspiracies, which parallels to "good or evil" or "patriots or terrorists." NYC09 sees this as a reason for why someone would not talk openly about conspiracies. She explained, "When you have people who don't agree with what you're saying, unfortunately they throw the word 'terrorist' around. Being a patriot depends on which side of the line you stand on." She also went on to explain how closely link the word "conspiracy" is linked to this process, because of such a heavily negative connotation it carries. She also explained, "I like using the 'Truth Movement' because of the way it's said, it's an actual movement not a conspiracy." The Truth Movement is continuing to push to be recognized as a movement, not as 9/11 conspiracy theorists.

West Virginia Respondents (WV)

Much like in New Orleans, exploring conspiracists in West Virginia provide a look into a hidden subculture and community of conspiracy. The ten respondents from West Virginia were not given any specific conspiracies to talk about, like that of the New Orleans and the New York City respondent groups. Instead, the respondents could explore avenues of conspiracy interesting to them, where some of the most popular responses included 9/11 conspiracies, the JFK assassination, and hoax moon landings. A major theme that is apparent among this respondent group is that these feelings of skepticism, that "there's more to the story," started earlier in life than the other respondent groups, that had specific events to incite conspiratorial beliefs and behaviors. Since the emergence of their skepticism, the respondents have engaged into the

conspiracy community by watching documentaries, television shows, keeping up with websites, and some continue to do research on their own. Talking about conspiracy is a different matter, by which most of the conspiracists only share information with their close friends and family, avoiding discussions at work all together. The respondents were also aware that there exists an “us or them” framework for sharing conspiratorial viewpoints, on national and local levels.

All of the respondents are from, or currently living, in various places in West Virginia, including the cities of Charleston and Huntington, and a few small towns. Only one respondent is currently living outside of the state in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and is originally from a small town in the southern part of West Virginia. Because this respondent (WV02) has only been living in Pittsburgh for two months, his small town background will be considered during analysis. For location purposes, three respondents live in small towns, two respondents live in the city of Charleston, and five respondents live in Huntington, West Virginia.

“There’s more to the story”

The West Virginia respondents are more skeptical, and have often second-guessed mainstream information at much earlier ages than in New Orleans and in New York City, where they have had events to spark conspiratorial beliefs. These respondents often feel like there is "more to the story," and "something else going on" when presented with mainstream news and ideas. WV01, a 30 year-old male, doesn't remember ever not being skeptical and having paranoid feelings. He explained, "That's just one of the earliest things I can remember learning is that don't just trust something without looking into it

yourself." Also starting young, WV06 and WV05 both have parents who believe in JFK assassination conspiracies and felt they were raised to question things. WV06, a 25 year-old female, explained that she was raised to think about things scientifically and has a father who believes in JFK theories. Once she stopped believing in God in high school, it also lead to more questioning. Similarly, WV05, a 27 year-old female, was raised on theories about the JFK assassination. She reflected, "I was raised to be skeptical, to see things that, or to not take everything at face value, and to not just believe things without investigating them." She began research as a child, starting in 3rd grade by checking out library books on the JFK assassination, and later continuing her research at age 12 by investigating extraterrestrials.

For two other respondents, these feelings also came at a young age, but were triggered by specific events or circumstances. WV07, a 25 year-old male, felt that it was his living conditions that attributed to his skeptical mindset. When asked when he started feeling this way, he replied,

> If you grow up with the advantages a lot of people have... Like I grew up on welfare as a child, you kind of automatically question things. Like why do others have what I don't have? What advantages do they have on me?

He links conspiracies to advantages, disadvantages, and inequalities that exist. By noticing these inequalities, he automatically thought that, "something else is going on." With conspiracies, WV07's reflection is no different, "I think a lot of conspiracy theory is built upon advantage." WV02, a 29 year-old male, also thought you should question everything, but for different reasons. His first experience was with UFOs when he watched one being pursued by a military helicopter at age seven. He remembered, "I

questioned almost everything after that because UFOs were not supposed to exist." This event jump-started his activity into investigating other theories as well.

WV08, a 51 year-old female, was also raised to think critically but really attributes growing up in the Vietnam era to being "a free thinker." She explained, "Because I grew up during the Vietnam era, anyone that grew up in that era should always question everything because nothing was as it was reported in that era. There was always suspicion, there was always things that were hidden." She also remembered the Watergate scandal and has never believed the official story in the JFK assassination.

For other respondents, these feelings have been somewhat recent with two respondents remembering the 9/11 events as a catalyst for conspiratorial beliefs. Both respondents WV09 and WV10 had some levels of government mistrust and skepticism in their mid-teenage years, but both also felt that those feelings hit their peak with the 9/11 events. WV10, a 26 year-old male, explained his experience with coming to these feelings at ages 14 to 15,

> In general just hearing shit and thinking it couldn't be right, there's no way that's right. And just being young talking to all my friends that were older and they were into it, they were telling me about it and I started researching it, then 9/11 happened and that just blew the doors open.

Anything from then on, he would read and do research on his own. He is still a firm believer of 9/11 conspiracies.

Often times, respondents get into conspiracies because they are interesting, or entertaining. Claiming not to "buy in" to most conspiracies, WV01 continues to watch documentaries and conspiracy videos because he finds them interesting. Likewise, WV07 explains that, although he doesn't believe every conspiracy out there, "they're still interesting." He also explains how some of the "crazier" conspiracies can be seen as

metaphors, "like those reptilians are those disgusting skin-bags who's running shit now." WV05 also noted she likes to keep an open mind to any conspiracy available; her skepticism keeps her open to new theories and ideas.

As previously stated, no specific conspiracies were asked by the questioner and the respondents had freedom to include any conspiracies they believe in. Conspiracies concerning the 9/11 events were included by all ten respondents; for those who believe in specific 9/11 theories, such as no plane hitting the Pentagon, or those who feel that 9/11 needs to be reinvestigated. The existence of aliens were mentioned by four respondents, followed by the fake moon landing theories included by three respondents. On the whole, there is embedded mistrust of the media, government, and figures of authority among the respondents. WV02 explained, "We have been taught to accept answers from our 'superiors' (such as parents, bosses, teachers, police, religious leader) with unabated agreement." He also indicated that if you are against this process, it leads to negative consequences, especially when you "find holes in a superior's story." This mentality also includes the behind-the-scenes agreements between corporations, governments, and corporate media; which operate all under the guise of promoting official stories in their interests. Other conspiracies mentioned by respondents include HAARP, vaccines, rigged elections, and various governmental theories.

Media Influence

All ten respondents have watched, and continue to watch, conspiracy documentaries and television programming, while fewer frequent alternative media sources for news and continue to do research on their own. Although most of the

respondents have seen popular documentaries such as *Loose Change*, *Outfoxed*, and the video on the hoax moon landing, a lot of respondents include television shows for conspiracy media. Television programming included History Channel specials, *Ancient Aliens*, and *Mythbusters* seen by some respondents.

Some respondents continue to check websites such as *Infowars* for news, including WV04, a 25 year-old female, who does her own research but is sometimes afraid of using search engines. She explained, "I'm even weird about what I search online because I'm afraid it might come back to haunt me." However, she does frequent *Infowars* and a website by Kevin Trudeau that updates on conspiracy theories. On the other hand, WV08 does not focus on specific websites but she gets her news from BBC, to read unbiased news concerning the United States. When asked about new sources, she replied,

> I usually get my news from BBC because I think they're more accurate giving us American news. You have to watch, because a lot of our news stations are so biased with their own agendas that they're not really news, they're social propaganda.

Not only are some respondents seeking conspiracy news, but they are also concerned with the validity and quality of the news source. Likewise, WV02 only reads *Reuters*, "It's reliable and not biased. No opinions really, just news."

Four of the ten respondents included that they continue to do research on conspiracies on their own by searching the internet. WV03, a 24 year-old male, did a lot of independent research right after the September 11, 2001 attacks, which led him into 9/11 conspiracies. Since then, he has continued to research theories on his own, including those including corporations. Similarly, WV06 uses the internet to research as much as she wants to as well. WV07 will also do research on the internet, but he prefers to gather

information from scholarly articles and nonfiction works, such as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*.

Talking about Conspiracy

All of the respondents are familiar with the negative consequences they might encounter, or have already encountered, by talking about conspiracy theories. If some are open about their beliefs, their friends or family might avoid those topics altogether, especially when faced with political or religious differences. There is also the national mentality and proposed "us or them" framework for those who choose to open about their conspiratorial beliefs, knowing they might be socially reprimanded or put into the "terrorist" category. Although all avenues of discrimination can be faced, it is assumed that the workplace will cause the greatest consequences, where having a conspiratorial mindset can fringe upon a person's professionalism.

Talking about conspiracy theories is hard for those who know they might be socially reprimanded for their beliefs. WV06 refers to this as the "coming out" process for conspiracists. She explained, "It's kind of like what I'd envision 'coming out' for some people. Like 'coming out' about a dark secret." She also explained that it's a process for finding likeminded individuals; a way to weed out people who are going to disagree with you. Since WV01 is open about his feelings of political discourse and governmental mistrust, he has acquaintances that will avoid these conversations all together. WV01 explained, "There's certain people that I know that avoid discussing things like this with me, because they generally know what my persuasion is." These people are not close, but acquaintances that he might encounter casually. This has also raised the issue of political

and religious differences, and how political discourse is often associated with conspiracists and altercations with others. WV03 referred to his family's religious and political ideology for reasoning he does not feel comfortable talking about his conspiratorial beliefs, "My family is religious, and though not intensely political, still quite conservative and not open to any ideas that might go against their beliefs or faith in the government." Likewise, WV10 feels he would be least comfortable talking to his father about his beliefs because of how "conservative" his father is.

It is recognized that this mindset does not necessarily start at home but on a governmental level. There is an overbearing sense that the messages promoted by government policy (or major corporations, according to some respondents) and mainstream media are correct and should not be questioned. When asked why it's so hard for some people to talk about conspiracies, WV05 reflected, "It's kind of hard when you have people that, well we're kind of taught to be patriotic and to stand up for our country, and that the government's right, but the government is not always right..." Questioning government policy, or opening up to people who firmly believe the government is always right, is a gateway to confrontations that WV05 would rather avoid. WV10 elaborated on government policy and how it reinforces marginalization among those with opposing ideas. He explained that it's worse now,

> Because of the Patriot Act and stuff like that you can't talk about these things. You used to be able to, well not really, but now it's even worse. They'll talk shit if they're listening to you. And if you make a big hurrah about something you'll be on watch lists, labeled a terrorist, all kinds of things.

WV07 remembered the beginning of the post-9/11 mindset and shared a story about a debate he had with a coworker of the 9/11 events. He described that he got into a "heated

debate" and that the coworker "was totally bought and sold on the 'if you're not with us, you're against us' thing." The message has been set that any opposing views are wrong, even dangerous.

A couple of respondents reflected that while the normative message might be that questioning the government is wrong, it is actually a form of patriotism that the United States was founded on. WV08 explained,

> When you think about it, when we started this country they would have been called conspiracy people. Now they're patriots. But any time any kind of social change or anything that's different and not within the norm, sure there are [negative consequences].

Likewise, WV02 quoted Thomas Jefferson in stating that "Dissent is the highest form of patriotism" and that "questioning events should be the American way, not blindly accepting them or avoiding possible new facts." Being labeled as a "terrorist" is only one of many consequences that someone might face when speaking openly about conspiracies. WV01 explained that "you're automatically considered kooky," "crazy," and people are made fun of and joked about. It also could be an embarrassing situation for people you're around that do not want to be identified with you. WV01 also described, "If you're at a party and you bring some guy who's preaching about 9/11 to everybody there, you're probably going to be like 'sorry about my friend.'"

As far as not talking about conspiracies, most West Virginian respondents felt that they would be least comfortable talking about their beliefs at work, and that it would hurt any images of professionalism. WV04 shared that she felt if she talked about her beliefs at work, people would look at her differently. When asked to elaborate, she explained, "...the beliefs will make me seem crazy and I don't want to mess up any professional relationships that I have." She stated that she's very careful not to ruin her reputation by

talking about her beliefs at work. WV05 also felt she would not talk about her beliefs at work for fear of judgment, or that "you don't want them to think you are dumb." When asked to elaborate on why they would think she's "dumb," she explained, "Some people aren't very open to conspiracy theories in general. And I'm in the mental health field, there is some sort of line between 'I believe in this conspiracy' and 'I'm having pathological delusions.'" Other respondents indicated that you just don't bring politics up at work.

Defining Conspiracy in Appalachia; Ideas of Logic

Conspiracy theories and conspiracist behavior is not clear cut among the West Virginia respondents. Conspiracy has been refined by some respondents that may not fit into the mainstream definitions of conspiracy; that they also need a reformation of *what* is considered conspiracy in order to see if what they believe in falls into those categories. Considering this, they also make distinctions between mainstream conspiracies and "crazy" theories, providing a scale on how to judge those theories and their validity. There is an embedded sense of government mistrust, that is much attributed to being raised in impoverished West Virginia, which also has a sense of regional pride, with two respondents identifying their ethnicity as Appalachian. Most importantly, there is an overlapping theme of rationality, skepticism, and being a "free thinker" when it comes to believing in conspiracies, and being open to new theories.

On the first mention of *conspiracies*, three respondents felt that they needed to define *conspiracy* for themselves and what it meant to them in the first stages of the interviews. WV07 indicated that conspiracy is "a really loaded word," and explained he

would rather say, "there's a lot of stuff out there that's portrayed in a certain way that I don't necessarily agree with." WV05 expressed early in the interview, "What do you mean by conspiracies?" She quickly linked her belief in extraterrestrials with a definition of conspiracy, while aliens and UFOs don't always fit into the "conspiracy" schema at initial thought. She explained about including aliens into conspiracies, "What I wasn't sure on was the stuff about the aliens? Because I don't think they are really plotting against us, or being hidden away or anything." She also referred to the JFK assassination theories as more "traditional" theories than including aliens. Likewise, WV01 felt that conspiracy is also a too loaded term for an easy definition. When first asked about conspiracies, he first replied with, "It depends on what you define as a conspiracy." When asked to provide his own definition, he explained,

> I look at conspiracies as, well there are a lot of things that are considered as wild and 'out there' that are probably true. I guess I've always looked at it as if it's a 'conspiracy' then it's probably not true. Maybe for me the term has a negative connotation.

In reference to his viewpoint and definition, WV01 expressed that there has to be "grains of truth" in theories for him to believe in them, and that he does not believe in conspiracies once they leave "the realm of empirical evidence" and become "wacky."

Even though others may not have refined the definition of conspiracy, they did provide evidence of distinctions between theories; those that are logical and others that are too "crazy" to have any truth to them. It is recognized that some theories are found more "plausible" whereas others are considered to be "out there." WV09 explained that he follows David Icke, a British theorist, who lectures about the New World Order but takes his theories too far. He recalled,

> It all fits together and usually makes sense... then he gets to the lizard people and I mean, he had me at one world government, but why go one step further? I think he wants people to think he's crazy when he mentions reptilians so it throws people off his game.

By including reptilians, it made his theories too "crazy" and lost credibility, and he could lose part of his fan base as well. As far as what WV05 believes in, she knows any conspiracy will have a negative impact if she talks openly about them, but she described it could be worse, "It's not like I'm wearing my tin foil hat waiting for them [aliens] to come or anything, so I think that's probably fine. It's just that there's a fine line and you worry about people thinking you've crossed it." Crossing that line in her explanation would be taking her belief in aliens and going one step further to include a tin foil hat, often worn by conspiracists to prevent aliens or the government from intercepting brain activity.

On the spectrum from "plausible" to "crazy" theories, there is also room to include differences between conspiracies that are easy to talk about and those that are more sensitive in nature. Two respondents referred to the 9/11 conspiracies as the most sensitive to talk about. WV08 thinks it is much easier to talk about the JFK assassination than is it to talk about the 9/11 theories today. Likewise, WV04 also thinks it's a very hard subject to talk about. She explained,

> I think the 9/11 conspiracies, it would be hard for a lot of people to imagine the cause of that or what happened being any other way than how we've been told it happened. It is hurtful, a lot of people were lost, so that's something you'd be stepping on a lot of people's toes about.

The 9/11 theories are more sensitive in nature due to the recentness and the gravity of the events.

There are two somewhat conflicting views in relation to region, or state, presented by respondents. The first is presented by WV04, who indicated that it is hard talking about conspiracies in West Virginia because of the conservative nature West Virginians have. She explained, "...it is different in West Virginia. I think a lot of West Virginians are typically about standing by your government, believing in one way and no other way, so I think a lot of people are very close minded." As noted previously by West Virginian conspiracists, close proximity to conservative individuals makes respondents less comfortable talking about their beliefs. On the other hand, as previously explored, WV07 felt that growing up in poverty, and on welfare, has caused him to second guess those in power and economic inequalities. Although WV04 feels that most West Virginians are too close minded, there is evidence of a sense of community among conspiracists in the state, who seek likeminded others, but have to do be cautious in doing so.

There is an over-arching theme among the West Virginia respondents of connecting skepticism with conspiracy theories, not the 'sure and hard truths' found among some New York City respondents in the Truth movement. Whereas mainstream thought projects conspiracists as illogical and irrational, interviews show that respondents actually clarified the differences between illogical and logical conspiracies, and that they use rationality when believing in certain theories. As stated previously, WV01 felt that there has to be "grains of truth" in theories for him for take interest in them. Similarly, WV08 explained that the world is not in black and white, but has "nuances of grays." She described this as "being a free thinker," where you have to question news and social messages constantly being presented to you.

Following this model, that means that some official stories are the illogical counterparts, whereas the explorative conspiracies are now rationalized answers to mainstream skepticism. WV02 recognized that mainstream messages are considered what is "logical" and the right answers, he described his participation with conspiracy theories as having, "broadly voiced what I feel are reasonably questionable holes in logic." His response questions the validity of normative "logic" by stating that there are often *holes* in that logic, and those holes give sway to new, *reasonable* questions. Questioning mainstream logic is expressed by other respondents, who said some common phrases such as, "there's no way that's right," "something else is going on," and "there's more to the story."

Developing a Typology

A typology was developed to place the respondents into three main categories based on the intensity of their participation habits as conspiracists: the Engaged Theorist, the Cautious Theorist, and the Hidden Theorist. The Engaged Theorist is the most active of the conspiracists, where they are open about their beliefs, have little or no hindrance when sharing their views with others, including strangers, and they might be actively continuing to do research on theories or physically participating in accordance with some theories, such as the Truthers at the 9/11 site in New York City were for 9/11 anniversary events. The Cautious Theorist is much more careful than the Engaged Theorists; they are wary with who they share their beliefs with and are afraid of the consequences for talking openly about conspiracy. Finally, the Hidden Theorist does not identify as a conspiracist at all, but shares similar views of government mistrust, paranoia, and skepticism as the

other respondents. Table 5.1 presents some basic behaviors of Engaged, Cautious, and Hidden Theorists found throughout the respondent groups. An "Other" group had to be created for respondent NOLA03, who believes in no conspiracy theories and does not share characteristics with any conspiracists.

Table 5.1: Typology Behaviors

	n=	Open about beliefs	Participates or active in beliefs	Aware of stigma	Percent (n)
Typology					
Engaged	20	Y	Y	Y	67%
Cautious	6	N	N	Y	20%
Hidden	3	Y	Y/N	Y	10%
Other					
No conspiracies	1	-	-	Y	3%

The Engaged Theorist

The Engaged Theorist typology makes up the majority of the respondents interviewed, at being 67% of the respondents, and are found in all three interview groups. The Engaged Theorists are the most active of the conspiracists and are generally open about their beliefs. They feel more comfortable talking to various groups of people about conspiracies, and some even prefer to talk to strangers. Although they may feel stigma exists for having conspiratorial beliefs, they feel little or no hindrance when sharing their views with others. Additionally, Engaged Theorists are very active, or were once active, in participating in their conspiratorial beliefs, by posting things on the Internet, actively

doing research, or physically participating by engaging in demonstrations or sharing conspiracy media.[12]

One quality that Engaged Theorists have is the comfort level to talk openly about their conspiratorial beliefs. Although NOLA02 felt like no one cares to talk about the levees being blown up in New Orleans in anymore, he expressed that he has been interviewed by media about it before and has never felt uncomfortable talking his beliefs. Feeling there is no threat involved, he stated, "I'll tell anybody I feel this way." Likewise, WV07 explained that he is not embarrassed of who he is and makes his beliefs open for everyone. WV02 felt the same way, explaining he had "broadly voiced" his beliefs. Some respondents felt comfortable enough stating they also express their beliefs to strangers, and sometimes prefer to do so. Three of the 9/11 site respondents specifically mentioned they preferred to talk to strangers, who might unaware of the theories, and are not afraid to approach them.

Another important quality the Engaged Theorists have is a high participation level in theory research, sharing, and physical participation in theories; either through open debate, posting information on the internet, or attending meetings or demonstrations. Some respondents, such as WV07 and NOLA05, both have used the internet to participate in forums or post theory information on social networking sites, such as Facebook, where they are easily identifiable. NOLA07 has also been engaged in open debate about his beliefs and is not afraid to post his ideas on websites. While most respondents have watched popular conspiracy media such as *Loose Change*, respondents who continue research can place them in the Engaged Theorist category. Some

[12] Participation defined by Merriam-Webster's (2012) definition for "participate," meaning to take part, to have a part, or to share in something.

respondents, such as WV10, have done research on 9/11 theories and continues to use the internet to research additional ideas of conspiracy. Similarly, WV09 frequents Alex Jones for news updates and does additional research on his own.

All respondents in the 9/11 site respondent group are Engaged due to the nature of how the interviews took place, and supplemented by their responses. The respondents were not pursued in their daily environments, much like those in New Orleans and in West Virginia, but were found at a conspiracy-related event where they were already showing signs of participation by engaging in the 9/11 anniversary events. All ten respondents felt strongly about sharing their message of 9/11 truth with people in their lives, and strangers on the streets. They were also very engaged by continuing to do research on 9/11 conspiracies, as well as sharing information by handing out leaflets or burned copies of 9/11 theory DVDs. Their commitments to the Truth movement, which includes traveling across the country and in some cases the world, are the very height of Engaged Theorists.

The Cautious Theorist

The Cautious Theorist is much more careful than the Engaged Theorists, and is the second largest typology that includes 20% of the respondents, only from the New Orleans and West Virginia respondent groups. These Theorists are wary with who they share their beliefs with and are afraid of the consequences for talking openly about conspiracy, especially in workplace settings. Not limited to friends, family, and coworkers, but they may also not feel comfortable sharing any information on social networking sites for fear of damaging their social reputations.

Cautious Theorists may or may not have close friends or family members they can share their conspiratorial beliefs with. NOLA04 used to bring up her beliefs about 9/11, but doesn't anymore as others also don't bring it up. She also does not talk about these views with her family or close friends, because "it leaves a bad impression on you." She also described that it's hard for people to talk about conspiracies because "you're look at like a nut job." WV05 is comfortable talking to her family and some friends, but she expressed that sharing that information with someone requires a certain type of relationship. She stated that she doesn't share much about herself, but especially not the level to be comfortable talking about conspiracies. Although most of the total 30 respondents feel uncomfortable sharing their beliefs in the workplace, the Cautious Theorist is no different. WV05 felt that she would not share her beliefs at work because of fear of judgment, and that they would think she is "dumb." Other respondents agreed that it would also hurt professionalism.

The Internet is another outlet for Cautious Theorists to be wary about, controlling how much, and the type of information they share. NOLA09 might have shared her conspiratorial beliefs with some friends, but doesn't on the internet because of how many ideas and different types of "truths" are already available on the internet. Similarly, WV03 does not put information on social networking sites because he explained it wouldn't "improve" his social life by posting things people find "weird or offensive." As mentioned previously, WV04 is also extremely careful about putting too much information online that might reflect her conspiratorial beliefs. The things she has posted on social networking sites is very limited, "because you don't know who's going to see it." She also felt that a person can be "punished" by sharing conspiratorial information,

and it might come back to haunt her. Likewise, she also shared she is careful about using search engines to look for specific information, and avoids them if she can. Other aspects in her life are controlled in the same fashion, with only her fiancé who knows about her beliefs.

Physically, the Cautious Theorist participates in few to no demonstrations, meeting, or other physical accounts of engaged in conspiracy theories. When asked if they participate in these ways, all Cautious Theorists but one said "no." The exception was NOLA04, who has participated in protests against the Church of Scientology, but quickly stopped after she felt like they were following her to her house. None of the Cautious Theorists offered any explanation to why they have not participated in a physical sense, other than through their explanations of stigma-related responses to conspiracists and their beliefs.

The Hidden Theorist

The Hidden Theorist does not identify as a conspiracist at all, but shares similar views of government mistrust, paranoia, and skepticism as the other respondents, giving them "theorist-like" qualities. This group is the smallest of the three main typologies, with only three respondents who fell into this category.[13] The essence behind this typology has been explored earlier in this chapter in which the definitions of "conspiracy" among New Orleans and West Virginia respondents are not as clear-cut as mainstream definitions might appear to be. Because of the negative connotations "conspiracy" has,

[13] Only from the New Orleans and West Virginia respondent groups, since the 9/11 site respondents were all Engaged

the Hidden Theorist rejects the idea of conspiracy although sharing similar characteristics of beliefs.

As stated previously, conspiracies in New Orleans are unique because of how conspiracy is defined. Conspiracy theories outside of New Orleans include this view of *normative* society and *abnormal* society, in which normative is defined by having a "normal," mainstream worldview that has trust in the government and authority figures. Abnormal society and conspiracies are often paralleled, giving conspiracies, and conspiracists, negative connotations that can make them seem dangerous to society. In New Orleans where corruption is so common, the new norm *becomes* questioning the city government and having a collective, known knowledge of this corruption; leaving the definition of "conspiracy" open to interpretation. This model has also be applied to the Appalachian region, where poverty and government mistrust has flourished for generations.

The three Hidden Theorists (NOLA06, NOLA10, and WV01) all have a deep mistrust for local governments and have extensive knowledge about city and national corruption. Theories that might considered as conspiracies to mainstream definitions, or location outsiders, are seen as facts and "not a conspiracy" to the Hidden Theorists. For example, both NOLA06 and NOLA10, recognize that they agree levees were built weaker in the poorer neighborhoods in New Orleans, but because it is common knowledge, it does not take on any conspiratorial elements of mystery, or behind-the-scenes behavior. Likewise, WV01 has a strong belief in the relationship between large corporations, the government, and political influence that "are considered conspiracies," but his definition of conspiracy only involved theories that are "wild" and "probably not

true." The negative implications of believing in conspiracies is so strong that the Hidden Theorist reverts their beliefs to facts and common knowledge, an easy task for shared characteristics that involve government mistrust and levels of corruption.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall purpose of this research was to make a critical examination of the public perception and social engagement surrounding conspiracy theories, including the people who believe in them. This study attempted to answer the following questions: (1) Under what conditions would a person speak openly about conspiracy, and under what conditions would they remain silent? (2) What are the social factors that draw a person into joining with others who believe a particular conspiracy has occurred? And (3) is there any relationship between a person's education or profession that would increase or hinder a conspiracist's visible participation of their beliefs? Respondents were interviewed in New Orleans, Louisiana; at the 9/11 site in New York City, New York; and in West Virginia and were grouped into the following typologies: the Engaged Theorist, the Cautious Theorist, and the Hidden Theorist.

Each research question will be answered and carefully explored in this chapter to also incorporate the fine line between clinical "crazy" and cultural "crazy," the importance of events as conspiratorial catalysts, and the importance of professionalism as a culture and among the respondents. Additional themes in this research also include gender disparities among conspiracists and passing on conspiracies in familial settings as a socialization process. The conclusion will also present a summation of this research and address the redefining of *conspiracy* and the implications of conspiracy as a stigmatized social construct, not a mental illness. Limitations to this research and future research suggestions are also addressed.

The Price of Stigma

The consequences of social stigma are the main reasons for controlling the conditions of when, where, how, and who conspiracists share their beliefs with. Part of the negative stigma held toward conspiracies is that they are illogical, irrational, and downright "crazy" (Hofstadter, 1964). Even more so, the fine line between clinically "crazy" and socially "crazy" has made having conspiratorial beliefs collectively jeopardizing, even dangerous. This stigma can affect conspiracists on individual levels, controlling the amount of conspiratorial information they choose to share with people around them; but it also affects how conspiracists are seen by society as a whole, that perpetuates an "us or them" mentality to political discourse. Stigma has also filtered down into the conspiracy subculture itself, where certain conspiracy theories are more stigmatized than others (e.g. aliens are "crazier" than political theories). The multilayered stigma attached to conspiracy theories has created boundaries among conspiracists for sharing their beliefs, as seen with all respondents, even within the Engaged Theorist typology.

Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma has been traditionally applied to ascribed and physical conditions, with brief mention of radical political behavior. His exploration into social stigma, the stigmatized individual, and their social interactions can be applied in the manner considering the impact stigma has on conspiracists' daily lives, much like an affliction. Once a conspiracist talks openly about his or her beliefs, it is projecting a *moral* status on his- or herself, that is often rejecting mainstream worldviews of normality. Goffman's idea of *moral* status, can also be seen as a quick indicator for

stigma - in this case, displaying that the individual is irrational, crazy, and sometimes dangerous to society. This quick labeling process discredits the stigmatized individual and all behavior that might follow. Many respondents were aware and are concerned about this relationship and knew that they have control over who they share their conspiratorial beliefs with because of the consequences that will follow. They are aware that consequences include losing their job, being thought of as "dumb" or "crazy," and some respondents have lost friends after sharing their beliefs. As for NOLA08, he explained that he has lost friends after sharing his beliefs,

> I have no close friends that really share my beliefs. In fact, once I really started to wake up and pay attention, and talking about these things, I lost about 90% of my friends because they didn't want to hear it.

In this quotation, he referred to "waking up" as when he started getting into conspiracies, and doing research on his own. NOLA08 is originally from Michigan, but moved to New Orleans when he lost most of his friends.

Information control is tricky for conspiracists, because they don't know how other people feel toward conspiracies when they first meet them. During any initial meeting, there is a heavy emphasis on uncertainty from the stigmatized, causing their behaviors to range from cowardice to hostility as the meeting develops (Goffman, 1963). One method is by judging the other person's political beliefs, to see if they are opposite from the conspiracist, and thus will have different worldviews concerning conspiracy. This process is seen among interaction between family, friends, and coworkers, where respondents have described they will not mention their beliefs if they know the other individual is "conservative" in their thinking.

Throughout all three typologies, it is apparent that some conspiracists feel more comfortable than others talking openly about their beliefs. What Goffman refers to as stigma management, conspiracists control their stigma by limiting the amount of their beliefs that they share, and also if they are seen with like-minds, for a "guilty by association" stigma. Whereas conspiracy is not the same as some physical afflictions, they can control how much information they share, and the process can be very personal to them. NOLA06 described a beautiful analogy concerning stigma management,

> It's why some people hide their poetry books. Some people will read their poetry anywhere; read it on a stage, tell it to people on the street, print it in a zine and not even sell it but give it away so that they can share it. Then there are other people, they'll write all day, but they keep it under their bed or locked away where it can't be seen. After so long they just burn it, it's too personal to share.

This quotation provides a look at those who are open about their beliefs, and who are more guarded; the Engaged and the Cautious Theorists. The Engaged Theorist knows of existing stigma but will speak openly about his or her beliefs. For the Cautious Theorist, they try to keep their beliefs hidden from the world, because the consequences to stigma are too socially damaging.

Stigma can create social isolation due to the world seeing the stigmatized as a "faulted person" (Goffman, 1963 p. 35). Conspiracists can feel directly socially isolated, for example, when they are ostracized after sharing their beliefs, or can feel mentally socially isolated, when they know they can only share their beliefs with certain people. This known stigma has created divisions among who conspiracists feel most and least comfortable talking about conspiracies with. Each respondent was asked where they felt most and least comfortable talking about conspiracies. The majority of respondents felt

the most comfortable sharing their beliefs with close friends and likeminded individuals. In only a handful of cases did respondents feel comfortable talking to family members, where most explained that their parents were more "conservative" or had a different worldview. The least comfortable place noted was in the workplace, sharing their views with coworkers or employers, or fear of judgment or losing their job.[14]

In criticizing conspiracy theories and conspiracists, a main argument has always been the issue of rationality; that conspiracists are irrational, illogical, have weak arguments, and have distorted realities (Kay, 2011). However, this research presents a view that is similar to Hofstadter's (1964) and Buenting and Taylor's (2010) approaches to rationality, where paranoia and skepticism actually promotes rationalistic thinking, and conspiracies cannot be deemed irrational solely on the basis on being a conspiracy. This holds true in cognitive research as well, where those who have skeptical thinking patterns also have significant cognitive and personality traits that include high intellectual achievement based on analytical and systematic reasoning (Caldwell-Harris, n.d.). Congruently, some respondents specifically indicated that they rejected official stories of 9/11, JFK, or other theories, because *they* didn't make sense and were illogical explanations. For example, respondents at the 9/11 site saw holes in the official story presented by the media concerning the September 11, 2001 attacks, and were often confused by it. Truthers see 9/11 conspiracies as more rational explanations than the official story provides. Some respondents in West Virginia also felt that being skeptical is actually being a "free thinker" and thinking about issues from a rational, logical point of view.

[14] The importance of professionalism is further explored in the third heading in this chapter, titled Education and Professions.

Whereas mainstream thought projects all conspiracists and conspiracies as illogical and irrational, interviews showed that respondents actually clarified the differences between illogical and logical conspiracies, and that they use rationality when believing in certain theories. Within the huge realm of conspiracies, stigma affects certain conspiracies more harshly than others. For example, some respondents viewed alien and UFO theories as being "crazier" than others, indicating that there are stigmatized lines with conspiracy culture. Social stigma has affected conspiracists' interaction with others, and continues to trickle down between conspiracists themselves.

Social Factors

There are many social factors as to why someone develops a conspiratorial mindset or is interested in joining a likeminded group, such as the Truth movement. These factors include that social isolation caused by stigma are attracted to "stigma groups," life-changing events that spur this conspiracies to life (e.g. Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 events), regional characteristics, and the issue of time elapsed from certain conspiracies. It is also hard when this change happens, because the conspiracists' worldview also changes, which often contradicts any mainstream worldviews. Some respondents have had a preexisting positive mindset toward conspiracies, while others were incited by specific events.

Although some respondents explained that their skeptical thinking and keenness toward conspiracies were a part of their upbringing, we have to assume the other respondents were socialized with mainstream definitions of normality and deviance, including the existing stigma that revolves around conspiracies. Goffman (1963) refers to

this as the "stigma learning" phase of their lives, where socialization reinforces societal norms and values about stigmatized others. He also recognizes that stigma can occur later in life, causing the stigmatized to have to re-identify their place in society while they have already been socialized of the separate identities *normals* and conspiracists have. This process is seen among respondents who have had a life changing event, such as WV02's encounter with aliens at a young age, or when 9/11 Truthers rejected the official story, causing them to reevaluate their place, and worldview, in society.

The largest "stigma group" explored in this research is the Truth Movement concerning 9/11 conspiracy theories. According to Goffman (1963), stigmatized individuals become organized in various ways to develop a community out of socially isolated people. Instead of being isolated, they can now identify as "we" and have a group to belong to, where the power of numbers reconfirm each others' beliefs. Although the realm of conspiracies is not one, large organized group, there is a sense of underlying community among conspiracists, that can provide comfort to those new to conspiratorial beliefs caused by events or other social factors.

A life-changing event is a social factor that causes conspiratorial beliefs, including the surge or skepticism or a changing worldview. Conspiracy can arise out of special events, especially when people feel threatened or have faced similar problems in the past (Lemert, 1962). As explored with the New Orleans respondents, conspiracy takes a different definition in a city filled with known corruption and existing government mistrust, seen with Hurricane Betsy and intentionally blowing up those levees. Although the majority of the New Orleans respondents were Caucasian, previous research has explored that African Americans are more prone to believe in conspiracies than

Caucasians (Crocker et al., 1999). Additionally, research on minorities has proved the same thing, where minorities have an embedded feeling of powerlessness and have low trust in authority and give way to skeptical thinking patterns (Abalakinda-Paap et al., 1999). Specifically in New Orleans, Hirsh & Levert's (2009) study suggested that the Hurricane Katrina conspiracies were born out of the economic tension between the rich, white upper class and the poor, black neighborhoods. This theme of powerlessness is congruent among the New Orleans interviews, which are rich with government mistrust, knowledge of city corruption, and the history that the levees have been destroyed intentionally before during previous hurricanes.

Social factors in West Virginia are more region specific, because the Appalachian region has reoccurring themes of generational poverty, government mistrust, strong kinship ties, and a history of folklore. Whereas Appalachians are often marginalized and seen like minorities, research that has been done on minorities and conspiracies can be applied to Applachians as well. Appalachians, like other minorities who have a higher mistrust of authority, also give way to skeptical thinking patterns, all being tied back to this feeling of powerlessness (Abalakinda-Paap et al., 1999). On a different note, the West Virginia respondents showed the highest inclusion of paranormal conspiracies, such as interest in aliens, UFOs, or referencing the hoax moon landings. This paranormal inclusion can first be explained by generations of folklore traditions, including storytelling and oral histories (Asbury et al., 2006). Next, the 1966-1967 occurrence of the Mothman, a mythical creature that was related to supernatural events in West Virginia, also had commonalities to traditional folklore in Appalachia, and was highly popular in the state (Brunvand, 1994).

Another social factor to consider for why a person would join a conspiracy, is the concept of time; and how some conspiracies are more accepted as more time goes by. For example, those who believed in JFK conspiracies feel that it is easier to talk about JFK theories than it once was and is definitely easier to talk about than 9/11 conspiracies. Another example would be the common knowledge of finding out later that levees were intentionally destroyed during Hurricane Betsy in New Orleans but is still a heated topic of debate concerning Hurricane Katrina. Once a conspiracy becomes more accepted over time, people are more inclined to believe in them and do they not seem as "crazy" anymore.

One social factor that might prohibit someone from believing in conspiracies or joining a conspiracy group is having to change a worldview. Some respondents explained that it is hard for others to develop this new way of looking at the world. NYC06 explained, “It threatens their entire version of reality, how they see themselves in the world, and their world.” Likewise, people do not even want to accept this other world exists. According to NOLA09, “People just want to be comfortable, they don’t want to think about the possibilities that other people are making decisions that we aren’t aware of.” These are examples of why someone wouldn't want to go along with conspiracies, this new worldview they would have to adapt. However, conspiracies and conspiracists exist, they must have bridged this gap at some point in their lives. NYC05 touched on this issue when answering why conspiracies are so hard to talk about,

> Number one, that conspiracies are really portrayed in a really negative way by the media in general. It has all these negative connotations that you're crazy or you're wearing a tin foil hat kind of thing, or you must believe in the reptiles, or that you don't think logically, or you want to make sense of a difficult world. That's what is being pushed by the media a lot, this whole image and people listen to that. That's how they see it.

> The second thing is also that once you actually accept that something like this actually happened, that certain elements within the government actually pulled off something as big as this, kill their own people, go to war over a big lie, actually if you think of all the details of how much work is involved, the planning, the foresight, the cold hearted calculating attitude people must have that is bordering on psychopathic, that is really scary. It will change your whole world view. You have to look at the world anew and there's no safety net anymore, you can't trust the government to keep you safe, or the media to tell you what's going on, all these figures of authority give you a safety net and that all falls away. It's a scary thing to actually accept that. It also holds people back because it's such a big step to take.

She pointed out the existing stigmas that are associated with conspiracies that people know about when confronted with this dilemma. She also described how scary it is for people to adopt a new worldview, one that might seem so different than one a person has had for their entire lives. As indicated, this worldview comparison is a reason that might hold people back from believing in conspiracies, or developing a conspiratorial mindset.

Education and Professions

After analyzing the relationship between conspiracists' education and their occupations to explore any causal reasoning that would increase or hinder their participation in their conspiratorial beliefs, it has been determined there is no known relationship. Within the three typologies presented by this research (Engaged, Cautious, and Hidden Theorists), no participation patterns in reference to conspiracists' education or professions were seen either. Although all respondents had different education levels from some high school to master's degrees and occupations ranging from unemployment to professional careers, the issue of appearing "professional" was a major factor that increased or limited their visible participation in their beliefs in the work place.

The Engaged, Cautious, and Hidden Theorists were categorized by respondents' participation levels, which included being active in theory research, how much physical, or visible participation they partake in. When cross-referencing their education levels and occupations, no trends are present. For example, Engaged Theorists have respondents with education levels as low as some high school and as high as master's degrees, and their occupations range from trade jobs, professional careers, to full-time students. Cautious Theorists show the same variety with education levels ranging from some college to completing bachelor's degrees, and occupations ranging from professional careers, service industry, to full-time students. The same can also be said for Hidden Theorists whose education levels include some college to a master's degree, and occupations are service industry, professional career or who may be unemployed.

Despite the variety shown among the respondents, the majority exhibited a deep concern of maintaining a professional image in the work place, which cannot be achieved if they choose to be open about their conspiratorial beliefs. Going back to Goffman's (1963) social stigma and the display of a *moral* status, in the "normal" world of the work place where rules and deviant behavior are much more defined, any revealing of social stigma would be discrediting to the individual. These social rules were known by respondents who indicated, "you just don't talk about politics at work," and how NOLA10 explained, "...you just don't discuss politics, money, religion in polite company. So I think that there's an idea that it's unprofessional or impolite to talk about these matters."

Social rules for behavior are more rigid in the work place, with little allotment for deviation. Social stigma follows conspiracists into the work place, if they choose to be

visible about their beliefs. NYC02 has been discriminated against at work and has been cussed at by coworkers for his beliefs. However, he has never been afraid to lose his job because he is protected by a union. On the other hand, NYC05 would never dream of sharing her beliefs at work because it would put her job at risk. She explained, "You fit into their structure or you are the problem. People get encouraged to leave or they're treated badly, and then they have to leave." For fear of losing her job, she does not share her beliefs in the work place.

Respondents felt that talking about conspiracies at work would hurt any image of professionalism for themselves. The stigma attached to conspiracies can cause awkward work conversations, ruined relationships, and a discredited professional image as a result. Even during job interviews, maintaining an image of professionalism is important, and not the place to bring up such topics because it might "rock the boat," according to NOLA10. As explored earlier, WV04 shared that she felt if she talked about her beliefs at her professional occupation, people would view her differently. She does not want to appear "crazy" by talking about conspiracies, and does not "want to mess up any professional relationships" she already has. There is also this fear of judgment that will discredit the conspiracist at work, making all of their future judgment seemed illogical or unqualified; much how conspiracists are viewed outside of the work place. Similarly, WV07 does not share his beliefs at work for fear or seeming "crazy." He explained, "You don't want to jeopardize yourself with your beliefs in a professional environment."

Additional Themes

In exploring the main questions of considering the conditions for the respondents to share their conspiratorial beliefs, the social factors that stimulate these behaviors and investigating any likely relationship between a conspiracist's educational background and employment that may increase or hinder these beliefs, additional themes were found among the data. These themes include the consideration of gender in finding conspiracists to interview, with having low numbers in comparison to male respondents; and the relationship of older respondents believing in older conspiracies (JFK) and passing them to their children, and the reverse of this relationship.

Gender

A major underlying theme demographically is the small number of women respondents included in this research. Originally, no gender-specific questions were included in the interview guides, but were added sporadically throughout all 30 interviews.[15] As seen in Table 3.1, only 30% of the respondents were female, the majority were found in the West Virginia respondent group with four, whereas New Orleans and the 9/11 site had three each. At various points, men and women respondents were asked why they thought women did not like to talk about conspiracies. All gave similar responses that included gender bias and traditions learned at young ages that have come to produce this image that conspiracy is seen as a male area of interest. It should also be noted that five of the six Cautious Theorists were female. Although it was hard to find females to interview, no Hidden Theorists were female, but were both male.

[15] Questions concerning gender were included near the middle of interviewing New Orleans respondents after I realized mostly men were wanting to be interviewed while women ignored me or refused and were asked at various points throughout the rest of the interviews.

One respondent felt that the disparity between males and females starts at an early age with gender bias in the classroom. WV05 recalled that women are socialized not to have certain beliefs and "those opinions hold even more of a stigma for them." She explained, "women are less likely to speak up, even if they have the right answers." In relation to conspiracies, WV05 recognized that women "may be seen as more crazy, or have more issues than a man would, speaking about the same thing." For WV08, she felt that this gender relationship has started even earlier in society. When asked why she thought it's hard for people to talk about conspiracies, she first indicated that it's harder for women. When asked to elaborate, she explained,

> Well when you look at women's history, starting from the Middle Ages, any time women were giving a different opinion they were burned at the stake, they were witches, then we went to bitches, and now I think we're regressing with women's rights and it makes my heart ache because I look at these girls today and I think, 'My God, what have I fought for, for years?' You all like the Kardashians and then you're having girls that have people they want to emulate that are Barbie dolls. I don't know, and I get frustrated. I think it's harder for women to have a strong opinion because they're not supposed to be smart or smarter than men, or they're supposed to agree with the men, and men are supposed to lead.

WV08 indicated that this pattern of men having more valued opinions is nothing new and, if anything, is getting worse with time.

On a similar level, WV04 described this gender-power relationship concerning conspiracies as a male-dominated area. She explained, "I don't think females think about this as much. I think people who question things and look at conspiracy theories are generally males who do it." She also reflected that maybe women are more afraid to speak up, or on the other hand, maybe they think "it's cute to not have an opinion and stay uninformed." WV06 simply just felt that conspiracies are "most investigated by guys," as

a result of cultural gender norms. A brief example of this sentiment is found among respondent NYC09, who was actually introduced and started participated in 9/11 conspiracies through her boyfriend.

In New Orleans, two respondents felt that this gender disparity is best explained by traditional gender roles found in the South. NOLA09 explained that although she believes in conspiracy theories, she very rarely talks about or looks into politics. She stated, "traditionally politics are a man's thing." Although she felt this way, she still found it strange than fewer females in New Orleans wanted to be interviewed about their conspiratorial beliefs. Likewise, NOLA10 felt that southern gender stereotypes still hold true today. He reflected on females he has known,

> I have known a handful of women under 25 that were a little or very upset that they were not married yet, and they think they need to get married and start having babies in their early 20s... I mean they are complicit with everything, even BP, speaking of conspiracy stuff. They work for BP basically. So anyway, there's these women who come up through the system, and one girl who was really bright I asked her about worldly radical stuff one day and she should say that she didn't have any opinions about that. I think it is this stereotype of women think that governing and opinions are for the men to have and women should raise their kids, have a career, but that's it. I've seen it so much, this conservative lifestyle. I think that women are brought up here like that, they even have a secret society right? Remember the Carnival krewes? They even crown queens and princesses and shit, very traditional for women. So they keep their mouths shut and say, 'That's just how we do things down here and I'm not going to talk to you about it.'

NOLA10's description of traditional of gender roles in New Orleans also presents a bigger picture of cultural traditions that automatically incorporate these long-standing gender roles, including the existence of Carnival krewes (organizations that help lead and organize Mardi Gras), that have been around since the 19th century. He also touched

upon a theme of "That's just how we do things down here," indicating that New Orleans traditions might not be changing any time soon.

Passing on Beliefs

Although this research has shown that family members show no clear comfort zone for conspiracists to share their beliefs with, there is the less frequent theme of sharing conspiracies *within* the family that will be referred to as Generational Conspiracies. Most of these have been seen among the West Virginia respondents in relation to JFK conspiracies. However, there is one exception among the 9/11 site respondents, where a Truther was turned on to 9/11 conspiracies through his son.

The JFK conspiracies have popped up the most among the West Virginia respondents, especially in terms of "being raised" with them. WV05 was raised to think critically, and recalled, "I was kind of raised like that actually. My mother always believed there was more to the Kennedy assassination, and I was kind of obsessed with it as a kid, really." WV05 also remembered having this obsession in grade school and doing her own research into the JFK assassination. Likewise, WV06 was also raised "to question things" and has a father who was into JFK theories because he lived through that event. On the other side of this dynamic is WV08, who is a firm believer in the JFK theories and never believed the official story about his assassination. She has passed this knowledge down to her daughters, who are supposed to read the papers when they are finally released, even if WV08 is then deceased.

The caveat to the argument that Generational Conspiracies are only consummated from the older family members to the younger, is with NYC10. Like other 9/11 site

respondents, NYC10 believed the official story before becoming a Truther himself. When asked what caused him to change his mind about the official story, he said, "Four years ago when my son brought it up to me." Although his son was not with him at the 10th anniversary of September 11th, NYC10 has been very engaged in the Truth movement since being presented with 9/11 conspiracies.

Generational Conspiracies have evidence of existing through JFK theories, seen in majority in West Virginia. West Virginia lies completely in the Appalachian region where kinship ties are strong and folklore is a generational pastime (Asbury et al., 2006). Older conspiracists such as WV08 and WV06's father have been a part of the JFK conspiracies and have used their skepticism in accordance with their child-rearing. Although 9/11 theories are aging in years, can this pattern still be seen? The only evidence from this research is from NYC02, who regularly shares his beliefs with his five children, but they have shown no interest in 9/11 conspiracies.

Conclusion

In summary, this research has shown that stigma plays a crucial and critical role in why a conspiracist would speak openly about his or her beliefs, or keep them hidden from society, sometimes even from close friends and family members. This social stigma has also revalidated that Harper's (2008) approach to paranoia, where it is not a psychiatric disease in this sense, but is actually the product *of* conspiracies. Social factors, which include life events and large, national events, are important to the creation of conspiracies and to engage new conspiracists. Other social factors include heavy media influence seen throughout the conspiracy subculture as well as familial

socialization to practice skepticism. On an individual level with conspiracists, they can be seen as Engaged Theorists, Cautious Theorists, and Hidden Theorists in their displays of conspiratorial participation and their reaction to social stigmas. Although the relationship between education and professions among the respondents has no direct connection, there is an embedded concern about appearing professional and sharing conspiratorial beliefs in the workplace.

Paranoia, skepticism, and conspiracies are all socially constructed entities that are used to identify behaviors and cognitive patterns that deviate from normative, mainstream society. Looking at paranoia and conspiracies as social issues, not as mental illness, can tone down the radicalization of every conspiracist considered “paranoid” and thus deemed irrational and incompetent. By separating paranoia and the conspiratorial mindset from psychiatry and mental illness, social stigma will be less of a negative impact, and could gradually lose the connection of conspiracists as being dangerous individuals.

Although the definition of "conspiracy" seems relative among different regions, socioeconomic situations, and among conspriacists themselves, their overarching social cultural definition no longer is limited to "the secrecy behind doing something unlawful or wrong as the result of a secret agreement among a group of conspirators" as seen in Merriam-Webster; but rather incorporates an umbrella of terminology and ideas that are radical enough from normative society to fit under a conspiracy label. This dynamic of inclusion was perpetuated by post-9/11 national policy and the reemergence of an "us or them" dichotomy; us being collective, normative society, and them including individuals showing dissent, radicalized, and thus "crazy, illogical" behavior. All the conspiracies are still popular and controversial; just at a safe distance.

Although it may be dangerous and definitely stigmatizing to speak of conspiracies on an individual, popular culture still embraces "the conspiracy" as a form of entertainment with popular television shows like *Conspiracy Theory with Jesse Ventura* (2009), *Mythbusters* (2003 to present), and exploring the-truth-is-out-there theories with *Ancient Aliens* (2009 to present) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Movies about conspiracies have also exploded in the box offices with popular titles such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (2001), *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2006) about secret societies, as well as surveillance thrillers like the *Bourne* films (2002, 2004, 2007), *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), and *Inception* (2010). Conspiracies continue to flourish and grow in the public sphere or seen in movies and pop culture, and consequently influencing the private spheres and the daily lives of individuals perpetuating social stigma attached to conspiratorial mindset.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to consider due to the research topic and methodology of acquiring the two situation-specific interview sets. Trying to find a specific subculture, that often likes to keep itself hidden, is a limitation in itself. The stigmatized nature of researching anything that has to do with conspiracies also proves limiting in ways of limited or apprehensive support and help from others. Plenty of possible respondents I located through the snowball technique (either through previous respondents or word-of-mouth), would not even consider being interviewed due to the topic. Not only are there basic risks during all interviews with all respondents, such as the honesty or validity of their arguments or social behaviors, but the variation in the manner of the interviews

could have caused some limitations and disparities among respondent's interviews. An additional risk with interviews on this subject matter is that, although the research is studying stigma management among conspiracists, it could also be in control *during* the interview, skewing the responses from the respondents. It is important to consider the effect the researcher could have had on the interview process itself.

For the first interview group in New Orleans, Louisiana, the researcher had five days to acquire ten interviews. While that is ample time for ten interviews, the researcher did not know anyone specific to approach in New Orleans, nor was there any event or public location where potential respondents could be identified. In New Orleans, the snowball effect of finding respondents was extremely necessary to delve into the cusp of the conspiratorial subculture that exists there. However, being a complete stranger to the area it was that much harder to gain people's trust in an already mistrustful city. The second interview set allowed that much shorter time to acquire ten interviews in two days during the 10th Anniversary September 11th weekend. The limitations here were only interviewing those participating in the 9/11 Truth movement, so they already have some sort of "participation level" established. Also, a lot of the people participating are not actual residents of New York City, which does not portray any accurate findings for New Yorkers, but instead for those just participating at the 9/11 site.

Future Research

Research on this topic can be continued in a number of ways. One major way, which was lightly touched during this research, is the analysis of gender differences among the conspiracy subculture, or in skeptical beliefs or behaviors in general.

Analyzing gender differences can also apply to different cognitive, motivational, and participation levels between men and women skeptics, if there are any differences at all. Another way to continue research is to provide follow-up research as some situation-incited conspiracies that have changed or developed with time. Although some research polls have followed up with 9/11 conspiracies in five year intervals (and briefly with JFK skeptics), research should continue to follow conspiracy trends over time, especially concerning "generational conspiracies." It would also be interesting to continue researching Generational Conspiracies to see if these ideas are being passed down as older generations disappear, such as this research explored with JFK conspiracies, and if Truthers now pass on their beliefs to future generations as part of a familial socialization process.

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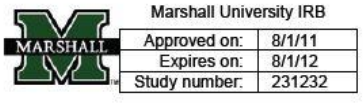
Appendix A - IRB Approved Consent Form



Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Social Factors in Susceptibility to Conspiratorial Thinking

Dr. Donna Sullivan, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. Your participation is voluntary. Please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research investigator or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

Why Is This Study Being Done?

The purpose of this study is to investigate public perception and participation habits surrounding conspiracies. It specifically addresses the issues of participating in conspiratorial thought or behavior and the comfort levels to which a person would share their views in public and private spheres.

How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?

About 30 people will take part in this study. A total of 30 subjects are the most that would be able to enter the study.

What Is Involved In This Research Study?

If chosen to participate, you will take part in a 30-45 minute interview answering questions about conspiracies, participation in conspiratorial behavior, and sharing your views with the world. Keep in mind that not all questions are required and you can quit the interview at any time.

_____ initials

How Long Will You Be In The Study?

You will be in the study for about 30-45 minutes.
You can decide to stop participating at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study we encourage you to talk to the study investigator or study staff as soon as possible. The study investigator may stop you from taking part in this study at any time if he/she believes it is in your best interest; if you do not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

What Are The Risks Of The Study?

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to you. We hope the information learned from this study will benefit other people in the future. The benefits of participating in this study may be: contributing to research that is addressing social and national issues.

What About Confidentiality?

We will do our best to make sure that your personal information is kept confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University IRB, Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, you will not be identified by name or in any other way.

What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study. All the study costs, including any study tests, supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

_____ initials

Will You Be Paid For Participating?

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to stop participating in the study we encourage you to talk to the investigators or study staff first.

Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, contact the study investigator, Dr. Donna Sullivan 304-696-6394 or co-investigator Rachel Sparkman at Sparkman@marshall.edu. You should also call the investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.
For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Stephen Cooper or ORI at (304) 696-4303. You may also call this number if:

- You have concerns or complaints about the research.
- The research staff cannot be reached.
- You want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

SIGNATURES

You agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 18 years of age or older. You have had a chance to ask questions about being in this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled.

_____
Subject Name (Printed)

_____ _____
Subject Signature Date

_____
Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

_____ _____
Person Obtaining Consent Signature Date

_____ initials

Appendix B - Interview Template for New Orleans Respondents

Factors to Conspiratorial Thinking

Interview Guide for New Orleans Respondents

Date:

Time:

1. [Introductory]

   Tell me a little about yourself:

   Are you from NO?

   If yes: Were you here when it happened?

   Did you lose anyone that day?

2. [Thesis]

   Do you believe there are conspiracies involving the breached levees during

   Hurricane Katrina?:

   Levees were breached intentionally by bombing?

   Levees were breached to displace the African American residents?

   How do you feel about the slow government response for aid?:

   Have you ever taken part or participated in these conspiracies?:

   How (demonstrations, online forums, open debate)?:

3. [Conspiratorial Thinking]

   Do your family, friends, co-workers, or employer know about your beliefs?:

Who do you feel most comfortable talking about these conspiracies with?:

Does being a New Orleans resident make it harder or easier to talk about your views concerning Hurricane Katrina?

Why or why not?

Where would you not feel comfortable expressing your views concerning Hurricane Katrina?

Why do you suppose it is so hard to talk about conspiracies?

4. Anything else you would like to add:

5. [Demographics]
   Age:
   Sex:
   Race/Ethnicity:
   Immigrant Status/Language:
   Marital Status:
   Children or grandchildren:
   Religious Affiliation:
   Political Party:
   Highest education:
   Occupation:

Appendix C - Interview Template for 9/11 Site Respondents

Factors to Conspiratorial Thinking

Interview Guide for 9/11 Respondents

Date:

Time:

1. [Introductory]

   Where are you from (do you live in NYC or close by?)?:

   Are you participating in the 9/11 10th anniversary events?:

   How often do you participate in these activities? (if this 1st time, why today, was it because of 10th anniversary?):

   Does your family, friends, co-workers, or employer know you're here this weekend?:

   Are you from NYC? :

   If yes: Were you here when it happened?

   Did you lose anyone that day?

2. [Thesis]Do you believe there are conspiracies or alternative theories involving the 9/11 attacks? Feel free to elaborate.:

   How do you feel about building 7's collapse?:

   What were you thinking when you saw the buildings explode? (In person or on TV):

   Did you believe the newscasters or what you were seeing?:

Have you watched any of the 911 conspiracy videos, like *Loose Change*, *Fahrenheit 911, In Plane Sight, Between the Lies,* etc.?:

Do you frequent similar websites for 911truth or dig for more research regarding the attacks?:

3. [Conspiratorial Thinking]

   Do your family, friends, co-workers, or employer know about your beliefs?:

   Who do you feel most comfortable talking about 9/11 conspiracies with?:

   Least comfortable? Why?:

   For NYC residents: Does being a New York City resident make it harder or easier to talk about your views concerning 9/11?

   How?

   Where would you not feel comfortable expressing your views concerning 9/11?:

   Have you ever faced discrimination or ridicule for your beliefs?:

   Why do you suppose it is so hard to talk about conspiracies?:

4. Anything else you would like to add:

5. [Demographics]
   Age:
   Sex:
   Race/Ethnicity:

Immigrant Status/Language:
Marital Status:
    Children or grandchildren:
Religious Affiliation:
Political Party:
Highest education:
Occupation:

Appendix D - Interview Template for West Virginia Respondents

Factors to Conspiratorial Thinking

Interview Guide for General Respondents

Date:

Time:

1. [Introductory]

   Where are you from?:

   Tell me a little about yourself:

2. [Thesis]

   What general conspiracies do you believe in (in any)?:

   When did you start feeling this way?:

   Have you ever taken part or participated in these conspiracies?:

   How (demonstrations, online forums, open debate)?:

   Have you watched any conspiracy videos like *Loose Change* or *Outfoxed*? Or the tv series *Conspiracy Theory* with Jesse Ventura?:

   Do you read alternative news sources such as *Infowars* or *Skeptic*?:

3. [Conspiratorial Thinking]

   Do your family, friends, co-workers, or employer know about your beliefs?:

   Who do you feel most comfortable talking about conspiracies with?:

   Where would you not feel comfortable expressing your views?:

Why do you suppose it is so hard to talk about conspiracies?:

Do you think there are any negative consequences when talking about conspiracies?:

Or depending or who/where you're talking about them?

4. Anything else you would like to add:

5. [Demographics]

Age:
Sex:
Race/Ethnicity:
Immigrant Status/Language:
Marital Status:
Children or grandchildren:
Religious Affiliation:
Political Party:
Highest education:
Occupation: