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The QAnon Infection:
How Families Manage, Adapt to, and Abandon their QAnon-Infected Family Members

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The QAnon Infection:
How Families Manage, Adapt to, and Abandon their QAnon-Infected Family Members
Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2023)

This research reveals how families have been affected by and coped with a member's devotion to and internalization of QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies. I have employed a netnographic-inspired research study primarily focused on the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties, where the family members of QAnon affiliates post about their experiences. A pilot content analysis of the posts in r/QAnonCasualties and 23 interviews with the family members of QAnon affiliates revealed a "manage, adapt, abandonment" process in which family members abandon their relationships with their QAnon-infected family members. I have examined the family unit from a family systems framework perspective, which suggests that the members of a family system must conversationally work to preserve their capacity and ability to trust each other. Likewise, I have interpreted my results through contemporary social theorist Anthony Giddens, who emphasizes that successful interpersonal relationships rely on trust and can only be maintained when people have relatable realities.

Key Words: Abandonment, Family, Netnography, QAnon, Trust

Chapter 1: Introduction

The conspiracy-theory-based movement known as QAnon has gained a substantial and diverse following since its development in 2017 (Argentino, 2023; Blazakis et al., 2021; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Bracewell, 2021; Buntain et al., 2022; Ebner et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023; Rothschild, 2021). QAnon is often referred to as a "big-tent" conspiracy theory-based movement due to the group's nature of adopting aspects of all existing conspiracy theories (Bracewell, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022). At the core of QAnon's various conspiratorial ideologies lies the belief that a malicious "Deep State," or "Cabal" of individuals, made up of the world's economic elites, secretly controls the world order and are sex trafficking and drinking the blood of children (Bracewell, 2021; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023).

In 2019 QAnon was deemed a potential domestic terrorist threat to the United States by the FBI and labeled "the world's most dangerous conspiracy theory" by early scholars and researchers studying the conspiratorial phenomenon (Blazakis et al., 2021, p. 26; Ebner et al., 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Jansen, 2021). However, recent research suggests that QAnon affiliates are more likely to commit criminal acts of domestic violence on their interpersonal-family members rather than acts of domestic terrorism (Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023). Because QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs inspire adherents of the movement to believe that any non-QAnon-affiliated individual(s) is their enemy, QAnon affiliates have struggled to maintain their interpersonal family relationships, as well as with anyone whose beliefs do not align with their own (Argentino, 2023; Bracewell, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2016; O'Brien, 2023; Rothschild, 2021)

The overall consensus in the general literature addressing the QAnon phenomenon's impact on national security and family systems is representatively demonstrated in statements such as "QAnon is a destructive force in our families, communities, and our democracy" (Goldenberg et al., 2020 p. 10). Indeed, claims of this QAnon phenomenon "tearing families apart" are riddled throughout the academic literature and media stories covering the movement; often citing the mere existence of and the posts made by the family members of QAnon affiliates within the subreddit titled r/QAnonCasualties, illustrating how people have lost their family members to QAnon's conspiracy theories (Argentino, 2023; Ebner et al., 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023). Since its development in 2019, thousands of family members and friends of QAnon affiliates have migrated to the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties to post about their QAnon-related experiences and to sympathize with others in similar situations as themselves.

The broader literature on this QAnon phenomenon has primarily focused on the movement and its followers (Buntain et al., 2022; Ebner et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2021; Freeman, 2020; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023; Pierre, 2020; Roose, 2020; Timberg & Dwoskin, 2020; Seetharaman, 2020). Although these researchers frequently and simultaneously acknowledge the damaging effects an individual's affiliation with the movement has on their interpersonal family relationships (Argentino, 2023; Bracewell, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023). Indeed, previous research on family systems has shown that one member's struggles with addiction(s), substance abuse disorders, or conflicting religious affiliations have directly affected the other members of their family systems. Those whose family systems are affected by such issues have been shown to experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression in comparison to those who are not experiencing these

conditions (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002; Daley & Feit, 2013; Lundholm & Waters, 1991; Ólafsdóttir, 2020; Roer-Strier et al., 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019; Selbekk et al., 2015). This previous research situates the motivation for this study by indicating that a family member(s) affiliation with the QAnon movement or its conspiracies will directly and potentially negatively affect the other members of their family systems. Likewise, scholars have yet to exclusively explore how the family members of QAnon affiliates are affected by and cope with their member's conspiratorial identities. Identifying and further understanding how QAnon's conspiracies affect the family system may aid in (1) promoting efforts toward countering the spread of misinformation-based conspiracy theories, (2) further evaluating the scope or threat of the broader QAnon phenomenon, and (3) advancing the development of suitable responses aimed at reducing the chances that QAnon affiliates cause harm to themselves or their family members (Ebner et al., 2022; Goldenberg et al., 2020; Jensen & Kane, 2021).

To understand how families cope with and are affected by their QAnon-infected family members, I have employed a netnographic-inspired research study with data gathered from a preliminary pilot content analysis of the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties and semi-structured interviews with the family members of QAnon affiliates. The preliminary pilot content analysis revealed an overarching theme among the subreddit posters of families losing interpersonal relationships with their q-person(s) via detachment, disownment, and even death. However, the analyzed posts from this subreddit frequently lacked detailed, extensive descriptions of the posters' experiences with their q-person(s) that may aid in developing a richer understanding of how families reach the point of such loss. Therefore, to further explore this issue and to make up for the lack of detail gathered in the content analysis, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews

with the family members of QAnon affiliates, primarily recruited from r/QAnonCasualties, to better understand how QAnon conspiracy theories affect the family system.

The analysis of the interview data revealed a "manage, adapt, and abandonment process" by which QAnon-infected family systems break down and abandon their conspiratorially consumed family members. I have examined the family unit from a family systems framework perspective, which suggests that for the family system to maintain homeostasis or relational stability amongst its members, the system members must collectively and conversationally work to preserve their capacity and ability to trust each other (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002). Likewise, I have interpreted my results through the lens of contemporary social theorist Anthony Giddens, who emphasizes that successful interpersonal family relationships rely on trust and can only be maintained when people have relatable realities (1992). Thus, if the members of a family system develop conflicting constructions of reality, it will theoretically severely jeopardize their ability to trust each other and may render the overall system unstable and potentially dysfunctional.

My findings suggest that a q-person(s) degree of internalization of and devotion to the QAnon movement and its conspiratorial ideologies determines how their family system manages, adapts to, or abandons its QAnon-infected family members. More broadly, I find that, initially, family members will try to manage a relatively recent QAnon-affiliated family member's reality by refuting, debunking, or limiting their q-persons' access and availability to QAnon's conspiracy theories. When these debunking-like efforts fail, members are forced to adapt to their q-persons' newfound conspiratorial identities by setting physical, emotional, and conversational boundaries with them. Families reach the abandonment stage when their q-person consistently disrespects those previously made boundaries. The consistent setting and breaking of boundaries by family

members with conflicting ontologies inhibit their ability to trust each other, thus severely jeopardizing the preservation of their relationships' moving forward (Giddens, 1992).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 QAnon

QAnon initially emerged on the anonymous online discussion boards within the website 4chan in 2017. On 4chan, a still-unknown individual(s) using the pseudonyms "Q" and "Q-Clearance-Patriot," claimed to have high-level government security clearance with a military intelligence background. Thus, Q's followers believe Q was revealing top-secret governmental knowledge through Q's posts on various online message boards. The posts made by Q are called "Q-drops" by the movement's followers— Q-drops, however, are the facilitator of QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs and come in various forms, such as codes, puzzles, texts, pictures, and memes (Beverley, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Bracewell, 2021; Buntain et al., 2022; Caputo-Levine & Harris, 2022; Ebner et al., 2022; Garry et al., 2021; Kelly, 2020; Rothschild, 2021). Due to the movement's expansion to other internet sites and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and because of these sites' unique algorithmic capabilities, QAnon's affiliation exploded from a fringe-like following on an anonymous online message board to potentially gaining millions of followers within four years (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2021; Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023; Timberg & Dwoskin, 2020; Seetharaman, 2020).

Although QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs lack credible or authenticating evidence, the movement's conspiratorial beliefs inspire affiliates to commit actual acts of violence, and as such, QAnon was deemed to be a potential domestic terrorist threat to the United States by the

Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2019 (Beverley, 2020; Blazakis et al., 2021; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Caputo-Levine & Harris, 2022; Ebner et al., 2022; Garry et al., 2021; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021; O'Brien, 2023; Rothschild, 2021). Indeed, QAnon affiliates promoted and participated in the deadly Washington D.C. capitol riot on January 6th, 2021 (Jansen, 2021).

2.2 QAnon & The Family System

While the vast majority of the literature on the QAnon phenomenon widely refers to the movement as a potential domestic terrorist threat, recent research suggests, instead, that QAnon affiliates are more likely to commit criminal acts of domestic violence on their family members and children (Argentino, 2023; Blazakis et al., 2021; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Bracewell, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Jansen, 2021; Jensen & Kane, 2021; Kelly, 2020; O'Brien, 2023; Rothschild, 2021). Indeed, the more infamous QAnon-inspired crimes have been committed by QAnon affiliates on their family members (Beverley, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Rothschild, 2021). In 2019, for example, a QAnon affiliate named Buckey Wolfe murdered his brother by stabbing him in the head with a sword because he believed he was an evil humanoid lizard person (Moskalenko et al., 2022). Likewise, in 2021, QAnon affiliate Matthew Coleman murdered his two children with a spear gun in Mexico because he also believed they carried humanoid lizard DNA (Moskalenko et al., 2022). In March 2020, QAnon adherent Neely Petrie-Blanchard attempted to kidnap her two daughters from their grandmother, who had legal custody over them. Similarly, in October 2020, QAnon adherent Emily Jolley kidnapped her son from his biological father, who also had legal custody over him. Emily reportedly believed that Child Protective Services were working with the Cabal by stealing and

murdering children to supply the evil Cabal with children's blood and or adrenochrome (Beverley, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Rothschild, 2021).

Researchers have also highlighted that QAnon adherents reportedly reach severe levels of radicalization or devotion to the QAnon movement in relatively short timeframes, with the recent covid 19 pandemic seeming to have accelerated this radicalization process (Argentino, 2023; De Coninck et al., 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Freeman, 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023). Due to the speed of QAnon-affiliated radicalization processes and with the understanding that QAnon affiliates are more likely to commit criminal acts of violence on their family members, Jensen and Kane argue that "counterterrorism strategies are not designed to mitigate threats of violence that are primarily found in the household," and that because of "the speed at which the followers of QAnon tend to radicalize, families, not law enforcement, are in the best position to act before it is too late" (2021, pp. 13-14).

Previous research on family systems has demonstrated that one member's struggles with addiction(s), substance abuse disorders, or conflicting religious affiliations have directly affected the other members of their family systems. The family systems affected by these conditions have been shown to experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression in comparison to those who are not experiencing these conditions (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002; Daley & Feit, 2013; Lundholm & Waters, 1991; Ólafsdóttir, 2020; Roer-Strier et al., 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2009; Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019; Selbekk et al., 2015). Indeed, a recent internet-based survey of 288 U.S. participants reported that 80% had a QAnon-affiliated family member or friend and that those relationships had deteriorated due to their q-person's adherence to QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs (Moskalenko et al., 2022).

2.3 Reddit, Subreddits, & r/QAnonCasualties

Reddit has become one of the largest online social media sites since its development in 2005 (Singer et al., 2014). The website of Reddit consists of 2.8 million virtual communities known as subreddits (Singer et al., 2014; Subreddit Stats, 2021). The focused subreddit of this study, titled r/QAnonCasualties, serves as a virtual community for people directly affected by QAnon affiliates. This subreddit contains a vast amount of freely accessible textual data encompassing a broad range of valuable perspectives and insights from family members of QAnon affiliates. The creators and moderators of the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties encourage subscribers to provide support, advice, and resources to others in need. The subscribers of this subreddit frequently share personal stories about how QAnon has affected their lives to help others make sense of their experiences (r/QAnonCasualties, 2019).

This subreddit is a highly active, heavily monitored community with ten moderators (r/QAnonCasualties, 2019). The moderators control the posts and comments by excluding posts or comments that do not provide support, advice, resources, or assistance to other members of the subreddit (Anderson, 2015; Singer et al., 2014; r/QAnonCasualties, 2019). The creators and moderators of r/QAnonCasualties believe these shared narratives will provide support, advice, and information to assist others in managing their past, present, or continuing experiences with QAnon affiliates (2019). With over 261,000 subscribers, the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties contains an incredible amount of personal, anonymous narratives made by the family members and friends of QAnon affiliates (Subreddit Stats, 2023). As of May 16th, 2022, the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties accumulates approximately 22 posts and 461 comments per day (Subreddit Stats, 2022).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Approach

3.1 Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory emphasizes that families are singular cohesive emotional units. The family members themselves, however, are believed to be or recognized by family systems theorists as individually unique. Regardless of one's family dynamic or who makes up one's family unit, family systems theory emphasizes that the collective group of individuals who make up a family system will always individually play a fundamental role in maintaining the emotional and physical well-being of all the other members (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002; Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2021). Therefore, one member's actions, beliefs, needs, and abilities directly affect all the other members of the system (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002; Roberts, 2021).

Family systems theory maintains that each member of a family system seeks to collectively and consistently maintain the system's stability, or homeostasis, of the entire unit (Thomas & Priest, 2015). Homeostasis is a biological analogy made by family systems theorists to represent a family unit's engagement in managing the system's expected, continuous, and perceived successful functionality (Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2021; Watson, 2012). However, as family relationships exist within a broader cultural context, modernization and globalization have created new strains and challenges for contemporary families. These strains shape family roles and the likelihood of family members engaging in or adhering to misinformation or conspiracy theories such as QAnon. Thus, when each member of a family system actively engages in maintaining homeostasis, or the continuation of the relationships within the system, the family system should theoretically be resistant, adaptive, or managerial towards changes and influences from the outside world (Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2021; Watson, 2012).

The theoretical premise(s) of family systems theory allows researchers to view and analyze the successful and unsuccessful functions of a family unit while simultaneously acknowledging that one member's beliefs and actions, like a QAnon affiliation, will affect the other members of the entire system (Calatrava et al., 2022; Csiernik, 2002; Roberts, 2021). I have used this family systems framework for viewing and understanding the families affected by QAnon-induced discord.

3.2 The Juggernaut of Modernity & Ontological Security

Individuals' subscription to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies, and the deterioration of trust between individuals' interpersonal-family relationships, may be explained with the understanding of the *juggernaut of modernity*. The juggernaut of modernity is an analogy made by contemporary social theorist Anthony Giddens to represent the inevitably powerful and inescapable human experience of contemporary reality (1992). Essentially, this idea is that through modern technology, and constant media consumption, contemporary individuals are constantly reminded, aware, and in fear of potential life-altering global-scale catastrophes. Nuclear war, climate change, and viral pandemics only scratch the surface of the currently perceived potential global risks. Giddens explains that contemporary individuals can develop a lack of confidence in the world leaders and experts trusted to handle these perceived cataclysmic events and, consequently, become perspectively unreliable as these events seem inevitable (1992).

Therefore, contemporary individuals' sense of trust, confidence, and reliability in the future and other individuals, both interpersonally and institutionally - their sense of *ontological security* - is jeopardized (1992). Ontological security is the sense of security based on a faith that the surrounding world and the people we choose to surround ourselves with are as they appear

(Giddens, 1992). The unforeseen risks of the future, combined with the loss of trust in contemporary individuals' interpersonal relationships and institutions, have forced the reconstruction of peoples' self-identities and realities (Rich, 2021; Giddens, 1992). Thus, individuals' ontological security relies on developing trust between individuals who can consistently reaffirm each other's perceptions of reality. As such, for a family system to maintain its stability or trust the members of their family systems, members must have relatable realities to avoid ontological divides (Giddens, 1992).

3.3 Trust & Interpersonal Relationships

Family relationships are rooted in trust. However, the ontological insecurity that develops from the encounter with modernity can erode trust, even within intimate relationships. Within Giddens' concept of the *transformation of intimacy*, Giddens explains that the development of the self and interpersonal relationships become "*ongoing projects*" (2013). The ongoing project in contemporary individuals' relationships is constantly and consistently analyzing others' beliefs through persistent verbal self-disclosures to determine the relatability of other individuals' realities. Individuals create and develop trust with others through this ongoing inspectional project. Giddens explains that relationships can be formed and sustained if the constructed reality held between individuals is similar. However, if the constructed reality between individuals is not shared, relationships will not develop, last, or succeed (Giddens, 2013).

The uncontrollable nature of the juggernaut of modernity has facilitated the development of QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs. Contemporary social issues, political unrest, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc., induce fear in individuals' perceptions of the future, threatening their ontological security (Giddens, 1992). Thus, QAnon ideologies, while lacking any authenticating or credible evidence, provided QAnon affiliates with the demand for answers to the unstable future they

perceived, thus giving them a sense of ontological security (Beverley, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Rothschild, 2021). QAnon ideologies, however, construct a unique reality and self-identity for affiliates that resembles a "conflict identity" as radicalized followers become addicted, angry, and devoted to the conspiratorial cause (Mitzen, 2006; Rich, 2021; Vlahos, 2008). Thus, not identifying with these QAnon ideologies (the development of an ontological divide) causes the jeopardization of trust in the relationships between QAnon affiliates and their family members (Giddens, 1992). This theoretical information provided by Giddens, and family systems theorists, on the development of trust in late modernity, particularly between inter-personal-familial relationships, set the stage for my investigation of how QAnon conspiracy theories affect contemporary family systems.

Chapter 4: Methods

4.1 Netnography

Netnography is an ethnographic-inspired online research method used to study virtual cultures and subcultures (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015). There are two netnographic techniques; active netnographies and passive netnographies. Active netnographic researchers engage in "immersive depth, prolonged engagement, researcher identification, and persistent conversations" with the virtual community members (Costello et al., 2017, p. 5). In contrast, passive netnographic research studies are purely observational. This passive approach allows researchers to observe a virtual community unobtrusively to gain insight into the virtual community's subject matter (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015). I have taken both a passive and active netnographic approach for this study.

4.2 Passive Netnography: Pilot Study - Exploratory Qualitative Content Analysis

I joined Reddit and subscribed to the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties, on August 24th, 2021. The subreddit had approximately 184k members when I joined; today, it has over 260k members. For this exploratory pilot content analysis, I conveniently recorded and purposely analyzed the top twenty-five posts on r/QAnonCasualties (taken on 10/23/2021) and discovered an overarching theme of the loss of interpersonal relationships—specifically via disownments, detachments, and deaths. While this pilot preliminarily qualitative content analysis was highly informative and motivating to continue investigating this conspiratorial-induced familial discord, the data gathered from the posts themselves lacked rich detail and explanations of the posters' experiences. More often than not, the posts were short—typically a few paragraphs, max. Thus, to supplement the data from this content analysis and further authenticate or fill the gap in my preliminary pilot studies findings, I shifted from this passive netnographic approach to a more active approach by recruiting and conducting semi-structured interviews with the family members of QAnon affiliates, primarily recruited from r/QAnonCasualties.

4.3 Active Netnography: Semi-Structured Interviews

I first obtained the necessary approval from the moderators of r/QAnonCasualties to post a recruitment message on the subreddit thread. When permission was granted, I posted a recruitment message detailing my academic research goals to the r/QAnonCasualties community that explained the need for volunteers to participate in interviews for this study. Similarly, I recruited interviewees on the Facebook support group titled "Families of Q-Cult Support Group." I also recruited individuals from my local area of Southeastern Idaho. Seventeen of my interviewee participants were recruited from r/QAnonCasualties. Four interviewee participants were recruited from the "Families of Q-Cult Support Group," and two interviewees were from

Southeastern Idaho. Participant criteria included that they needed to be eighteen or older and have at least one immediate family member who believes in QAnon conspiracy theories.

Interviews were conducted over the phone, on a zoom call, or in person, depending on the participant's preference, location, and availability. Altogether I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews that lasted 45 minutes to 2 hours.

4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis: Content Analysis and Interview Data

I used Atlas.ti to code for themes in the posts and interviews using Susanne Frieze's "Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking" process (2019, p. 109). This approach begins with an initial read-through and first-cycle coding of the gathered data, followed by a secondary read-through and second-cycle coding of the data in search of themes, then sorting the data, codes, and themes to tell a bigger story (Frieze, 2019). Likewise, I used a phronetic iterative approach for analyzing and gathering data for this study. The phronetic iterative approach allows researchers to start with an interest in a general phenomenon, find several potential sites for gathering data to study this phenomenon, and then develop a more specific focus to study the phenomenon in question (Tracy, 2020).

4.5 Positionality Statement

In addition to the methods described above, the results of this study are informed by my own experiences with ideologically divided family members. I started studying the QAnon phenomenon, particularly for my thesis research, after my advisor encouraged me to do so and because I found an interest in further understanding the movement. However, before conducting this research, I was unaware of the complexity of QAnon's conspiratorial belief system. As I narrowed down my research focuses on studying and understanding how QAnon's conspiracy theories affect the family system, and as I began to do so via the pilot content analysis and semi-

structured interviews, I realized that I could sympathize with those affected by this, as I, like many others, have family members who adhere to similar conspiratorial beliefs with which I do not adhere to myself. While my family members are not blatantly adhering to or declaring their affiliation with the QAnon movement, I have witnessed how dichotomous ontologies like these can affect the closeness of even traditionally close familial relationships within my family dynamics. My experiences with my own loosely conspiratorially adherent family relationships enabled me to understand and empathize with those interviewed for this study who are currently coping with and being affected by a QAnon-infected family member(s) in an attempt to explain how QAnon conspiracy theories affect the family system.

Chapter 5: Findings & Results

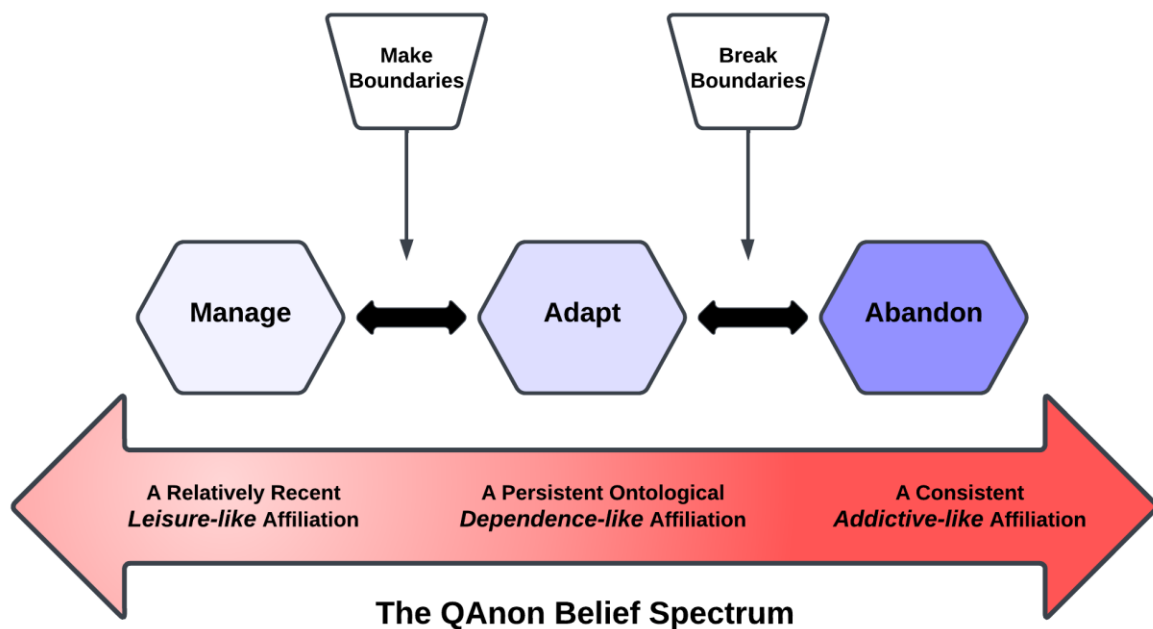
5.1 The QAnon Infection

Below, I demonstrate how QAnon conspiracy theories affect the family system. The analysis revealed an overarching process in which the family members of QAnon affiliates manage, adapt to, and abandon their QAnon-infected family members. I have illustrated this "manage, adapt, abandon process" identified in the analysis of the 23 interviews conducted for this study in the following result sections (Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3) using one or two in-depth examinations of my interviewees' experiences in each. Likewise, a visual representation of this "manage, adapt, abandon process" and its relationship to a family systems' q-person(s) devotion to and internalization of QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies, i.e., the QAnon Belief Spectrum, is shown in figure 1.

A family system's reaction to this QAnon-infection (i.e., manage, adapt, abandon) depends on their q-persons' devotion to or internalization of QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies.

Thus, families will initially try to manage their QAnon-infected family members' reality by refuting, debunking, or limiting their q-persons' access and availability to QAnon's conspiracy theories. However, when or if these management-like efforts fail, the families are forced to adapt to their QAnon-infected family members' new conspiratorial identities by setting physical, emotional, and conversational boundaries with them. Families reach the abandonment stage when their QAnon-infected family members consistently disrespect those previously made boundaries. At this abandonment stage, the q-persons have developed unfamiliar identities rooted in a conspiratorial reality that is unreciprocated by their family members. The consistent setting and then breaking of boundaries by family members with conflicting ontologies inhibit their ability to trust each other and facilitate the process of abandonment.

Figure 1:



The red shading in the double-headed arrow above represents a q-person's devotion to and internalization of QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies. The family systems' corresponding reaction to their q-persons' levels of devotion (i.e., manage, adapt, or abandon) is represented by the purple shading in the three hexagons in the figure above. Throughout my analysis, I categorized five of the 23 interviewees' experiences exclusively within the management phase (phase 1). However, all 23 participants had experienced a managing phase with their q-person at some point throughout their experience. Likewise, I categorized seven out of the 23 interviewees' experiences exclusively within the adaptive phase (phase 2), and finally, I organized 11 out of the 23 interviewees' experiences into the abandonment phase (phase 3). Those who reached this abandonment phase had experienced both a managing and an adapting phase and had completely abandoned their relationship with their QAnon-infected family member(s).

However, the categories shown in this figure are not static, and the arrows between the family systems' reactions demonstrate how family systems can move to and from each stage. Likewise, the q-person(s) can move back and forth on the QAnon belief spectrum depending on their change in devotion and internalization of QAnon's conspiracies. Nonetheless, the above figure represents the overall "manage, adapt, abandon process" described below.

5.2 Phase 1: Managing Relationships and Realities

The first phase of the manage, adapt, abandon process represents a QAnon-infected family system's initial effort to manage their q-person's reality to maintain their relationships. Based on the interview data, this managing phase involves the family members actively attempting to debunk, dispute, or limit their q-persons' access and availability to QAnon's conspiracy theories. The family members make these management-like efforts to protect the

continuation of their and their q-person's interpersonal relationship(s) and, thus, their previously held like-minded realities. Conversely, the family members' q-persons' red-pilling attempts are made to re-construct new like-minded, albeit conspiratorial, realities. Red-pilling refers to when a QAnon-affiliated individual actively tries to get or recruit others to adhere to their QAnon-inspired conspiratorial beliefs (Rothschild, 2021). Thus, the family members and their q-person(s) are competitively working to maintain relatable like-minded realities. Doing so is crucial to preserving and continuing these interpersonal-family-type relationships (Giddens, 2013).

Within this management phase, the q-person's affiliation with the movement is typically on the leisure-like end of the QAnon belief spectrum— meaning that, at this stage, their q-person seemed to enjoy learning about the QAnon conspiracy theories and used them as a form of entertainment. Regardless, a q-person's consistent adherence to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies constructs a uniquely conflicting reality and self-identity for affiliates that is frightening and unstable for their family members. For example, Kendall, a 26-year-old woman living with her QAnon-infected mother in the midwestern United States, described her reaction to her mother disclosing her QAnon-inspired beliefs to her for the first time and her subsequent attempt to manage her mother's reality. With no other family living within at least a 100-mile radius of them, Kendall and her mother have always been very close with one another, with more of a friendship-like relationship rather than a parent-child-like relationship.

Kendall admittedly recalls that her mother has always been susceptible to conspiratorial thinking. However, it had never been an issue between them until her mother discovered QAnon's conspiracies not long after her father died of cancer in the fall of 2021. Kendall's mother found a sense of inclusivity in QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs and online groups as she

developed a similar distrust and lack of faith in the broader medical and governmental institutions. Not only did Kendall disagree with these conspiratorial beliefs, but the fear of losing her mother to these conspiratorial ideologies after literally losing her father to cancer was overwhelming. As such, Kendall's initial reaction to her mother's new affiliation with the movement resulted in a damaging argument in which she and her mother competitively attempted to persuade each other into adhering to each other's belief systems. Kendall's attempt to manage her mother's reality was to dispute her mother's newfound conspiratorial beliefs by telling her that QAnon conspiracy theorists had "brainwashed" her. Kendall further explains by stating how:

"She told me that they [elite individuals] are adrenochrome harvesting and that Democrats eat and torture children... So I told her — I think that you've been brainwashed! It breaks my heart to see this, you're the only family I have, and I think you've been brainwashed. And it's terrifying! I am worried about your mental state! And she tells me — I think you've been brainwashed by the liberal media! It became a screaming match."

This assertion that conspiracy theorists had brainwashed her was rooted in Kendall's concern for her mother's mental health and to maintain her relationship with her mother. While Kendall was actively working to manage her mother's reality for the continuation of their relationship, she acknowledges that her mother's affiliation with the movement was relatively recent and more on the leisure-like end of the QAnon spectrum. However, Kendall also acknowledges that her efforts to manage her q-mother's reality may become unrealistic if her q-mother was to go, as she and others affected by this phenomenon frequently say, "too far down

the rabbit hole," meaning that— if Kendall's mother were to ignore these management-like efforts and devote herself to the movement and its conspiracies further than she already had, then, even Kendall recognizes that she would need to take a different approach to maintain her valued relationship with her q-mother.

While Kendall's mother's ontological security was being threatened by adhering to QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs, so was Kendall's being jeopardized by the threat of losing her mother to, as she put it, "a conspiratorial cult." In fact, for the family members of QAnon affiliates, QAnon is much more than its generally accepted definition of just a mesh of conspiratorial ideologies. For them, QAnon is an internet-based ideological cult that has ensnared their family members' identities and torn their family systems apart. Kendall representatively explains the impact a q-persons devotion to the movement has on interpersonal relationships within family systems by stating that:

"You always hear people refer to it [QAnon] as a 'big-tent conspiracy.' And yeah, it is. It's a big-tent conspiracy because everything fits under there! But I don't think that gives it enough credit. I just don't think it does because people don't lose family members over thinking the moon landing was a hoax. People don't lose family members over whether or not the FBI assassinated JFK. So while it [QAnon] started as a shit post and then grew into a big-tent conspiracy, it is probably now in the same vein as new religious movements and cults... It is so awful to watch it take over someone you love."

My interviews suggest that QAnon's conspiracy theories do, indeed, have the ability to "take over" affiliates' self-identities and realities. Through the analysis of the interview data, it

became clear that the more devoted a q-person becomes to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies and online groups, the more time one will spend on these sites, the more one will internalize the conspiratorial beliefs, the more money one will give to QAnon related causes and grifters, and the more one will try to recruit the people who make up their interpersonal-relationships. Parker's family systems efforts in managing their QAnon-infected grandmother's reality exemplify this finding.

Parker is a 29-year-old male just starting their career as a journalist for a major news network in a prominent city in the United States. However, he is originally from a small conservative town in the rural Southern United States. According to him, he grew up surrounded by "guns, Christians, and family members." Parker recalls always having a very close relationship with his family, particularly with his mother and grandmother. Parker grew up without a father figure when he was a child and had attributed that "fatherly-like figure role" to his grandmother. As such, Parker explained that she took on more of a disciplinarian role in his life and that he attributes her presence to feelings of emotional and physical security. Thus, he developed an intensely close connection with her throughout his life.

Eventually, Parker went to college, obtained a graduate degree in journalism, and, as he put it, "expanded his horizons." He moved away from his hometown for his current job around 2018. A few years following Parker's departure from his hometown family dynamic, the covid 19 pandemic ensued. During the pandemic, particularly during the lockdown, Parker would frequently call to check in with his family members, especially worried about his grandmother's health, who is now in her mid-seventies. During one of these check-ins with his family, Parker learns that his grandmother had separated from her then-husband to live by herself in the rural woodlands of his hometown. Concerned for her safety, his mother often went to her new house

to check in on her, and Parker would frequently call her to see if she was safe. Not long after these physical check-ins and phone calls, though, Parker and his mother realized that his grandmother had entered into a seemingly unexpected state of what he called "conspiratorial paranoia."

At this time, Parker's grandmother started spending and dedicating all of her time to following Q and the Q-drops online. She started investing in and amassing guns and ammunition for the "Great Awakening," which is the prophesied by Q to be the "purge of the Deep State" where the secret, evil elitists will be exposed to the world by Donald Trump and publicly executed and or brought to justice (Rothschild, 2021 p. 251). As Parker's grandmother's devotion to QAnon conspiracies increased, she would frequently show her friends and family members who would come to visit her "deep-fake" videos of Joe Biden molesting a child and Hillary Clinton eating a child in an attempt to red-pill them into her new conspiratorial belief system. According to Parker, his grandmother had completely drowned herself in the fringe online QAnon-related discussion boards, and as such, she quickly became radicalized into QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs. Eventually, she became virtually unrecognizable to her friends, family members, and especially Parker.

Her conspiratorial identity shift severely strained Parker's relationship with his grandmother. During our interview, Parker explained that, similarly to Kendall, he unsuccessfully, yet consistently, would attempt to manage his grandmother's reality by refuting and debunking her conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, Parker got tired of persistently trying to dispute and debunk the seemingly infinite amount of conspiracies she would recite in her attempts to red-pill him into her conspiratorial belief system that, as he put it, he "fundamentally disagreed with." Thus, to salvage his loving, kind, and father-like image of her in his head, he

deliberately detached himself from her and stopped calling to check in on her for weeks. I have found that the family members of QAnon affiliates will use this detachment method to serve as a temporary boundary between them and their q-person(s). This temporary period of deliberate detachment is used as a boundary by those still open to rekindling that relationship again shortly but are overwhelmed with their q-persons' increasing devotion to QAnon and its conspiracies.

This detachment-like boundary method, however, was unrealistic for Parker's other family members who were physically near his grandmother in his hometown. The effects of her intense devotion to QAnon and its conspiracies became more than a pastime activity and more like an addiction when she started devoting all of her time to investigating Q-drops and sending her and her then-husband's retirement money to QAnon-related causes, scams, and grifters. Parker's family ultimately determined that his grandmother had a severe digital literacy issue, and he goes on to describe how his family system managed his grandmother's reality by explaining how one day he:

"Got a call from my mom crying, saying she can't do it anymore. That grandmas really changed, and that she's warped into a different person... So they just took her off the grid. They shut off the WIFI at her home to make her phone unable to access things like the internet, and they deleted her Facebook page... Was it a little far? Maybe. But it worked! I know that a lot of people like me, you know, my job, my life, and everything revolves around the internet. So not everyone can just 'pull the plug' and hope for the best, but I think in this case, we had to! Because she was not the same person anymore... And some of the damage can't be undone, but we stopped it from getting worse."

As Parker put it, "pulling the plug" on his grandmother's internet source was his family's last-ditch effort to manage her reality and maintain their relationships by removing access to her information sources. While Parker's grandmother falls outside of the leisure-like affiliation of the movement on the QAnon belief spectrum, his case was categorized within the management phase because he reports that since taking her away from the internet, and thus the QAnon-related content, she is much more tolerable to be around and talk to again. This successful management of his grandmother's reality, and thus their relationship(s), is consistent with Giddens's assumptions on the need for the constructed reality held between individuals to be similar for even interpersonal relationships to be sustained. Indeed, implementing "site blockers" on q-persons' internet devices that inhibit them from going to QAnon-related websites is a popular managing method recommended to others in the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties. However, even Parker acknowledges that this "pulling the plug" method or cutting someone off from their internet source is challenging, if not impossible, for most QAnon-infected families.

Kendall's and Parker's stories represent those whose families I interviewed for this study were solely in this phase of actively managing their family members' reality. While Kendall was actively managing her mother's reality by refuting and debunking her mother's newfound conspiracy theories, and Parker's family had successfully managed his grandmother's reality by taking away her ability to access the internet and thus QAnon's conspiracies, most interviewee participants' stories could not be exclusively categorized into this managing phase. Instead, this managing phase is just that—a phase within this broader experience of the manage, adapt, abandon process. However, many interviewees reported that managing their QAnon-infected family members' reality becomes unrealistic, especially considering the increasingly intense devotion some QAnon adherents develop for the conspiratorial movement in surprisingly short

timeframes (Argentino, 2023; De Coninck et al., 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023). Thus, when or if a family system in this study attempted to manage their family members' reality and failed because their q-persons' devotion to the movement goes beyond the point of manageability, it forced the families to attempt then to adapt to their q-persons' new conspiratorial identities.

5.3 Phase 2: Adapting to Members' Conspiratorial Ontologies

When or if managing their family members' reality fails, QAnon-infected family systems move into the next phase of the manage, adapt, abandon process—the adapting stage. Based on the interview data, the family members of QAnon affiliates accept their inability to manage their q-person's conspiratorial reality in the adaptation phase and attempt to salvage their now strained relationships by setting physical, emotional, and conversational boundaries with their q-person(s). At its most extreme, these boundaries consist of temporarily but deliberately detaching from their QAnon-infected family members and not interacting with them for some time. During this adaptation phase, the family members will go out of their way to avoid a dispute with their q-person. They will deliberately stop calling or visiting them and perhaps even block them from their social media profiles and phone numbers. These boundaries can also consist of the family members asking their q-persons not to talk about particular ontologically-related topics (i.e., conspiracy theories, political opinions/affiliation, religious ideologies, etc.) around them or at family gatherings.

For my interviewees, the catalyst that led to their decision to implement boundaries and move from managing to adapting was when they recognized and accepted that their q-person's adherence to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies was much more devout than previously thought. Thus, within this adaptive phase, the q-person's affiliation with the movement is typically on the

persistent, ontological dependent-like part of the QAnon belief spectrum— meaning that, at this stage, their q-person has developed a dependence on their adherence to QAnon's conspiracy theories because it provides them a sense of ontological security and contributes to their self-identities. The interviewees and their q-person(s) ability to trust each other in this adaptive phase is severely diminished as they begin to acknowledge that they have developed conflicting views on reality, one conspiratorial and the other not. To illustrate how and why the interviewees moved from managing to adapting because of a breakdown in trust with their q-person(s), take Sarah's experience with her QAnon-infected brother.

Sarah and her brother are both from and live in a prominent Canadian city. She reports noticing her brother's adherence to QAnon conspiracy theories and an unexpected devotion to Donald Trump around 2017. With both of them being Canadian, his sudden infatuation with American politics and conspiracy theories was highly confusing to Sarah. She could not understand where his sudden devotion to Donald Trump and these QAnon conspiracies came from until her brother introduced her to Q-drops. Instead of being intrigued with the Q-drops and the subsequent conspiracies that follow, as her brother was, Sarah quickly realized how dangerous these Q-drops were for her brother, as the conspiracies that stemmed from them seemed to consume her brother's self-identity.

While her brother tried to red-pill her into his new conspiratorial belief system by vouching, showing, and explaining to her what Q-drops were, Sarah explains what she was thinking at that moment by stating:

"Oh my God, these were the most vague, nonsensical claims I have ever heard in my life! This stuff could literally mean anything! It's so easily debunked! It's so easy to take them apart, and

it's coming from a secret guy on the internet? To me, it was stupid right from the get-go, but I've since realized it's quite dangerous... They [QAnon affiliates] literally don't trust anything! They don't trust the government, they don't trust the media, they don't trust the doctors, and they DO NOT trust their own family members."

The quote above depicts Sarah's internal thought process as her brother disclosed his adherence to QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs to her for the first time. During this period of her brother vouching for these dangerous conspiracy theories, Sarah senses that these conspiracies and her brother's subscription to them threaten the continuation of their relationship as their worldviews have become incompatible. Consequently, at this stage of adapting to a member's conspiratorial identities, the family members' trust in each other and the surrounding world simultaneously becomes unstable for both parties. Accordingly, after an entire year of Sarah's exhausting efforts to debunk her brother's newfound conspiracy theories, she came to the harsh realization that she could not manage his new conspiratorial reality. Thus, Sarah decided that she would have to adapt to him and his new conspiratorial-inspired identity. Sarah's decision to adapt to her brother's new conspiratorial identity after repeatedly attempting to manage his reality provides a glimpse into Giddens theory on how trust is formed between people in contemporary societies.

According to Giddens, the ontological insecurity that develops from inevitably encountering or merely existing in the contemporary reality, or what Giddens refers to as the *juggernaut of modernity*, erodes individuals' capacity to trust, even within interpersonal family relationships (1992). Giddens theorizes that because of the juggernaut of modernity, the development of the self and our ontological reliance on interpersonal-family relationships

become "ongoing projects" (2013). Thus, contemporary individuals create and develop trust with the individuals in their family systems through an ongoing verbal inspectional process. This ongoing project in individuals' interpersonal family relationships consists of regularly and consistently analyzing each other's core beliefs through persistent verbal examinations and self-disclosures, which individuals use to determine the relatability and compatibility of another individual's reality. Thus, developing and maintaining trust in familial relationships requires an openness of compatible self-disclosures between individuals for trust to be achieved or, as Giddens would say, won (2013).

Sarah's shift to attempt to adapt to her brother's new conspiratorial identity came from her interpretation or understanding that these conspiratorial ideologies had become a part of his self-identity and that QAnon had essentially become his new religious affiliation. Her brother was constantly decoding and interpreting Q-drops online as if they were a form of a sacred text, all while sacrificing his relationships with his family, including with his daughter, friends, and even his job, to become a "digital soldier" in the "silent war" between good and evil. From Sarah's perspective and others who were exclusively categorized within this adaptive phase, she notes that her brother had completely undergone a conspiratorial-inspired identity shift that had seemed to her to go beyond any point of manageability. As such, Sarah decided that her only chance to maintain their relationship was to attempt to adapt or tolerate his new conspiratorial belief system by creating boundaries around when he could and could not talk about his new conspiratorial beliefs. She was willing to let him continue to believe these new conspiracy theories as long as he did not discuss QAnon, Q-drops, or anything remotely political or conspiratorial in front of her, her kids, or at family gatherings, to avoid any more ontological

discord. Sarah explains how she and her family system initially started to adapt to her q-brother and his new conspiratorial belief system by explaining how:

"All we could do was adapt and avoid [discussing] certain topics with him. So you couldn't talk to him about this, or you couldn't talk to him about that. And my mom's [initial] advice was to just hang up the phone or end the conversations and to just try and keep things super quick with him. So we went from having these like hour-plus conversations to like five-minute conversations... Honestly, he just wasn't totally there anymore."

It is typically here in the adaptive phase, or even between the adapting and managing phase, where family members start setting boundaries like these with their q-person(s). Sarah's goal for setting these types of conversational boundaries and taking on a more acceptance-like approach was to, in her words, "slowly bring him back to reality" by providing him with a balance of comfort to explore his new beliefs but with the boundary to only discuss them within the agreed-upon settings. While attempts to manage their q-person's reality usually happen in the managing phase, Sarah's experience represents this adaptive phase because of the boundaries she and her family put in place with her q-brother that allowed him to embrace the development of a conspiratorial identity rather than her actively attempting to counter the development of such identity. Sarah was concerned that if she completely shut him and his newfound ideologies out, they would lose their relationship with each other and that she would become his "enemy" in this conspiratorial war. Sarah firmly believes that family relationships, support, and empathy are essential to keeping people "grounded in reality" when such dangerously divisive conspiracy theories like QAnon are so easily accessible and convincing to the public. She further explains

this sympathetic approach to this issue while acknowledging how these conspiratorial ideologies have consumed her brother by stating:

"Family is our tether to reality! And when you are talking to them about this kind of stuff, you're talking to their heart. You are not talking to their brain, you are talking to their heart, and their heart is in love with this [QAnon]. And if you don't completely agree with absolutely everything they agree with, then you are part of the problem! I'm just really hoping that one day he'll wake up... When I look at my brother, I see my brother, but as soon as he opens his mouth, he is a completely different person... So it's not just a conspiracy [theory] anymore. It's become his religion. It's become his entire identity."

In my interviewees, the shift from the managing phase, where the family actively attempts to manage their q-person's reality for the sake of their relationship, to this adapting phase, where they try to accept or tolerate their new belief systems, is a characteristic process families seem to experience to maintain their relationships with their q-person(s). The adapting phase is also consistent with family systems theorists' assumptions on how families address internal friction and maintain "homeostasis" within the family unit. Homeostasis is the family's expected, continuous, and perceived successful system functionality. A family system will typically attempt to adapt to a particular individual's issue to maintain the relationships between the individuals who make up the system (Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2021). When each system member actively maintains this homeostasis, the system will, theoretically, resist or adapt to the changes and influences from the outside world (Watson, 2012). Thus, family systems adaptations, in the form of acceptance or tolerance to conflicting ontologies, as seen in Sarah's and many others'

experiences, occur to preserve the strength and continuation of the relationships within the family unit.

While Sarah was, at the point at which I interviewed her, able to successfully adapt to her brother's conspiratorial belief system to continue their relationship, other interviewees were unable to do this because of their q-person(s) consistent, addictive-like affiliation with the movement. In fact, most interviewees' efforts to adapt to their q-persons' conflicting realities were short-lived and, thus, unsustainable. They are particularly unsustainable when the q-persons become even more devoted than before to their conspiratorial ideologies and when they start consistently breaking the boundaries put in place by their family members. One interviewee participant even compared this adaptive stage to putting a "band-aid" on an unhealable wound. Indeed, this adaptive phase is consistently the precursor to the abandonment stage.

5.4 Phase 3: Abandoning QAnon-Infected Family Members

QAnon-infected families reach the abandonment stage when their q-person(s) develop an unfamiliar identity rooted in a conspiratorial reality that is unreciprocated by their other family members. In this abandonment phase, the family members completely cut ties with their q-person(s) via disownments, divorces, in some cases, even death (Beverley, 2020; Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021; Ebner et al., 2022; Rothschild, 2021). Based on the interview data, what prompts this abandonment phase is that the boundaries previously made between the family members and their q-person(s) are typically and deliberately broken by their QAnon-infected family member(s). The consistent setting and then breaking of boundaries by family members with conflicting ontologies inhibit their ability to trust each other and severely jeopardize the preservation of their relationship(s) (Giddens, 2013). The participants in this study typically abandoned their QAnon-infected family members when their q-person's adherence to QAnon and

its conspiratorial ideologies became more of an addiction or an obsession rather than a leisure-like or dependence-like devotion to the movement. To illustrate how a q-person's consistent, addictive-like devotion to QAnon and its ideologies affects their interpersonal family relationships, take Tory and Jamie's experience with their QAnon-infected parents.

Tory and Jamie are biological sisters living in the midwestern U.S., about 30 miles from their QAnon-infected parents. Tory and Jamie have struggled to maintain traditionally close relationships with their q-parents for almost five years. Their parents became highly devoted to the QAnon movement and its conspiracies almost immediately after it originated on fringe message boards on the website 4Chan in 2017. Despite Tory and Jamie's consistent disapproval of such actions, during our interview, Tory and Jamie emphasized how their q-parents started promoting their conspiratorial affiliation on their social media accounts and attempting to red-pill their other family members and friends to adhere to their new conspiratorial belief system. During the interview, Jamie specifically made it clear that both she and Tory had attempted for years to manage their q-parents reality by debunking and disputing their newfound conspiracy theories. However, when Tory and Jamie's efforts to manage their q-parent's reality consistently failed, they tried to adapt to their q-parent's new conspiratorial identities by setting both conversational and emotional boundaries with them. Regardless, Jamie expressed how failing to manage her q-parent's reality, her q-mother's reality in particular, and their parent's consistent devotion to the movement's conspiracies affected their relationship by stating:

"I kept thinking I could prevent my mom from falling into it [QAnon], and I tried to stop her for months, but it didn't work... It has been extremely harmful to our relationships. You just get to a point where you can't argue with them anymore, like, you're not even having the same

conversation anymore! And there's no logic associated with this at all! It's kind of like faith. You can't argue with them about it because they just believe it, like faith! And I just felt completely torn apart all the time... So I'm presently in therapy, and [I've learned that] you can't control whether they cross a line or not, but you can control whether or not you allow that relationship to continue afterward, and it broke for me. Like, to the point where I was like, I can't be around these people anymore."

Tory and Jamie believe that their initial efforts to manage their q-parents' realities by debunking and disputing their newfound conspiracy theories drove their parent's adherence deeper into QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies as they believe this forced their q-parents to further fight for and defend their conspiratorial beliefs. Likewise, Tory and Jamie's subsequent attempts to adapt to their q-parents' new conspiratorial identities by setting emotional and conversational boundaries with their q-parents became equally unsuccessful as their q-parents repeatedly and deliberately broke these boundaries with their consistent red-pilling attempts. Tory and Jamie's q-parents' development of an irrefutable, faith-like devotion to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies, combined with their consistent red-pilling efforts and persistent boundary-breaking, enabled Tory and Jamie's decision to abandon their relationship with their q-parents altogether. Although, abandoning a relationship with QAnon-infected family member(s) is an incredibly challenging and intensely emotional experience for the family members of QAnon affiliates. To illustrate this emotionally impactful experience, take Susan's experiences with divorcing her QAnon-infected husband, for example.

Susan and her family live in a heavily populated coastal city in the Western United States. Susan and her now ex-husband had been married for 15 years and had two children

together before he became affiliated with the QAnon movement. In fact, before QAnon even originated in 2017, she stressed during our interview that he, annoyingly to her as she has a B.A. in political science, had zero interest in politics, celebrities, or even conspiracy theories. Susan stressed that early in their marriage, her husband was a successful entrepreneur focused on running his, at the time, successful business. Susan reported in our interview that her husband was traditionally unphased by popular media, news stories, or politics. That all changed, however, around 2018 when Susan's historically conspiratorial-prone brother-in-law successfully red-pilled her husband into adhering to QAnon's conspiratorial beliefs with the discovery of Q and the subsequent Q-drops online.

The claim that Q had a top-secret government security clearance and was heroically sharing, as Susan described, "need-to-know" classified information with everyday citizens through these Q-drops appealed to Susan's husband. Thus, Susan's husband had completely devoted himself to the movement over just one year, sacrificing his interpersonal relationships and business endeavors to become a devout follower and believer in QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies. Susan explains how his radical and sudden devotedness to QAnon's ideologies affected their relationship and her trust in her now ex-husband by stating:

"He completely changed within the span of a year, and... it was a little traumatic. I mean, prior to this, he was a man who loved football! We played darts and cards and would have fantasy football weekends together and hang out with family and friends almost every weekend! Like, none of this was ever an issue! And not only had his personality and interests completely changed, but he was talking about some pretty weird shit at this point. Like, he told me he didn't

know what was real anymore? ... And it [QAnon] just consumed him to the point where he was not a productive participant in parenting our children anymore."

Susan's husband became so dedicated to the QAnon movement and its conspiratorial ideologies not long after its development in 2017 that he stopped working for his own business to become a self-described "Anon," which, according to the literature, is someone who follows Q and interprets complicated Q-drops for other fringe or newer followers of Q (Rothschild, 2021). Later on, Susan describes how her q-husband, as she put it, "ranked up" as he then became what is known in the Q-community as a "Baker," which is an Anon who organizes or puts together their own thread(s) on social media boards to gather their own following on social media in dedication to discussing, decoding, and connecting Q-drops to real-world events together (Rothschild, 2021). Eventually, Susan explains that her q-husband became so radicalized into this conspiratorial belief system that he claimed to start having QAnon-related or induced visions and prophecies. As such, Susan claims that he became a prominent leader of one of the fringe online QAnon threads in Telegram, where he would frequently announce his prophecies and post recordings of his visions to his followers.

Meanwhile, Susan's ontological security was significantly jeopardized as she felt isolated and scared for her and her children's safety. Susan reports that their youngest daughter, aged 13, went from being an upbeat straight-A student to a depressed young girl who started cutting herself, engaging in suicidal attempts that rendered her hospitalized, shoplifting, and being expelled from school, all during, and later deemed because of, according to Susan, her father's conspiratorial radicalization into QAnon. Susan felt she had completely lost her husband and her family system to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies by explaining during the interview that her

husband "was not the same man I married anymore," as he became unnecessarily angry and upset with those closest to him for not supporting him and his new conspiratorial belief system. Thus, Susan became increasingly concerned about his devotion to these ideologies and was constantly unsure of her husband's next actions and motivations.

During the interview, Susan stressed that she was utterly unaware whether her husband would be willing to hurt her, himself, or their kids, in the name of QAnon or by the instruction of a random Q-drop. Susan's husband's addictive-like devotion to the QAnon movement and the subsequent fear Susan developed for her and her children's safety eventually prompted their recent divorce. Susan explained how her husband's affiliation with QAnon was like an addiction and how attempting to manage or adapt to his conspiratorial belief system broke down their marriage and her mental health by stating during our interview that:

"It [QAnon] was absolutely an addiction. I mean, it just consumed every thought that he had, and you couldn't talk to him about anything else! Like, there weren't any casual conversations anymore. It was the only thing he could talk about at that point... And you're in a marriage, right? You listen to bullshit you really don't feel like listening to just to keep the peace! But after a while, he got really uncertain and really unpredictable... I got really nervous about having him alone with any of the kids because he was so volatile, and the safety was just gone. I don't know how you do that and have things work? After a while, you just hear so much crap that you're just like, I can't do this anymore... You feel like you have to stay with them because you can't survive without them, but I know I was done. I didn't want to live anymore. I didn't want to be around anymore. Like, I was done."

Since their divorce, Susan reports that she and her daughter have recovered remarkably well from her mental health and behavioral issues. According to Susan, her daughter's current therapist believes that it was the persistent QAnon-related conspiratorial claims pushed on to her by her q-father, such as conspiracies like— Joe Biden had been secretly executed and that Jim Carey was "playing" the current president Biden in a "skin suit," or that everything she learns in school is training her to be a "sheep" and that her teachers need to, and most likely will be publicly executed — had undeniably been the root of their daughter's relatively surprising onset of mental health and behavioral issues. Thus, Susan explained how she felt that her divorce from her q-husband was necessary for her and her child's mental health. In fact, Susan expressed how ashamed she was of herself for staying with him so long, trying to manage his reality and adapt to his conspiratorial identity for the sake of their marriage and family system, especially after understanding its effects on her and her daughter's mental health.

Susan, like many others who reach this stage of abandonment, representatively likened her husband's devout affiliation with the movement to a substance abuse issue or addiction. In fact, in the early years of their marriage, unbeknownst to her, she learned that her q-husband had been a persistent user of methamphetamines for years before their marriage. Although she was surprised by this, she actively supported him while finding him a rehabilitation center where he spent months overcoming his drug/substance abuse addiction(s). QAnon-infected family members who historically or presently had an addiction or substance abuse issue(s) were surprisingly prevalent within my interviewee participants' experiences. Just over half of all the people interviewed for this study made mention of their q-persons' past or present substance abuse or addiction-like issues, and many, indeed, likened their members' adherence to QAnon conspiracy theories to a new addiction for their q-persons. QAnon's conspiracies seem to be just

intriguing enough to inspire people from all walks of life to explore, yet like an addictive substance or drug, they have a secretly addictive, ontologically infectious, identity-changing, relationship-losing side effect.

Chapter 6: Limitations

The interpretative approach of this study makes it challenging to verify the findings. Likewise, because this research study took a purely qualitative approach, other social researchers may attempt to quantify these findings and make them more statistically representative. Also, because most of my interviewees came from r/QAnonCasualties, where people seek support from others in similar situations or as a place to vent about their experiences, it has a reasonably homogeneous sampling population. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that almost everyone recruited and interviewed for this study disagreed with their family members' adherence to QAnon's conspiracy theories to some extent. However, there may likely be families who are unaffected by or adhere to QAnon's conspiracy theories together to maintain their family systems' stability. Future research may address this issue by recruiting and interviewing active QAnon affiliates to substantiate or further the findings of this study.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Whether or not the QAnon-infected family member(s) mentioned in this study have always been susceptible to conspiratorial beliefs or if they are relatively new to adhering to conspiratorial ideologies, the development of an addictive-like devotion to the QAnon movement or its conspiracies is alarming for the adherent's family members. Thus, based on the data gathered for this study, the family members who abandon their relationships with their QAnon-

infected family member(s) sincerely grieve and mourn the loss of their relationships. One of my interviewee participants representatively likened the approach to the abandonment phase with their q-parents to death by stating during the interview that:

"I would liken my current relationship with my [QAnon-infected] parents to, like... Death. Like, I'm grieving their existences while they're still alive... And it's traumatizing! It's a constant, never-ending grieving process. It's very much to me, like, they are just skeletons of themselves walking around now... And these are the people who raised me! These are the people who created my or shaped my original reality! I have happy memories with them! But, like, we're not doing that now. Those [family] experiences are being robbed from us, from me, presently, because there is zero contact now, and always will be zero contact now. So this process is just like they're dying, only in my opinion, worse, because they are still alive doing harm in their way."

Losing a family member to QAnon's conspiratorial ideologies, as demonstrated above, is intensely impactful, if not traumatic, on the well-being of the family members of QAnon affiliates. Most of my interviewee participants sought counsel from those who have experienced similar phenomena by participating, posting, and reading others' posts on the subreddit r/QAnonCasualties, or within Facebook support groups, where the family members and friends of QAnon affiliates help each other make sense of their experiences. Many interviewees have also sought assistance from mental health professionals and family systems theorists who help them understand their subsequent experiences, generate ways to create and maintain boundaries and assist them in handling the loss of losing a family member to the conspiratorial movement

and its ideologies. Regardless, this QAnon phenomenon has infiltrated and divided countless individuals' lives, homes, and interpersonal relationships worldwide (Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023). Although QAnon originated in the United States, I interviewed participants from Japan, Canada, and Australia for this small-scale study alone. QAnon ideologies have also reached the UK, Germany, and Brazil (O'Brien, 2023). Thus, as one of my interviewee participants representatively states:

"[QAnon] has caused so much hurt. Irreparable, irreversible hurt. There are kids who will never know their extended family members, parents who are missing out on important parts of their children's lives, and people who will inevitably die alone because of [QAnon's conspiratorial] beliefs... All because of this very weird, very pervasive lie."

Indeed, for the family members of QAnon affiliates, QAnon's conspiracy theories are lies. Lies that have preyed on their family members' vulnerabilities and insecurities to completely ensnare their family members' identities and tear their family systems apart.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This research has investigated the effects of QAnon conspiracy theories on the family system. The netnographic approach and analysis of both the data gathered for the pilot content analysis of r/QAnonCasualties and the 23 interviews conducted with the family members of QAnon affiliates for this study revealed a "manage, adapt, and abandonment process" in which QAnon infected family systems abandon their relationships with QAnon-infected family members. A family member's persistent adherence to and affiliation with the QAnon movement

and its conspiratorial ideologies severely jeopardizes the preservation of their interpersonal relationships within their family systems by impeding the members' ability to trust each other by sabotaging their previously held like-minded realities. Thus, a q-person(s) degree of internalization of and devotion to the QAnon movement and its conspiratorial ideologies determines how their family system manages, adapts to, or abandons its QAnon-infected family members.

Identifying and further understanding the phases within this manage, adapt, and abandon process may greatly interest and assist other social researchers, family systems therapists, and social workers who address and mitigate familial discord influenced by conflicting ontologies. Researchers may apply this abandonment process to other ontologically induced familial discord-related matters, such as religious conversions, substance abuse issues, addiction(s), political polarization, intimate partner violence (IPV), etc. A QAnon affiliate's conspiratorial radicalization process could be compared to the literature on the use, dependency, and addiction to substance abuse issues and disorders. Likewise, QAnon affiliates' sudden or relatively new devotion to the movement may be likened to the literature on religious conversions.

Taking a more public health approach to addressing the issues associated with this QAnon phenomenon may be more appropriate than treating it like a domestic terrorist threat. Emphasizing mitigating and countering misinformation on social media and online platforms, educating the public on digital literacy issues, and potentially implementing primary prevention programs and interventions aimed at assisting families in finding and locating access to mental health and counseling services would be beneficial. Providing access to individual and family counseling and therapy, substance abuse treatment programs, and even job assistance programs

may reduce the chances of QAnon affiliates causing harm to themselves or their family members (Jensen & Kane, 2021; O'Brien, 2023).

We must continue to study, understand, and be aware of the effects social harms like QAnon have on family systems if we are to continue to find ways to preserve our relationships with our family members and prevent further QAnon-related social harms from happening in the future. We must continue to study the phases and transitions from one phase to another within this manage, adapt, abandon process to provide other researchers and scholars, family systems therapists, and social workers engaged in addressing familial discord a way of understanding the effects of divisive ontologies within a family system. Every phase of familial discord identified within this manage, adapt, and abandoned process provides valuable insight into how family systems reach a state of severe dysfunction. Understanding how families are affected by this conspiratorial movement, in particular, provides valuable insight and information that may help mitigate adherence or affiliation with the QAnon phenomenon.

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